



THE
FAE WARRIOR'S
QUEEN

JAMIE SCHLOSSER

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THE FAE WARRIOR'S QUEEN
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Due to language, violence, and sexual content, this book is intended for readers 18 and older. Please note possible trigger warnings. This story has some themes readers might find distressing, including suicide ideation and the mention of past traumatic events like domestic violence, sexual assault, and torture.

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CHAPTER 1

Kai

“Motherfucker,” I rasp, my body aching from the violent impact I just encountered.

I didn’t realize falling on sand could hurt so much, but I suppose it’s all about force and speed. And when I came hurdling through that vortex, it was hard and fast.

Not to mention, this is my second brutal landing within a minute. Before I was brought to this exact spot, my escort Ellister had to take another warrior to a different location, and I was dragged along for the ride.

I hope Pippin isn’t hurt. I didn’t have time to check him to see if he needed healing because Ellister formed another swirling abyss right after the first drop off. He just immediately grabbed my wrist, and we flew into the next vortex, leaving Pippin quite literally in the dust.

While still lying on the ground facedown, I take stock of my minor injuries. A scrape on my elbow. A contusion on my leg. No gashes or broken bones.

I’m lucky it’s not worse.

Using my healing power, I mentally nudge the damaged skin and soft tissue back into place, smoothing it over and repairing it to perfection. There are some popping and crackling sounds that most people find disturbing, but it doesn’t hurt. On the contrary, it’s pleasant. Like a warm tingle.

However, I notice my power is more sluggish than usual because it’s being affected by this awful place I’ve found myself in.

The Lost Land.

I’d heard crossing over to the alternate universe would be terrible, but there’s no way I could’ve imagined how deeply depressing it would be.

My limbs are heavy. My chest, empty. Every triumph I’ve ever had suddenly seems meaningless.

I am... worthless. The rational part of me knows that's not true, but I can't seem to rid myself of the idea.

Pushing up onto my hands and knees, I dig my fingers into the loosely packed sand and dirt on the ground. A gust of wind blows, kicking up the dust and pelting my face with it.

As I spit some of the chalky substance from my mouth, I become keenly aware of the unsettling absence of my soul.

My soul is gone.

Stripped from me, as if it were never there to begin with.

That's what's causing this dreadful emptiness.

"You get used to it," Ellister drawls to my right.

I look over to see the dark fae standing several feet away, brushing himself off. Patting his black leather pants, he causes puffs of dust to blow off in the breeze, but it's futile because the grime is in the air. It perpetually covers him from head to toe, regardless of his efforts to rid himself of it. His dark hair appears brownish-gray from the powdery film, and his pale skin is splotchy with dirt.

Behind him, there's an endless expanse of sand dunes with some occasional dead trees speckling the horizon. Above him, just gray skies. Even the areas that aren't clouded have no color. There are no suns or stars.

It's so bleak.

"You get used to it?" I echo, skeptical. "Really?"

"No, not really." A cruel smirk pulls at Ellister's mouth, though the amused expression doesn't match his dead, cold eyes. "That was a lie."

Of course he'd be dishonest every chance he gets. Deceivers, betrayers... that's who the dark fae are.

A lie wouldn't hurt Ellister. Not here. Not without his soul to inflict him with the physically painful consequences. I guess it wouldn't harm me either, but I don't want to get into the habit of lying.

When Ellister sees my judgmental stare, he scoffs, "I forgot how superior you warriors are. How honorable you claim to be. You'll lose that sense of grandeur very quickly around here."

Somehow finding the will to get up from the ground, I support myself on unstable legs while giving him a distasteful sneer. "There's nothing wrong with being trustworthy. The truth has been my friend many times, and I don't see the point in wasting words. And that's what lies are. Just a waste of air."

Ellister's face is devoid of any humor when he warns, "In a world where

nothing means anything, you'll do what you must to escape it. Lie. Scheme. Steal. Do whatever you can to get away from here.”

That's... actually not bad advice.

The restlessness of the Lost Land is already too much to bear, and I've only been here for a few minutes.

At least, I think it's been minutes.

Time is nonsensical and jumbled in my mind. Logically, I know I just arrived, but my thoughts are tired as if it's been weeks or months.

What would it feel like to be here for years, centuries, or *millennia* marinating in the confusion?

Utter despair, I imagine.

I've been through some horrific events in my life, but I've never considered giving up. Even when the odds were stacked against me, I held onto hope.

But there is no hope in this universe. The void of it is all around me, and it's like falling through a pitch-black pit with no bottom.

I can't believe I'm even having this thought, but I feel a bit of sympathy for Ellister.

I know I shouldn't. He was banished here because he committed atrocious acts along with his fellow dark fae. Stealing human children and trying to build their own powerful kingdom was not only against the law, but an act of treason. They deserved punishment.

However, allowing the dark fae to continue existing was a bit extreme and totally reckless of our ancestors. If the criminals couldn't be rehabilitated, then they should've been put to death.

Simple. Merciful.

Most importantly, final.

Just because the dark fae weren't supposed to be able to escape from the Lost Land doesn't mean they couldn't.

They did, and their recent reemergence is what humans would call a *plot twist*.

Now they're more dangerous than they were when they were sentenced. For the past five hundred thousand years, they've been trapped in a place that made them crueler than they were before, and they're really pissed off.

Evil + angry = a bad combination.

They're thirsty for vengeance, and they've been ruthless in their efforts to regain access to another world.

My world, Valora.

Hence, how Queen Ro ended up here.

When Ellister abducted her, I suppose he was following his own advice. Lie, scheme, steal—do anything it takes to escape. He even took his efforts a step further and kidnapped other royal women, too. Princess Zaylee, Princess Danyetta, and Lady Isla became additional collateral damage in this war because Ellister knew bringing females to a world occupied only by men meant he had an extremely valuable commodity to barter with. He was trying to buy his freedom from his master, Vaeront, The Overlord of the West.

But Ellister is a fool. There was no chance he'd ever be released from his servitude because his power is too rare.

He's the one Gatekeeper in history. Never before have I heard of someone who can travel to other universes. Ellister's ability to form a vortex and cross over to different planes is unprecedented.

Fuck, it's the only reason I haven't killed him.

As much as I'd love to see him dead, it's not an option because I'd be stuck here, and so would Queen Ro.

Rubbing my temple, I try to push away my murderous thoughts and focus on my mission instead.

I must rescue the former Day Realm queen from the clutches of Armand, The Overlord of the East.

"Really, though," Ellister intones seriously, "the confusion you feel should get better once you're in Armand's territory."

He motions ahead to the crumbling stone wall lining the castle grounds.

Beyond it, there's a shell of a palace that resembles the one in the Day Realm, only it's dark and partially destroyed in some places near the top. And like everywhere else in the Lost Land, it's backward, a mirror image of the world I know.

"I'll feel better?" I ask, wondering if he's being facetious again.

Ellister nods. "There's an enchantment over the area within the walls that makes time stand still instead of feeling like you have no sense of the seconds, days, or weeks. It helps a lot."

Annoyed, I point at the barrier that's apparently separating us from our sanity. "Why couldn't you just take me straight inside instead of dumping me out here?"

"Armand has strict rules. No one is allowed on his property without paying a price, and I'm not about to owe him anything."

I give him a perplexed look. “There’s a toll? I wasn’t informed of this.”
Ellister shrugs. “I’m telling you now.”

“I have nothing to pay.” My frustration is mounting. “The royals of Valora would’ve given me currency for the price of my entry if they’d known about it.”

“Money wouldn’t have helped you.”

“And why is that?”

“Armand doesn’t accept jewels or gold.”

“Then what will he want?”

“Your dignity,” Ellister responds ominously.

Whatever that means. “So, you’re telling me you’d seriously rather wait out here?”

“No, I’m leaving.” He gawks at me like I’m out of my mind even suggesting he should stick around.

“You can’t.”

“Aw, did you get emotionally attached already?” Planting his hands on his hips, Ellister shakes his head, rolls his eyes to the sky, and mutters, “I hate it when they get clingy. Why does this always happen?”

A menacing growl rumbles in my chest. “I’ll need you for transport.”

“I’ll be summoned once you’re ready to return to Valora.”

“That could be soon,” I point out optimistically.

Cocking his head, Ellister manages to appear genuinely sorry for me with pity in his stare. “The fact that you think you’ll be done with this matter in a few minutes tells me how woefully unprepared you are.”

I *am* unprepared. It was just earlier this afternoon that I learned of the queen’s abduction, and I immediately volunteered to retrieve her. There wasn’t time to research the situation or even pack a bag with a decent amount of supplies.

All I have with me are the pants and boots I’m wearing, my plethora of weapons, a water skin, and a sack with some bread, cheese, and fruit.

Palming the sharp objects on my belt and the contents of the cloth bag slung across my chest, I make sure I didn’t lose any items during my travel.

Everything is where it should be, and that’s where all of it will stay.

No doubt, Queen Ro will need the food and water.

Since time is immeasurable here, there’s no way for me to predict how long she’s been held captive, and with sustenance being so scarce, she’s likely starving.

Honestly, I'm afraid of the condition I'm going to find her in. She could be on death's door for all I know, and that thought causes me great distress—more than it should, considering she's a stranger to me.

I don't know the former queen. Never met her, but perhaps the heavy feeling in my chest is guilt. I have a lot of remorse over the fact that she's been mistreated for most of her life, and every single person who failed to save her is culpable.

Including me.

See, I was employed in the Day Realm as a soldier when she was forced into King Zarid's harem. It was common knowledge that he'd been doing the unthinkable—kidnapping women from the human realm. Illegal or not, he was king, so there wasn't much anyone could do about it.

Plus, he spun it like he was doing it for the good of the kingdom. He needed an heir, and the more women he had, the better his chances were of impregnating some.

Queen Ro just happened to be the first and only one he conceived with, so whether she liked it or not, he married her to make the baby legitimate. You'd think after being elevated to such a high position, her life would've gotten better, but that's when her real nightmare began. The rumors of her abuse were rampant.

Zarid kept his new wife hidden away from the public, and it was a strategic move on his part. Out of sight, out of mind. I think he knew if he didn't let the people see how miserable she was, they would ignore her suffering.

It worked, even on me.

Under Zarid's rule, I was obedient to a fault. Yes, I mentally opposed the king's practice of collecting women like trinkets, but voicing my opinion on the matter would've been treason.

A lot of good it did me to keep my mouth shut. Not long after Queen Ro gave birth to a son, I was suddenly sentenced to die with no trial and no explanation. Zarid had me violently whipped before ordering two of his soldiers to take me far away, kill me, and dump me in an unmarked grave.

By the grace of fate, I survived, but I was changed forever.

Mutilated.

The only gift I was given in exchange for my loyalty was disfigurement—hundreds of scars on my back, arms, chest, and face.

So yes, I have regrets, and I wish I'd done things differently.

If I'd known I was going to have to spend the rest of my life being this ugly, I would've stirred up some shit. I would've formed a rebellion, whispering treasonous ideas in my fellow warriors' ears. We could've stormed the castle, killed Zarid, and freed the women he'd turned into his victims.

At least then I would've deserved the punishment I received, and maybe I would've made a positive difference for the powerless and abused before I died in a righteous battle.

But that's not what happened.

I didn't save Queen Ro back then.

I'm a couple thousand years too late, but I can finally make things right.

I notice Ellister studying my scars. I ignore it. His scrutiny doesn't bother me. I'm used to being stared at. Even when people try to resist looking, their self-control whittles down until their curiosity gets the best of them.

Without a goodbye, I pivot away from Ellister and start heading for the wooden door under the stone archway.

Just as I reach it, he warns, "Be careful with Armand."

"Careful how?" I ask without turning around.

"He's a wizard who likes tricks. Entertainment is his favorite commodity, and he won't hesitate to use you for sport."

Sport. Is that what he's been doing with Queen Ro? Tormenting her to appease his boredom? The thought makes me want to rip his head off.

And I might. I haven't decided yet.

What would be the punishment if I were to kill the overlord?

I could fight off his henchmen if they decide to retaliate. From what I've seen of the dark fae, they're undernourished and weak. Just before this trip, some of them invaded the Night Realm, and it took only three other warriors and myself mere minutes to defeat their pathetic army of twenty-five.

I could just murder my way to the queen and leave without a backward glance.

Then again, there's a treaty in place now. The kings of Valora drew up a contract for peace with Vaeront. Armand wasn't at the meeting to sign it, but as a ruler of the Lost Land, he might be included.

The last idea I should be entertaining is adding flames to the fire of this conflict. After the chokehold the dark fae put on Valora in the past few years—a widespread plague and famine—I can't risk the fragile truce.

I heave out a sigh as I come to the conclusion that I'll have to negotiate

instead. King Zander already gave me permission to bargain for his mother's freedom, and he trusts my discretion.

There's an indignant huff behind me. "What, I don't even get a thank you?"

Screwing my face up, I glance back at Ellister. "Thank you?"

"You're welcome." He places a hand over his chest and gives a slight bow as if he's just done a brilliant act that deserves applause.

"No, I mean, thank you for *what*?"

"The travel? The stellar words of wisdom I've bestowed upon you?"

I scowl at him.

"You're lucky I need you to get back," I simply state, letting the implied alternative of his death hang between us as I turn away to grasp the corroded metal of the door handle.

Ellister hums forlornly and mumbles, "Lucky? If I were truly fortunate, you'd put me out of my misery."

I pause.

I know I heard him correctly, so I don't need to ask him to repeat it, but it sounds like he wants to die.

The wind blows harder for a second, and when I look over my shoulder, Ellister is gone. Some sand still swirls in the air from the suction of the vortex he just used.

With his exit, my mission begins.

I open the heavy door and step inside the palace grounds.

Immediately, the wind dies down. My confusion clears. The hopelessness lifts a little.

Time suddenly makes sense again. I can count the seconds as they tick by. The dust is settled on this side of the wall, and it's eerily still.

So this is what it's like to stand inside enchanted territory.

It's still shitty, but I can see the benefit of it. Ellister was right—I do feel better, and that's a good thing, because I'm going to need my wits about me if I'm marching into battle by myself.

As I forge ahead toward the four-story castle, I carefully scan my drab surroundings for any threats. My muscles are tense and ready for a confrontation, but no one comes.

Shifting my gaze, I take in the dried grass on either side of the walkway and the cracked cobblestones under my feet. The grand maze to my right looks nothing like the lush labyrinth I've seen from above when flying in the

Day Realm. Thorny branches make up the tall walls that are normally covered in green leaves and flowers.

About halfway between me and the castle, there's a decrepit, bone-dry fountain. As I pass it, my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. I'd love to quench my thirst and wash some of the filth off me before I try to present myself to the overlord as a royal representative, but that's not an option without water.

Holding out my hands, I grimace at the way the dirt coats my skin and how the grittiness is caked under my fingernails. My face feels tight, and my beard is itchy from the sand.

Attempting to shake off the excess dirt, I toss my head this way and that, whipping my braid around while I vigorously scratch my facial hair.

It's no use. I'm still disgusting.

Oh, well. Appearing regal and civilized has never been my style, and I have a feeling it wouldn't help me in this world anyway.

Everything here is hideous, so really, I fit in.

Once I'm closer to the castle, I can see that every stone is in a state of disintegration, making it look like the structure could topple at any moment.

When I get to the main entrance, I don't knock.

The wooden door isn't locked, and it swings open with a loud creak before shutting behind me with an even more obnoxious *bang*. The sound echoes off the stone walls in the foyer like a cannon exploding.

Well, if Armand didn't know I was here before, he does now.

This is the moment when I think I'll be intercepted. However, no servants or soldiers greet me, and I start to think perhaps the place has been vacated. Maybe Armand heard rumor of retaliation and he's fled.

I hope that's not the case.

As satisfying as it is to think of Queen Ro's captor running in fear, it wouldn't be ideal; I certainly don't want to have to hunt him down.

My boots are not quiet as I stomp through the foyer. I stride with purpose, wandering into what appears to be a barely furnished dining room on my right.

All that occupies the space is a long wooden table that looks like it's been burnt, charred to the point of blackness. Surrounding it, there are uncomfortable chairs made from thousands of twigs. Thin sticks are woven together to make the wicker-like structures, but they're spiky and riddled with large splinters.

Despite the fact that they're poorly done, I assume it would've taken a very long time to craft furniture like that.

And isn't that sad?

Imagine working that hard to make a chair only to get a stick in the ass every time you sit on it.

Turning away from the unoccupied room, I head in the opposite direction. On the other side of the foyer, open double doors lead to a large empty space.

The vastness of the long room gives off a daunting, intimidating vibe. Grayish light comes through the cloudy glass of the windows, creating ominous shadows. The high ceilings and all the corners are shrouded in darkness.

There are no tapestries, the sconces on the walls have no candlesticks in them, and the chandeliers are just rusted shells of the opulent fixtures they once were. And the dirt. My boots have left prints in the filth like snow tracks, and the musty smell in the air is overwhelming.

What a shithole.

I can't believe this is someone's home. How could anyone live in this?

Right as I'm about to leave and check out the second floor, a quiet clinking draws my attention.

I'd recognize that sound anywhere.

Shackles.

The noise came from the far end of the room, and when I look that way, I see the dark outline of a large wicker chair.

Not a regular chair. A throne. It has a tall back that must reach six feet high, and whoever is in this room with me is taking cover behind it.

I'm not alone like I thought.

Moving toward my company, I rest my hand on my sword.

I palm the hilt, ready to remove the weapon and swing if necessary. "Don't hide like a coward. Show yourself."

A soft, rhythmic shuffling starts up, then a female responds, "I'm working as quickly as I can. I'll be done soon."

That voice. So smooth and pleasant.

She has an interesting lilt to her words. She's got the Valora accent, but it's combined with something else. A hint of Portuguese, Queen Ro's original language.

Satisfaction douses my soulless body because I've located the woman I'm looking for, and I didn't even have to try.

CHAPTER 2

Kai

My grip on the weapon loosens and my tone becomes gentler. “Come out. I won’t hurt you.”

“Please give me a few more minutes. I promise I’m doing my best.”

She’s so patient. So placating.

Soft.

I’ve heard people talk of Queen Ro’s kind nature. Some have called her weak because of it. They claim her compassion is a human flaw. A hinderance.

But it’s that very characteristic that made the Day Realm citizens love her.

During her rule, she was like an angel, unseen while sprinkling blessings on her people. From behind the scenes, she routinely sent aid to the villagers suffering from the plague that ravaged their lands. If someone couldn’t work because they were too busy caring for sick loved ones, she made sure they had food and medicine. When there were deaths, she arranged funerals and sent flowers.

She was a silent savior, the opposite side of the coin to King Zarid’s blatant neglect.

He truly was one of the worst rulers Valora has ever seen, and that’s been recorded in the history books. So has his very public demise. He met death in the least glorious way possible.

About twenty years ago, his own son killed him. Prince Zander flew over a battlefield in his griffin form, went straight for his father, and bit off the king’s head with his giant beak in front of thousands of warriors. Then he shifted back into a man. A naked, bloody, ruthless man.

It surprised the fuck out of everyone because the prince’s ability to shift was a secret up until then. People thought he didn’t have any power at all, but

he proved them wrong with a talent no one had ever seen.

And the gruesome act was a statement—one that demanded respect as the new king.

That day, Queen Ro finally gained her freedom, but unfortunately, it didn't last long.

A couple years after Zarid's death, she ran off to the human realm. I'm not sure if it was a vacation or an escape, but she deserved the right to choose her own path, even if her sudden decision to leave Valora shocked and saddened many.

Alas, she fell into captivity once again when Ellister came to take her shortly after she returned to Brazil.

Now she's here.

The swishing continues. She's sweeping—a tedious, endless task in this dust-filled world.

"I'm here to help you," I say, even quieter now. "I've come to take you away from this hell."

"Don't toy with me. I'm too tired for games today."

"No games. My name is Kai. King Zander sent me."

The shadow of a head peeks out from behind the throne, but just for a second, and not long enough for me to see her face. She disappears again.

"I know all of Zander's men," she states with skepticism. "I don't recognize you."

"That's because I belong to the Night Realm. I'm King Kirian's warrior, but my services have been loaned to King Zander from time to time. Consider my assignment a task given by all the royals. Everyone wants you to be safe. Under their orders, I'm to bring you home."

"Home?" The word doesn't have the happy note I would expect. She's completely devoid of emotion, as if her spirit is broken. "I have no home."

"Valora," I clarify, then I pause because maybe she doesn't want to go back there. "Or the Earth realm, perhaps?"

"No, thank you." Still so polite.

Baffled, I'm speechless for a few seconds.

If Queen Ro doesn't want to return to Valora or Earth, where else is there? She certainly can't want to stay in the Lost Land.

"Your Majesty, please listen to me. I don't care where you want to go, as long as it's not this stars forsaken place. I'll take you anywhere. Anywhere but here."

“Really?” Finally, there’s a hint of interest in her question, but she still hasn’t moved from behind her hiding place.

“Really.”

“Promise?”

“I do.”

“I’ll need you to swear it,” she presses. “You’ll send me anywhere I want to go.”

“Yes,” I insist. “You have my vow.”

“Even without your soul? In the Lost Land, promises don’t mean much when you’re not held accountable by magic.”

“I hold myself accountable,” I respond roughly with conviction. “If I give you my word, I will follow through.”

“Good. Then I accept.” Her voice breaks, and whether it’s from emotion or thirst, I’m not sure.

Slowly coming closer, I lift the waterskin off my belt and shake it so she can hear the liquid sloshing around inside. “I have a drink for you. Please, take it.”

Finally, Queen Ro moves into my view, and what I see has me balling my hands into fists.

She’s too thin, and that fact is obvious because she’s scantily dressed in rags. The torn burlap fabric barely covers her breasts and her lower region. Her ribs protrude from her body, and her stomach is basically concave. Her small thighs have somehow maintained a curvy shape, but I’m guessing that’s her short stature and genetics at play. She’s so petite. I’m used to women who are close to six feet tall, but Ro hardly clears five feet. Her smallness makes me feel even more protective than I already do.

With the lack of food, I’d already known the dark fae resort to drinking each other’s blood for sustenance. Honestly, I’d judged them for it. I thought it was disgusting and feral, and I still do.

But it’s their only alternative to starvation, and it seems Queen Ro has been forced to go hungry.

She’s also filthy. Dirt is streaked on her tan skin, and it darkens her hands and knees as if she’s been crawling around while cleaning.

I grind my teeth when I see the chains around her ankles. That’s completely unnecessary. I highly doubt she could run. First of all, she’s too frail. And second, she has no shoes. Her toes are blackened with grime.

I lift my eyes to hers.

When our gazes connect, my heart starts to pound, but it's not from unadulterated rage.

I've never seen anyone more gorgeous than this woman.

Everyone's heard the tales of Queen Ro's beauty. Only the highest nobles and palace staff got to lay eyes upon her, and their opinion of her good looks was always unanimous. In a world where almost everyone has flawless skin and elegant features, that's quite a compliment.

Even now, the rumors still hold true.

Queen Ro's sad state of dress, her stringy black hair, and the lack of hygiene are inconsequential—none of it takes away from her attractiveness.

It's her face... she's just so unbelievably pretty. There's something special about the fullness of her lips, her high cheekbones, her wide forehead, her round jaw, and the cleft in her chin.

And she looks so young.

In Valora, people stop aging at twenty-five, and they're frozen that way for thousands of years. We all get to maintain our youth, but Queen Ro has a special kind of innocence about her.

Maybe it's vulnerability that shines through her soulful brown eyes.

The top of her ear is sticking out through her hair, and the rounded shape of it is strangely endearing—a reminder that she's human.

Now I know why Zarid kept her like a prized exotic pet. She's unique, exquisite, and unfortunately for her, breakable.

For someone who likes to destroy pretty, fragile things, Zarid chose his perfect victim. If he weren't already dead, I'd murder the fuck out of him.

"It is my honor to meet you, Queen Ro," I manage to speak up, trying to keep my voice deep and steady so I sound like a strong warrior and not a smitten schoolboy.

"Just Ro," she corrects. "Only Ro. Don't call me queen."

"If that's what you wish, Ro." I motion to my bare torso. "I wish I had a shirt to offer you. I'm sorry I don't have much to give, but I do have this."

I extend the water between us again.

Licking her dry lips, Ro steps closer. She warily studies me from head to toe as she sizes me up. Probably wondering if she can trust what's in front of her.

Her eyebrows pinch together when she sees all my scars.

Self-consciousness makes my cheeks heat.

For the first time in centuries, I actually care about what someone thinks

of me, and I wish Ro could've met me before the mutilation. Back then, I was extraordinarily handsome. I'm not being arrogant—it's the truth. I was the best of the best, and I would've proudly stood before her, soaking up my conceit as she openly admired me.

Now, her attention lingers on the marks decorating my arms. My chest. The long scar running from my forehead, over my eye, and down my cheek.

My old wounds tingle under her scrutiny, and I try not to squirm.

It's funny. Most of the sealed skin doesn't have any sensation—too much nerve damage—but for some reason, I feel them in this moment.

Ro's not even touching me, but it's as if she's running her smooth little fingers over each line.

I shiver.

Thankfully, Ro doesn't seem to notice my reaction because she's too busy shifting her focus to the waterskin.

After quickly snatching it from my grip, she gulps at it as if the offer has an expiration date. And maybe it does. I have no idea how long we have before Armand shows up, and Ro must have the same concern.

She keeps glancing behind me at the doorway, like she's expecting to get interrupted.

It's then that I realize I probably stepped right into a trap. Armand wouldn't let me find Ro so easily without ulterior motives. She's the bait, and I'm already caught.

Whatever Armand's plans are, he'll have to let Ro eat and drink as much as she wants. If I have to hold him off with physical force while she does so, I will, consequences be damned.

When I retrieve a roll from my sack, Ro practically tosses the waterskin back at me and swipes the bread from my hand with impressive speed. She ravenously digs her teeth into the food, stuffing a large bite into her mouth until her cheeks are puffed up as she chews. She closes her eyes and lets out a long sigh through her nose before swallowing and going back for more.

It's... cute.

She's cute.

Watching her eat is oddly pleasurable for me. Knowing that I'm giving her something she desperately needs is rewarding. I feel proud and calmed in the same way I do after I've won a battle.

Once she's done with the bread, I bend my head and start searching my bag for something else, but she reminds me, "So, about that promise."

Eager to hear her wishes, I square my shoulders. “Yes? Where would you like to go?”

Drawing in a strengthening breath, her gaze stays fixed on the sword strapped to my belt. “I want you to send me to my final resting place.”

The blood drains from my face. “What?”

“I just ask that you make it quick.” Her delicate fingers go to her slender neck. “I bet your blade is so sharp, I wouldn’t feel a thing.”

Suddenly, I see her rapid consumption of the bread and water as something more than someone who thought they wouldn’t be allowed to finish. She was trying to enjoy her last meal so she could get to the end result as fast as possible.

“What are you saying to me?” My voice is gruff.

I don’t even know why I’m asking for clarification.

Her intent is clear, and I’m an idiot.

Why did I agree to her oath without asking her to be more specific about what she wants? I know better—always state the terms before making a vow.

Or else I could end up in a bad situation. A scenario like this where I have to refuse and go back on my word.

I don’t go back on my word. Ever.

But I can’t agree to this. I won’t.

It’s not even about morals or my duty to complete my mission as directed. It has nothing to do with the fact that I would probably be sentenced to death for killing a former queen.

It’s because the thought of causing this woman any harm makes me physically ill. I’m actually fighting the nausea, gritting my teeth and clenching my stomach muscles so I don’t hurl at Ro’s feet.

She’s persistent, though.

Just to drive the point home so there isn’t any misunderstanding, Ro’s big brown eyes bore into mine as the request comes again. “Kai, I want you to kill me.”

CHAPTER 3

Ro

Do I really want to die? No. I hate the thought of leaving my family behind forever, but what good am I to them? I don't belong in Valora. I don't belong in the Earth realm.

I don't belong anywhere.

I'm useless. My time in the Lost Land has confirmed it for me. In this hell, I've realized my insignificance. I've accepted it.

"It would be a gift." I keep trying to convince the unhappy warrior. "A mercy."

I didn't think a frown could get any frownier, but Kai manages it. He scowls harder than when he first saw me, and that's saying something.

When he scrutinized my neglected body, I recognized his dismay.

I should've felt shame and embarrassment for how gross I am, yet I felt nothing. That's just how it is in the Lost Land. Just a bunch of nothingness.

No happiness, no sadness, no end, and no beginning.

Time isn't linear. It doesn't exist.

Life doesn't exist.

After a while, the wrongness of it drains a person. Every particle of my body is empty, and all that's left of me is a hollow shell.

Honestly, it's as if I'm dead already. A zombie walking around in a decaying bodysuit. So, really, my request to the warrior is long overdue.

"No. Absolutely not." Kai radiates displeasure, his hands balling into tight fists as he delivers a swift denial.

I'm not disappointed at his refusal. Or glad. Or relieved. Or betrayed.

Again, that lack of emotion plagues me. The apathy... it's the worst.

I suppose my request was silly. If Kai's been sent by my son, he isn't going to take my order over Zander's.

"You promised," I point out flatly.

“I take it back.”

“If your soul were bound to it, would you follow through?”

“I would not.”

“Even knowing you’d be hurt by the consequences of your deceit?”

“You think I can’t handle pain?” Kai barks the question gutturally, and the passion in his voice reaches into some place deep inside me.

Now I feel a tiny spark of something.

Sympathy.

As I watch him fume, I realize the hypothetical threat of agony wouldn’t be a deterrent for him. His scars are proof that he’s endured terrible torture and lived through it.

Most fae have impeccable complexions. Even the ones who are injured badly in battle end up healing perfectly.

So what happened to him?

“It’s all right if I disgust you,” Kai states dully, holding my gaze bravely as he gives me permission to judge him.

I’m taken aback by how wrong he’s misreading me. “You don’t disgust me at all.”

In fact, it’s the opposite.

Scars or no scars, Kai’s the best-looking man I’ve ever seen, but somehow, the marks make him more... him. I try to picture him without them, but I can’t. I don’t want to. He’s perfect just the way he is.

Kai wears the evidence of his trauma on the outside. If my insides could bear the evidence of what I’ve been through, I’d be just like him, and knowing he’s as wounded as I am makes me feel like I’m not alone.

And the longer I look at him, the more my attraction builds.

I like that he’s every bit the hardened warrior, but he has an elegance about him, too. He has it all—he’s rough and rugged, but also classically handsome.

His nose is the perfect size and shape, and his mouth is plump. His beard is a little overgrown, but it doesn’t hide his facial structure. He has nice cheekbones and a carved jawline. The sides of his head are shaved, and he has a long strip of blond hair braided down the middle of his scalp.

Then there are his eyes. They’re the clearest light blue with some silver flecks. With the dusty muck of the outside coating his hair and skin, he’s mostly beige all over, and it makes his bright irises stand out even more.

For me, it’s like looking at the sky for the first time in months.

An intimidating scowl is his default expression. Some might describe it as angry, but it's more of a smolder. I recognize it for what it is—distrust and wariness. I imagine he's encountered many sneers and snide comments from the snotty fae, and maybe he expects it from me as well.

"Don't let my appearance frighten you," Kai adds, still assuming the worst. "I'm not as dangerous as I seem. Well..." Rethinking his statement, he tips his head thoughtfully to the side and amends, "I'm not a danger to *you*."

"You don't scare me." I mean that with all sincerity, and tension leaves him because he believes me.

As his muscles relax, the raised skin all over his exposed body moves with him, and I'm mesmerized by the way his scars take on a different shape. How they go from being tight and puckered to smooth.

Some of the lines are deep and long, but others are short and tiny, especially on his fingers. There are a couple of particularly large scars on Kai's lower abdomen. Thick and silvery, and they disappear into his leather pants.

Since my observation is dropping lower, I unintentionally end up checking out his crotch.

I almost gasp when I see the outline of his cock behind the material that's doing a very bad job at hiding the appendage. I can actually see the shape of it, long and thick against his right thigh.

Is he hard right now? Or is that just what it looks like all the time?

I haven't thought about a man's dick in ages, and suddenly, a flush of heat flows through me—in my face, my stomach, my fingertips. Most shockingly, a throbbing sensation starts up between my legs.

For a second, I'm a bit alarmed because I don't understand what's happening to my body.

Then it hits me.

I'm... aroused.

I can't believe I'm actually turned on. The idea of physical intimacy is usually revolting to me because the extent of my experience with men begins and ends with pain.

Sex is violent. It isn't an act of love or something to be enjoyed. It's just a way to hurt someone in their most vulnerable state.

But when I think about running my fingertips over Kai's chest, abs, and arms... it doesn't seem bad at all. I imagine what it would be like to trace the raised skin of his scars... or even better, to kiss them, as if my lips could

somehow soothe him.

I wonder if he'd let me. Or if he'd even like it.

It doesn't matter. It's pointless to contemplate it because I can't do any of that.

I could never be so bold and free. Even if I wanted to have sex, I wouldn't know what to do, where to start, how to act.

However, my body doesn't get that memo. The rhythmic pulsing in my privates is ramping up, going from a curious thump to a demanding ache.

I'm so confused. I don't know why I'm reacting this way.

Maybe I've finally lost my mind. Armand said I would. When he told me my sanity would slowly slip away, he'd said it with such glee like he couldn't wait for the day when I finally succumb to the madness.

That might be today.

Shifting from foot to foot, I squirm as I rub my thighs together to get some relieving pressure down there.

"Are you in pain?" Kai asks, reading my movements as discomfort. "Is it the shackles bothering you?"

"I'm fine," I squeak out, humiliated because I'm a horny mess over a stranger.

"Fine?" he echoes incredulously. "You asked to die. That's not fine."

"I—"

"Listen to me very closely." He cuts off any reason I could give to defend my choice, talking slowly so I don't miss one syllable. "You will not be dying anytime soon, and you will *never* say those words to me again. Never, Ro. Do you understand?"

Affronted by his bossiness, I outwardly bristle while secretly enjoying the little flame of indignation flaring in my chest. "I don't take orders from you."

"I'm commanding it anyway. You will never give up on yourself. Ever. Say you agree. Swear it."

I cross my arms. "Why would I promise you anything when you broke our vow?"

"It was a shitty deal, and you know it. You put me in a position where I had no choice but to deny you."

Kai's pecs rise and fall with every inhale. He's trying to stay calm, but he's shaking. All the trembling makes the dust on him sprinkle down like leaves falling off a tree during a windy day.

Apparently, the topic of my death is a hot button for the warrior. I

wouldn't go as far as to say it's fun to see Kai when he's upset, but it sure is interesting.

In this moment, I understand Armand a little better. The Lost Land is a world where all you can do is live vicariously through someone else's emotions, and Kai is giving me a lot of his right now.

Taking a ragged breath, he attempts to gather some composure, but he just ends up growling, "You'll feel better once we leave."

"You can't predict how I'll feel."

"A good meal, a warm bath, and a full night's sleep is what you need." He's talking like I'm a cranky toddler who can be fixed with basic necessities.

"Don't patronize me. I'm not a child."

"Oh, I can see that." His eyes dip to my breasts briefly before he respectfully brings his attention back up to my face.

Instead of feeling violated by his ogling, I'm more concerned about whether he likes what he sees or not.

Suddenly, his opinion matters to me. A lot.

I want him to think I'm attractive, but unfortunately, he's found me at my worst.

Dirty. Smelly. Begging for death.

Not my finest moment.

"We must get going." Moving on with business, Kai impatiently motions me forward with his fingers. "You can come willingly, or I can hoist you over my shoulder and carry you out. It's up to you."

"You talk like you're going to just walk out of here with me. It won't be that simple."

Kai has no idea what he's in for. He doesn't understand this fucked-up world Armand has created, and another old familiar feeling floods my body.

Fear.

I'm afraid for this courageous man.

I don't want him to get hurt.

I look to the doorway. It's empty now, but it won't be for long. Soon, Armand will appear. He'll be cold, collected, and cruel.

He'll probably torture Kai in the most sadistic of ways, and I'll have to watch.

Dreadful anticipation triggers a full-on panic attack. Cold tingles numb my face and fingertips. My lungs are constricted, and I can't seem to get

enough air. Palpitations make my heartbeat irregular.

I haven't had one of these episodes in a while, and I hadn't missed them.

One perk of the Lost Land is the absence of my anxiety. Yes, my indifference has been the source of my misery, it's also been my greatest protection. It's the only power I have against Armand's games, and now my armor is falling away.

Alarmed by my high-pitched gasping, Kai steps forward and grips my upper arm.

I shriek, not because I don't want him to touch me, but because his contact sends a shock of electricity running through my body. His fingers are like jumper cables, and the jolt restarts my pulse to a regular rhythm.

Immediately, my body calms.

Thinking he's made a mistake, Kai releases me, backs away, and apologizes, "I'm terribly sorry. I shouldn't have grabbed you."

"It's okay," I say, still wondering what the hell is up with the sensation I felt from his hand.

Usually, it can take hours for me to get rebalanced after a panic attack, but Kai stopped it before it could even gain any momentum.

He gazes at me with concern. "What's happening to you?"

I'm *caring*, that's what. I'm like the grinch when his heart grows three sizes. I almost blurt the comparison to Kai, but I stop myself because it's a human reference he wouldn't understand.

"It's dangerous for me to want," I explain. "Don't you get it? Wanting only leads to disappointment."

"I won't let you be disappointed," he rebuts with confidence. "I'll do whatever it takes to make sure you get anything you desire, as long as it includes you staying alive."

That can-do attitude is Armand's favorite characteristic to destroy. Kai's practically daring the overlord to knock him down a peg.

Shaking my head, I warn, "Really, you should go without me. Save yourself while you can."

All of a sudden, Armand's presence thickens the air. I can always sense his nearness before he shows himself, and the heaviness presses in on me now.

The overlord likes to lurk. He hovers like a bird of prey soaring over a field in search of its next meal.

But he isn't looking for food.

Suffering is Armand's favorite form of sustenance, and he's been without it for far too long.

CHAPTER 4

Ro

“Oh, a new friend,” Armand drawls, moving into the doorway, his voice echoing in the empty hall.

Dim light from one of the windows illuminates his face. His skin is so pale I can see the blue veins on his forehead. There are grayish circles under his eyes, and his cheeks are a bit sunken in.

Just like every other dark fae I’ve seen, Armand has icy eyes, short black tufts of thinning hair on his head, and no stubble on his face. The lack of hair growth seems to be a common affliction in the Lost Land. Half a million years of starvation will do that.

Armand is way better off than his minions, though. He’s in a committed blood sharing partnership with his husband, Yugo. They sustain each other, taking turns feeding from one another.

I don’t know why the men he’s enslaved haven’t adopted a similar system. Either they aren’t allowed to eat regularly, or they just can’t come to an agreement that works amongst them. Because they look bad. Not only are they missing hair, but their muscles have wasted away, and their colorless skin is wrinkled like dried fruit.

“I suppose I don’t need to tell you who I am,” Kai starts off with hostility in his tone as he squares off with Armand.

“No introductions are necessary,” Armand agrees. “I heard you tell the woman your name, Kai.”

If Kai’s narrowed eyes could shoot daggers, I think Armand would be dead where he stands. “Have you been listening this entire time?”

“Of course. I’m always aware of what’s happening in my home. Don’t forget you’re the intruder here.”

“I wouldn’t have had to come if you hadn’t stolen a queen from Valora.”

“I didn’t steal anyone. She was a gift from The Overlord of the West.”

“She wasn’t his to give. You know damn well she doesn’t belong to you or anyone else in this shithole.”

“Finders keepers.”

“Well, I found her now,” Kai counters with an edge of finality.

Armand starts toward us. As he glides closer, his footsteps are so graceful and smooth under his long robe, it almost looks like he’s floating across the floor.

Passing us on his way to his throne, he refutes, “No, it seems *I* found *you*. You’re in my territory. Therefore, you belong to me.”

Kai seems unfazed by the claim, and he just watches with annoyance as Armand lowers himself onto his throne.

The overlord fluffs his robe over his legs as if it’s an elegant garment. Then he gives an exaggerated pout as he thoughtfully steepled his fingers in front of his lips. The burlap robe covering him from his shoulders to his toes has wide sleeves, and they fall to his elbows with his hands raised.

“Now, Kai. I’m terribly disappointed in you.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. Do you want to know why?”

“Not really,” Kai responds with disinterest that I know will piss Armand off.

The overlord sneers, showing a fang.

Regardless of the fact that Kai didn’t ask for an explanation, Armand complains, “You’re not going to give the woman what you’ve promised her? She asked you so nicely. I actually thought we might get to have an execution today, but it seems you lack the strength.”

Reminding Kai of my request is the wrong move on Armand’s part, and the warrior’s chest puffs up with anger.

There’s something palpable about Kai’s rage. It’s similar to Armand’s presence, the way it makes your skin prickle, but it isn’t unpleasant.

Surprisingly, it’s soothing to me in a way.

“Ro isn’t in the right headspace, and that’s your fault,” Kai barks. “You’ve treated her with such cruelty, you’ve driven her to suicide. King Zander isn’t going to be happy when he hears about it, and believe me, you do not want to be on the receiving end of his wrath.”

Unbothered, Armand shrugs. “She’s been clothed and sheltered.”

“This isn’t a shelter. It’s a prison.” Kai furiously gestures to the empty expanse of ever-dusty stone before waving at my sad outfit. “And you call

these clothes? I wouldn't even use these scraps for a dog's collar. Lastly, Ro's ankles are chained!"

His shout is so loud, it echoes around us, vibrating the walls enough to cause some debris to rain down.

"Watch yourself." Armand folds his fingers over his abdomen and gives Kai a hard look. "I don't take kindly to unwelcome visitors coming into my home and yelling at me. I could have you tossed out on your backside for your insolence."

"I'd sincerely like to see you try," Kai dares, "but you won't do it."

"How can you be so sure?"

"You're too intrigued. You're not going to turn away the most interesting thing that's happened to you in ages." Kai's arrogance is plentiful, but he's not wrong. "Don't act like you didn't expect this, Armand. There's no way you could capture a former queen and think no one would come for her. We both know you knew I'd arrive at some point, and you've been looking forward to this day."

It's not very often that Armand gets called on his shit. Usually, everyone just cowers and agrees with whatever he says.

But those men aren't as fierce as Kai. They certainly don't have the gumption to threaten Armand, which is what Kai does next.

"The question is, what do you want from me?" Kai's hand goes from resting on the hilt of his sword to grabbing it like he's contemplating using it. "You seem like a man who enjoys action. Would a fight satisfy you? Let's go. I'm ready."

Armand does love violence, but only when he's a bystander.

If I'm seeing things correctly, I'd say the slight widening of the overlord's eyes indicates apprehension. The expression is brief, but it's there. His eyes dart to the doorway, and he's probably calculating how long it would take for his guards to arrive if he needs defending.

It would be too late, and I think he's realizing he might not want to own someone like Kai. Someone who won't fall in line. Someone who can overpower him with physical force.

Trying to act unaffected, Armand sniffs. "I would never stoop so low as to grapple and grunt with you, sir. You might be brute, but I am not."

I suppress a scoff.

Armand likes to tout himself as some sophisticated sorcerer, but up until a few decades ago when a powerful witch crossed over to the Lost Land to help

the dark fae, every single one of them had been living in squalor.

They were emaciated, disoriented, and covered in their own feces. Their powers were suppressed by the presence of a gem called Valonite, and without their magical abilities, they had no way to protect themselves from the hellish conditions of the Lost Land.

Merina changed that for them. As a troll, she wasn't affected by the Valonite, and she was able to corral the gem so the dark fae could access their powers.

After they were rehabilitated, she gained them as allies. I have to admit it was a smart move on Merina's part. She was the most-wanted fugitive in Valora, and she needed an escape and friends. She got both when she came to a universe where she couldn't be found, and she banded with the soulless monsters who were more than happy to help her get revenge on all her enemies.

I've had a lot of time to think while I've been in the Lost Land, and on countless occasions, I've wished she were never born because so much suffering could've been prevented.

On the other hand, Merina's actions have led to at least one positive outcome.

My son.

If she and her coven hadn't started a plague curse in the Day Realm, the sickness wouldn't have killed off ninety-five percent of the adult female population. And then maybe Zarid wouldn't have ordered the kidnapping of human women to replace the ones they'd lost. And if I hadn't been abducted and placed in Zarid's harem, I wouldn't have gotten pregnant.

No matter how Zander came to be, I can't regret him.

He's the best thing—the only thing—I've had to keep me going in my life. During my darkest times, he was my hope. My reason to survive.

He and I have a bond that's stronger than mother and son. For over two thousand years, we defended each other from an abusive psycho who wanted to see us dead.

To this day, I still believe Zarid wouldn't have hesitated to kill us both if he didn't think it would start an uproar in his kingdom.

It wouldn't have been the first time a king killed members of his own family, but Zarid was stuck in a hard spot—Zander was his only heir, and I'd made myself useful to the people. I knew it was in my best interest to be popular. If I was liked, I had a shred of security, so I gained favor with the

Day Realm citizens by easing their burdens with gifts and kind gestures.

Of course, I'm certain if Zarid had been able to get someone else pregnant, he would've replaced us, regardless of the backlash he would've faced. But he failed in that aspect, despite his most rigorous efforts to do so.

"Kai, I feel as though we got off to a bad start," Armand says diplomatically, backtracking. "If my manners are rusty, you'll have to excuse me. I've been a resident of the Lost Land for so long, I barely remember my years in Valora before I was banished here."

"Well, let me tell you how things work back in the civilized world." Kai doesn't let go of his sword. "We don't kidnap innocent people and turn them into slaves. We don't shackle them, starve them, and make them live in filth."

"First, of all, the chains on our dear Ro are for her own safety."

Dear Ro? What a joke. Armand has just been calling me 'woman' since I got here.

"Safety?" Kai repeats incredulously.

"They keep her from running away and getting herself into real danger out there in The Unknown." Armand flicks a hand at the window. "Look closely at her ankles. The iron isn't eating away at her flesh. She's human, so she isn't susceptible to the burns."

A small mercy. The metal chafes and causes some redness, but it isn't nearly as bad as it would be if I were fae.

"As for her emaciated state and her poor hygiene, I'm not to blame," Armand claims. "She has chosen not to eat or bathe."

Kai looks to me for confirmation, and I swallow hard and glance down with shame because it's partially true.

"When he says eat," I start to explain, "he means drink someone's blood, which I refuse to do." My face screws up with disgust at the thought of putting my lips on someone else's dirty skin and sucking. "And the offer wasn't one-sided. I would've had to agree to an even exchange and let them drink from me in return. Maybe someone smarter would've done it to survive, but—"

"Ro is strong for sticking to her convictions," Kai cuts me off, praising me to Armand.

Blinking, I gape at him with surprise because he's standing up for me. Here I was thinking he was going to scold me for not taking better care of myself, but he's doing the opposite.

"Everyone has their limits," he goes on. "You, for example, won't enter

physical combat with me because you're afraid—”

“I am not afraid to lose!” Armand pridefully shouts.

But Kai finishes, “—to engage in activity that might taint the image of your high status.”

The overlord's mouth snaps shut with a clack of his teeth, and he's clearly embarrassed by his premature outburst. He lost his cool before Kai was even done talking, and now he's working his jaw and tightly gripping the arms of his throne.

For once, he's the one squirming, and I like it. I like it a lot.

Kai scans Armand up and down, observing, “You're clean, and you said Ro had the option to bathe, but how is that possible in a world with no water?”

Obviously not having fun with this interrogation, Armand gives a straightforward answer instead of teasing or talking in riddles. “The treaty your kings made with the Overlord of the West trickles down to us here in the east. We trade with Vaeront, and we receive food and barrels of water sometimes.”

Kai turns back to me. “I have a feeling you had good reason to abstain from washing yourself?”

Leaning back in his chair, Armand stares me down because he wants me to stay quiet on this one. He cracks his knuckles one by one on his right hand while rubbing his amulet with his left.

That awful amulet.

The worst of Armand's abuse has come from what he's shown me inside that crystal. The light-blue gem is magical, and it displays visions.

Of the past—horrible events I've experienced.

Of the present—heart wrenching scenes that I don't want to believe are real.

Last time Armand made me gaze into the amulet, tempting me with the promise of seeing my family as they are now, I saw my granddaughter's face. She was pale and her eyes were closed. She was so still, and when the vision zoomed out on Zaylee, I realized she was in a glass casket. Dead.

The overwhelming grief I felt was the last straw for my already splintered mental state. Caring was too painful, and I willingly surrendered myself to the apathy of the Lost Land after that.

With that vision, Armand broke me, his favorite toy.

When I first came here, I was exactly what Armand and Yugo needed. I

reacted to their cruelty. I cried and yelled. I sobbed so hard I couldn't breathe. And they laughed.

I can still hear their evil cackling in my mind.

The frequency of their harassment has subsided, and I'm sure it's because I'm too damaged to give them what they want.

Honestly, Armand doesn't deserve my compliant silence. I'm already willing to die, so I have nothing to lose, and this might be the one chance I have to spill the truth.

"Armand invited his minions to watch my sponge baths," I tattle. "They surrounded me as I kneeled, naked, next to the bucket. Getting clean was a long process because I had so little water to work with, and I spent the entire time wondering when one of them would attack me. I couldn't go through that on a regular basis."

"You sexually assaulted her," Kai accuses Armand with an eerie calmness in his voice.

"I did not." Armand is aghast. "I wasn't even in the room, and no one touched her."

"It doesn't matter. You violated her just by putting her in that situation."

Kai's rage has increased, and it's hot.

Not hot as in sexy—though it *is* sexy—but it's actually warm. Heat ripples from the top of my head to the tips of my toes.

I wonder if Armand can feel it, too.

"Go on, then." Shifting in his uncomfortable chair, the overlord's jaw ticks with impatience. "Offer me a bargain for the woman's freedom."

Kai tilts his head, and I can almost read his mind. He's probably thinking, *are we seriously going to act like that conversation didn't just happen?*

Both men stare blankly at each other for several seconds, and I can tell the instant Kai decides he's just so done with this shit already.

With a business-like air, he straightens his shoulders, steps forward, and formally lays out his offer. "I can promise you a monthly shipment of goods. Grain, fruit, ale—"

"We have enough food," Armand cuts him off.

That's a lie. The supplies he receives from the west are scraps. Leftovers. It's charity, really.

"The starvation of the queen would indicate otherwise," Kai deadpans.

"She's alive, isn't she?"

"No thanks to you. I know how the Lost Land works. No one dies of

natural causes here. It's just endless thirst and hunger. Even you haven't escaped that suffering from the looks of your hair and skin."

Insulted, Armand gasps. "My nutritional needs are met by my husband. Yugo and I provide everything we need for each other."

Mentioning his significant other is all it takes for Yugo to be summoned. Strolling into the room, he wears his normal attire of a loin cloth that looks like it might fall off if even a light draft comes through the windows.

At first, when I met the man who worships Armand, I thought maybe he was being held captive. Or maybe he'd been brainwashed.

I quickly found out that's not the case. Yugo is completely devoted to Armand, and not in a Stockholm Syndrome kind of way.

They're two twisted peas in a pod.

They constantly conspire together, chuckling and whispering like best friends who are about to pull a prank on their least favorite teacher. They touch at every opportunity—much like now, when Yugo perches on the arm of the throne and drapes his arm over Armand's shoulder. As Yugo lightly brushes the recent puncture marks on Armand's neck, Armand caresses the day-old bite-shaped bruise on Yugo's upper thigh.

Moments ago, Armand was ready to blow a gasket, but now that his partner in crime has joined him, he's happy as a clam.

They're clearly in love. They look at each other as if time begins and ends with their relationship.

A part of me is jealous because I've never had that.

That fierce loyalty. A perfect fit.

They might be awful, but they're awful together. I've never heard one of them speak a bad word about the other, and that kind of devotion is hard to come by.

Kai studies the pair curiously, but there's no judgment in his gaze. Same sex relationships aren't unheard of in Valora, especially in the Day Realm. With the male to female ratio being so uneven, it's expected that men would seek intimacy with each other.

Plus, the fae are so experimental with their sexuality anyway because they can be without consequence. Pregnancy is extremely uncommon if the couple isn't a fated match, and there are no diseases to worry about.

Some stay abstinent if they're determined to wait for their soul mate, but it's rare to find them. Most assume it'll never happen, so they put their pleasure above all else. They collect happiness so greedily, so

unapologetically, wherever they can get it.

Quickly moving onto his next deal, Kai says, “Material goods. Tapestries, furniture, art. Surely you have need for that.”

Armand pretends to consider it as he tips his head back and forth. “While this place could use a good sprucing up, I’ve gone without those things for so long. I like my dreary home. Try again, good sir.”

“Seems you’re in desperate need of clothing.” Kai’s attention is focused on Yugo’s outfit. Or lack thereof.

“Absolutely not. My husband loves his uniform, and my slaves don’t get to choose what they wear.”

“What about dragon acid?” Kai tries again.

Armand’s eyebrows go up, and it might be the first time I’ve seen him genuinely impressed. “*You* captured a dragon?”

“I did not, but Princess Danyetta of the Night Realm has befriended one.”

“Then the substance isn’t yours to give.”

“I know for a fact that the princess would agree to the deal and the dragon loves her, so I’m telling you that if you want it in exchange for Ro, you’ll have it. I’ve heard dragon acid can enhance spells.”

“That’s true.” Nodding, Armand strokes his chin as he looks to Yugo. “What do you think?”

“It could help us expand the enchantment line of the property.”

“Eh,” Armand makes an unenthusiastic noise before asking, “and what would we do with the barren land outside of these walls? I have no use for the extra space. If anything, we would be unintentionally creating a sanctuary for outsiders. We’d basically be inviting the barbarians to camp at our doorstep.” He gives Kai a frown. “That was the best offer yet, but I still reject it.”

Kai doesn’t realize how pointless this negotiation is. Unless he starts offering people—more specifically, fresh meat to torment—I don’t think Armand is going to accept any exchange.

Suddenly, he takes out his magnifying glass. After withdrawing the enchanted tool from his robe pocket, he peers through the warped lens at Kai with slitted eyes.

He tilts it. Turns it this way and that. Straightening up and sitting forward, he brings it closer to his eye as if he needs to study something he finds very enthralling.

For several seconds, his unnaturally pale iris is enlarged as his lips flatten

and twitch.

Then he smiles, showing his sharpened incisors. His grin spreads into something bigger, creepier. He's downright delighted as he chuckles to himself.

"Oh, what fun we're going to have." He bounces excitedly as he puts the magnifying glass away. "Do you like games, Kai?"

"No." Kai's response comes quickly.

Amused, the evil overlord is still smiling. "Don't be such a sourpuss. You don't even know what game I'm proposing."

"Whatever it is, I want no part of it."

"Are you telling me you doubt your abilities?"

"Abilities to do what? To act like a child? Games are for children."

"No, it wouldn't be childish. It would be the opposite of childish. It would be violent, frightening, and almost impossible to beat. Come on, Kai. Every fae loves a good challenge, and you can't tell me that's not true."

Kai nibbles at the bait. "What kind of challenge?"

"Think of it as an obstacle course that will test your strength. It would be a set of three challenges."

Standing from the throne, Armand wears a thoughtful expression and paces a bit as if he's just now coming up with the idea.

In reality, I'm positive he had this plan before he walked into this room.

If Kai won't give him a new toy, Kai will be the new toy by default.

It's exactly what I've been fearing.

"You'll be tested physically, mentally, and emotionally..." Armand pauses dramatically. "A test of the body, the mind, and the heart. All you have to do is win each one."

Kai crosses his arms. "That's it?"

Smiling deviously, Armand seems pleased that Kai is underestimating the proposal. "That's it."

"And where is this taking place? In here?"

"Goodness, no. Way too messy. In the maze."

I close my eyes as a wave of nausea hits me. That bread and water I ingested is like heavy stones in my stomach.

Since I've been here, two servants who made minuscule mistakes have been sent into that maze as punishment. Neither ever came out, but I heard their agony.

Their screams kept me up for days. Guttural, throaty shouts. The kind of

sound someone makes when they're in the throes of absolute terror. Then, they eventually stopped, and somehow the silence was worse.

Unaware of the danger, Kai deadpans, "You want me to go through the maze?"

I pin him with a serious gaze. "Don't take this lightly. It's not like a normal maze. It's a death trap."

Kai glances at Armand, and the overlord nods. "She's not wrong. My magic is woven into the labyrinth. Without giving too much of the surprise away, all I can tell you is that the area is... vast and complicated."

"It's a trick, Kai." My chest is becoming tight with panic again. "I'm not even sure there's a way out. Once you go in... you're a goner. You should go home. Seriously. Turn around and leave."

Armand tsks like I'm a mouthy kid. "Ah, ah. Kai is so dedicated, he would never abandon you. Isn't that right, mighty warrior?"

"That's correct." Kai aims his grumpy face at me. "Either I leave with you or not at all."

"*Not at all* is how this will end," I hiss. "It doesn't matter if you agree to these ridiculous terms. Armand always gets his way."

"No, dear," the overlord contradicts me. "This time you're going to get *your* way."

"What do you mean by that?" I ask warily.

I don't like the look in his eyes. That evil twinkle.

Instead of clarifying, Armand grins at Kai and spreads his hands. "What do you say?"

"How will we be bound to the agreement without our souls?" Kai asks with caution. "How can I be sure you won't back out of the deal?"

Armand lifts his amulet from his chest. "We'll place our vow on this gem. The magic inside will make sure we both keep our word."

"How will it do that?"

"I might own the amulet, but I don't control it. Not when it comes to bargains. If either of us reneges, our lifeforce will be sucked into the gem. It has a hunger, you see, and it's been too long since it has consumed someone."

"How do I know you're not lying right now?"

"Feel the power within the amulet." Quickly removing the chain from around his neck, Armand extends the necklace toward Kai. It dangles from his fingertips, swinging back and forth like a pendulum. "Just put your hand

near it.”

Walking forward and extending his arm, Kai lets his palm hover a few inches away from the gem. I’ve been close enough to that thing that I’ve felt its force. It’s indescribable, but I’d say it’s unnerving and intriguing at the same time to sense the invisible energy of pure magic.

Kai snatches his hand away and steps back like he’s just as disturbed by it as I am. “You haven’t told me the terms yet. When I win, what do I get?”

“*When*,” Yugo speaks up, snickering to Armand. “He said, ‘when.’ Look at him... so sure he’s going to succeed.”

“If he’s that confident, then he has nothing to worry about,” Armand quips happily. “Kai, if you overcome the challenges, I’ll personally escort you to the Gatekeeper and make sure you and your queen leave the Lost Land safely. You’ll be a hero.”

“And if I lose?”

“If you lose...” Armand’s attention falls on me. “You have to give her what she wants.”

CHAPTER 5

Kai

“What she wants,” I repeat, my heart thundering.

Outwardly, I’m trying to keep a calm façade. I’m used to being stone-faced in the most perilous situations, but I’m not my best self today.

My emotions are all out of sorts, and I don’t know why I can’t seem to keep my shit together.

“Simply give the queen what she wants,” Armand confirms. “I still can’t believe you refused her. Quite frankly, it was rude.” He pretends to wear a sympathetic mask as he looks at Ro. “This poor thing deserves to be put out of her misery.”

Put out of her misery.

Ellister had used a similar phrase right before he left me outside the castle. I should’ve known then that the circumstances are worse than I’d realized.

It never occurred to me that Ro wouldn’t want to be saved, and now Armand is using that against me.

I glance at the queen.

Her eyes are wide and worried, and she’s shaking her head while silently mouthing, “Don’t.”

She wants me to turn down the proposal, but what’s the alternative?

Armand can tell I’m mentally debating, and he spells out the other option, which really isn’t an option at all. “Of course you could choose violence and kill every single one of us, but think of the repercussions. If I die, the time-stilling enchantment over the property goes away. You’ll become disoriented and unhinged. You’ll wander aimlessly and venture out into The Unknown. You and the woman would be lost. That’s not an outcome you’re willing to consider, is it?”

“No.” I hate agreeing with this asshole, but he’s got me backed into a

corner.

“Honestly, I don’t know why you don’t look happier,” Armand complains, like I’m being ungrateful for not thanking him for the wonderful opportunity he’s given me. “In either scenario, you get to leave here the victor who has either won a queen’s freedom or granted her with the most merciful act you could bestow on such a sad creature.”

He’s wrong. If I fail, there is no victory.

I’m confident in my ability to defeat his game, but in the off chance that I don’t, I know what will happen. I won’t complete my end of the deal, and I’ll willingly relinquish myself to the gem. Ro would still be stuck here, but eventually, when I don’t return to Valora, they’ll send someone else in my place and she’ll be rescued by another warrior.

I cannot—will not—hurt Ro under any circumstances.

So I must win.

Strength? I’ve got that in spades, and if anyone can beat these challenges, it’s me.

Armand just wants a show, and I can give him that. Like Ellister said, the overlord values entertainment.

I’ll slay any monsters thrown my way. In fact, I’m looking forward to it. I’ve got some pent-up anger I need to expel, and any target will do.

“All right.” I nod once. “You have a deal.”

A brief blue flash comes from the amulet, an acknowledgement of our bargain, and Armand claps his hands. “Wonderful.”

“Kai, no,” Ro cries, her voice cracking.

Trying to put off an air of nonchalance, I shrug. “I already agreed.”

“And you’ll take her with you.” Swirling a finger at Ro, Armand tacks on the stipulation with finality.

I fervently shake my head.

It’s one thing to march into an unknown battle by myself. But with a starving, suicidal former queen in tow? No way.

“Hold on.” I slash my hand through the air. “That wasn’t part of the deal.”

“Technically, no. I suppose you could leave her here, but I can’t guarantee her well-being in your absence.”

Meaning, he’s probably going to hurt her.

And I’ll worry the whole time I’m gone.

Worry is a dangerous distraction. If I’m thinking about what’s happening

on the outside of the maze, I'll make mistakes.

Plus, I can't stomach the thought of any additional harm coming to Ro because I'm not there to protect her.

The only way to keep her safe is to have her with me.

Fuck.

"Also, you'll have to wear this." Armand beckons Yugo, and his husband pulls a gold necklace from somewhere in the folds of his loin cloth.

I wrinkle my nose at the thought of touching anything that's been stored in someone's underpants, but the grossness of it isn't my greatest concern.

That's a Valonite necklace.

I recognize the jewelry because Vaeront had something similar at the treaty meeting with the royals. The chain holds rectangular gold plates of varying sizes. The biggest one in the middle is about two inches in length, and somewhere inside it, there's a tiny chip of the gem. The metal acts as a conduit, and anyone in contact with the necklace can't use their power.

Which means I won't be able to heal Ro or myself if we get injured.

I can handle pain, but Ro shouldn't have to endure any more misery than she already has.

I step back when Armand tries to put the collar on me. "You're just going to throw in random requirements to our bargain after we've already made it?"

"It's a rule of my game—anyone who plays must wear the necklace. Your strength is being tested. The competition is about you, not your power."

"My ability isn't destructive or defensive. I can't hurt anyone with it."

"I'm aware," Armand says with a smirk.

I didn't tell him what my power is, but it's not surprising that he knows. When he studied me through that magical magnifying glass, I'm sure he got a glimpse of many things. Personal things. He probably knows way too much about me, including my weaknesses.

Armand lifts the necklace toward me, and this time, I snatch it from him. "I'll put it on myself."

"Fine, fine." Satisfied with my compliance, he backs off.

When the clasp at the nape of my neck clicks into place, I observe the fact that it can't be unhooked without help. There's a little keyhole I can feel with my finger. This thing isn't coming off until Armand unlocks it.

I turn to Ro. "Don't be afraid. I'll be extra vigilant about making sure you don't get hurt. I'm one of the best fighters in all of Valora." My eyes cut to Armand. "I'm allowed to bring my weapons, right? Don't tell me you're

going to confiscate them.”

“Of course you can keep them. What kind of monster would I be if I let you go in there unarmed? Take everything you have on, even that sad sack of food.”

“And proper clothing for Ro,” I demand. When he raises his eyebrows at my uncompromising tone, I insist, “You’ve made a couple extra requests. This is mine. She will be covered.”

Sighing as if it’s a huge inconvenience, he turns to Yugo. “Get the woman something to wear?”

After leaving, Yugo returns surprisingly fast with a robe that looks a lot like Armand’s. I take the brown garment from his hands, and I frown as I hold it out in front of me.

First of all, it’s not Ro’s size. It’s way too big. Also, it’s made from rough burlap material. So stiff and scratchy. Not fit for a queen’s delicate skin.

“Something wrong?” Armand asks, and his taunting tone suggests he’s getting a kick out of every single displeasure he causes me.

I imagine punching him in the face. If I hit him just right, my fist is big enough to give him a black eye, a bloody nose, and a busted lip all in one blow.

Maybe I could take it a step further and snap his arm. Unless he has another Healer on hand, he’d be in pain until I can get back to fix him. Seems like that would make things a bit more fair.

What would the consequences be? Would he call off the deal? I don’t think he’s allowed to do that. We both swore on the amulet, but I never promised I wouldn’t maim him a little.

Before I can make a decision about retaliation, Ro takes the clothing from me and slips it around her shoulders. The sleeves are too long for her, so she just rolls them a few times until they’re bunched around her wrists. She buttons the front, but the neckline is wide and her shoulders are narrow, so the material keeps falling off to one side, exposing her upper arm. The bottom hem pools around her feet.

I’m not happy about any of it, but it’s better than not having clothing at all.

“Remove the chains,” I command. “And give her shoes.”

As if Yugo anticipated this request, he lifts two boots he’d been hiding behind his back. They’re huge and heavy. Probably not as big as the ones I wear, but certainly too large for Ro.

“Do you have anything less clunky?” I ask. “If she needs to run for her life, those will prevent her from doing so.”

Yugo shrugs. “This is all we have to offer.”

I’m not sure I believe him. The shoes he’s wearing are soft and leathery, almost like socks with laces.

“I’ll go without them,” Ro says softly. “I’m used to being barefoot.”

“See? She’s fine.” Armand tosses a key to me.

Kneeling down, I get to work on Ro’s shackles. Using the bottom of the robe, I wrap it around my fingers to protect my skin from any iron burns while I’m handling the harmful metal.

Once I release Ro from her restraints, she lets out a sigh of relief because the cuffs are no longer clamped around her ankles.

I drop the chains, and I softly rub my thumb over the redness on her skin. It must be sore, and I wish I’d insisted on removing the shackles before I put on the Valonite necklace so I could heal her.

“It’s okay,” she whispers as if she can read my mind. “Really.”

I have no choice but to believe her, and after I stand, I kick the chains, sending them skidding across the floor.

“And so it begins!” Armand announces boisterously, prompting four poorly dressed men to file into the room.

The burlap material they wear is so worn, it’s become soft over time. Their ripped shirts hang from their bony shoulders, and their pants have holes in the knees.

With spears in hand, they surround us in a square formation. Their eyes are dead, their skin is gray, and they’re bald. Honestly, they look like walking corpses.

“Stand proud,” Armand harshly orders the men. “Shoulders back, heads high. Look ferocious.”

I scoff loudly, earning irritated glances from Armand and Yugo.

Ferocious?

I could take these guards down as easily as swatting flies, and we all know it.

As Armand and Yugo meet in front of our group, I hear a quiet slurping sound behind me. I glance back and notice the man to the right of Ro focusing on the bare skin of her shoulder. He’s leering, literally salivating as spittle runs down his chin.

Like a starving animal, his lip lifts to show his teeth, and he licks one of

his fangs.

Reaching over, I pull the robe up to cover Ro and give the man a hard stare. “Look at her one more time and I’ll extract your eyeballs from your skull with my bare hands.”

Ro gasps at my sinister warning as she grips the material at her neck to keep it in place, and the man drops his gaze to the stone at his feet.

“Now, there are instructions you must follow,” Armand goes on cheerfully as if I didn’t just issue a gruesome threat. “Once you believe you’ve overcome a challenge, you need to call out the theme of the test—mental, physical, or of the heart. But the challenges won’t necessarily come in any particular order. You have to figure out which test is which, and you have to get it right to move onto the next challenge.”

Spinning around, he begins walking from the room with Yugo at his side. The two of them link arms as if they’re simply going for a romantic stroll.

Our gangly escorts move that way, and since Ro and I are boxed in, we have no choice but to trail behind Armand and Yugo through the foyer.

Two guards are stationed at the exit, and they’re so weak they struggle to open the heavy door for us.

“What happens if I get it wrong?” I ask at Armand’s back as we go outside into the gloomy landscape.

“You lose. And,” he tacks on without pausing his trek toward the maze, “you must recite your claim with an official poem. Here’s an example: *Challenge number one is done. The mental test is fought and won.* And you must be inside the maze when you say it.”

“Inside the maze... What do you mean? Of course that’s where we’ll be. That’s where we’re going.”

“You must be *inside* the maze when you say it,” Armand repeats, not clarifying at all.

Ro clears her throat. “What if Kai can’t say it? What if he’s unable to talk for some reason?”

Turning his head to squint at her, Armand gives Ro an assessing look as if he’s surprised by her cleverness to think to ask. “Then you may call it out for him.”

“What if Kai dies before the challenge is over?” she prods candidly. “Or what if I die?”

Those are good questions, and I’m glad she voiced them.

I’m not a strategist, unfortunately, and I realize it might be beneficial to

have Ro with me on this journey. My role in Valora includes taking orders and applying brute force. I don't have to think. I just do what I'm told.

Ro's obviously smarter than I am, and she knows Armand's tricks better than I do.

"If either of you dies, then the challenge is over, and I win."

"In the case of my death," Ro presses, "Kai will still get to leave, right?"

"Yes." There's a tick of annoyance in the overlord's jaw, like he doesn't enjoy being pestered to give away facts that might actually help us.

"So, the only way Kai doesn't regain his freedom is if he dies in the game?"

"That's what I said."

Pursing her lips, Ro nods once with determination.

I'm in awe of this woman. While she's entering a perilous contest, she's more concerned about my life than her own. Her fear for me is apparent, and I find it a bit heartwarming that she wants to ensure my survival.

I wonder if she's afraid for herself. Maybe not. If she's determined to die, maybe she's glad to be participating in a game where two out of three outcomes end with her dead.

Once we're near the beginning of the maze, Armand halts and turns toward us. "One more thing... If, at any point, you want to surrender, just say so."

"What kind of frilly poetry will you want for that?" I quip, being a smartass.

He gives me a chilled smile. "Oh, I won't need rhymes when you admit defeat."

"When?" I parrot, just like Yugo did when I used the word.

Armand doesn't answer with a reply. He just keeps that grin plastered on his face, snide and arrogant as if he knows my fate.

But he doesn't know *me*.

He has no idea how far I'm willing to go for victory.

CHAPTER 6

Ro

“Off you go,” Armand says behind us, impatient to get the game started.

Looking ahead, I scan the entrance of the maze that’s just a few steps away. The first path into the labyrinth is long, framed by tall walls made of brittle twigs. Pebbles and dusty rocks cover the ground of the aisle that’s six feet wide.

Other than being ugly and creepy as hell, it doesn’t look like a torture chamber.

Kai and I move forward.

As soon as we cross the threshold, I wince, bracing myself because I expect to see some obvious threats. Maybe a booby trap. Sharp blades or fire shooting from the shrubbery.

But nothing happens.

“Get behind me, and keep close,” Kai mutters. “You will still stay within two feet of me at all times, unless I’m fighting. In that case, you will maintain a minimum distance of eight feet while remaining in my sight. Understood?”

“Yes,” I immediately whisper.

Bossiness suits Kai. He’s not like other warriors who might tread lightly around my opinion. I’d much rather he bypass asking for my permission and just take charge. It makes me feel taken care of.

Positioning himself in front of me, Kai shields me with his left arm while holding his sword up with his right hand. I do as he says, trying to huddle in without latching myself to his body like a frightened child.

I don’t want to look like a total wimp, but I am, unlike Kai, who’s obviously in his element. He’s not even tense. His movements are stealthy, and there’s an air of calmness about him. Every time he takes a breath, it’s measured without a hint of panic, and I watch the scars on his back stretch as his lungs expand slowly.

We get ten feet in. Fifteen. Twenty.

Swallowing hard, I listen for any sound that will tell us what's coming, but all I hear is the wind, my lungs working a little hard to keep up with my racing heart, and Kai's boots crunching over the gravelly trail. My footsteps are much quieter than his, but that's because I have no shoes.

I'm instantly regretting my decision to refuse the boots I was offered because the rocks are rough and jagged. Even if it would've been like having cement blocks around my ankles, at least all these painful pieces wouldn't be digging into my feet.

"Remember you can surrender whenever you like!" Armand calls out happily.

I look back to see him standing closely with Yugo on the other side of the entrance.

They're both waving and smiling like they're our best friends and they're sending us off on a luxury cruise. Framing the couple, the soldiers are in position, blocking our way just in case we change our minds and decide to bolt at the last second.

As if we could run from this. We have no choice but to keep going.

"Assholes," Kai says under his breath, continuing farther into this unknown hell. "Don't let them get to you, Ro. We're going to be just fine."

I'm sure he's confident in himself with his sword and all his other weapons, and I have no doubt he's amazing with them, but danger isn't always a tangible thing. Sometimes the worst threat is something you can't fight with sharp objects.

Considering two of our tests are emotional and mental, I have a feeling we're up against some disturbing shit.

"There's something you need to understand about Armand," I warn.

"You want to know what I see when I look at him?" Kai actually sounds bored.

"What?"

"A cliché. He isn't exceptional. He reminds me of all the kings and queens in history who used the fact that they had more power than others as an excuse to do whatever they wanted."

"He's not like them," I disagree. "He's way worse."

"How so?"

"First of all, he's not the most powerful man in this region of the Lost Land."

“Who’s more powerful than a wizard?” On guard for any threat, Kai glances left. Right. Back the way we came.

“I don’t know, but I’ve eavesdropped a lot while I’ve been here, and I’ve heard Armand and Yugo talking about the other men. Some of them are wizards themselves. Before the dark fae were sent here, most of them had unique abilities. That’s why their society was so dangerous. They’d collected people who had the rarest of talents. All of them were special.”

“So how did Armand become the overlord?”

“That’s the point I’m trying to make. What happens when a bunch of men with equal power try to subjugate each other? Who wins?”

After a moment of thought, Kai comments, “The one who’s the most ruthless.”

“Exactly. Armand’s most valuable asset is his cruelty. He’s the leader because at some point he got the opportunity to have the upper hand, and he never let go of that. And now he deprives everyone around him because it keeps them too weak to fight back.”

Grunting, Kai acknowledges what I’ve said, but he still isn’t getting it. “That sounds like a familiar pattern to me. What sets him apart from other rulers?”

“How much he enjoys seeing people suffer,” I answer. “He doesn’t just hurt them because it serves him well. It’s almost like their misery feeds him. He thrives on it. He’s a sadist, and this maze? This is his playground. I don’t know what goes on in here, but whatever it is, I don’t think it will be what we expect. Don’t underestimate anything and accept the fact that you’re probably going to have to fight dirty. I’m being very pessimistic right now but trust me. I’ve been part of this world for long enough to know it changes people. It turns them into the worst version of themselves, and they spread their brutality to others like a disease. The Lost Land ruins everyone. It’ll ruin *you*, Kai.”

“Is that what you think? That you’re ruined like everyone else?”

“Yes,” I reply honestly, “except I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“Only yourself, right?” He turns his head forward again, and I’m offended by the comment.

Speeding up, I put myself beside him so we can have this conversation face-to-face. “There’s so much you don’t know about me.”

“I know how loved you are,” he shoots back. “Your son misses you. Queen Maelyn, too. And what about the grandson you’ve never met? Prince

Maverick is a fine boy—a strapping teenager now. Then there’s Princess Zaylee...”

At the mention of my granddaughter, my chest aches. I only got to meet her for one short afternoon.

It had been the most pleasant surprise when Zaylee came to Brazil to be with me. The reason for her visit wasn’t a good one—the dark fae had spread a sickness curse in all the realms of Valora, but it was only affecting female children. Since Zaylee was just sixteen, she was young enough to be susceptible to the illness, and Earth was the safest place for her to be.

Well, at least, that’s what we’d thought. No one could’ve known Ellister would crash our picnic. He took us so quickly, sucking us through a spinning abyss he calls a vortex.

Until that moment, I’d never even heard of Gatekeepers or alternate universes, but the next thing I knew, we were in the Lost Land in cages at Vaeront’s castle in the west.

Zaylee and I weren’t the only women he’d collected. Princess Danyetta, Kirian and Quinn’s daughter, and her lady in waiting, Isla, were there as well.

Last time I saw the girls, they were staring at me fearfully through the iron bars of their prisons as I was dragged away to be given to Armand as a “pretty maid.” Honestly, I was more scared for them than I was for myself. They were facing futures much worse than mine because of their ages. Young means fertile. Fertile means they can give the men here something I can’t—children.

If I’ve got anything going for me, it’s the fact that fae women lose their ability to get pregnant around the age of forty-five, and I passed that phase of my life thousands of years ago.

“What happened to the other girls who were taken to Vaeront’s?” I inquire hesitantly.

That’s probably one of the first questions I should’ve asked Kai, but I’ve been too afraid. Because if he doesn’t give me the answer I need, I’m not sure I can handle it.

“Princess Danyetta and Lady Isla were rescued,” Kai tells me. “They’re both back in Valora.”

Some tightness releases from my lungs. “And Zaylee? Did she escape this place? Please tell me she’s home and safe.”

I think of the vision inside Armand’s gem.

Zaylee’s lifeless face.

That glass casket.

Kai frowns. "I cannot tell you of her location, unfortunately. She's missing."

My heart drops. "Missing?"

"It seems she ended up in the company of a barbarian tribe."

"But-but the barbarians only reside out there... in The Unknown."

The wall of the maze is blocking my view, but I can imagine the desolate expanse of land beyond it. I've seen it from the third floor of Armand's castle while I was cleaning. It's an infinite desert with high winds, dust storms, and the confusing passing of time.

Throughout The Unknown, there are enchanted areas, just like Armand's territory. In those bubbles, the mind can think clearly, but those sanctuaries are few and far between.

"Pippin is searching for her right now." Kai injects a more upbeat tone into his voice, rather than his normal deep grumble, and I suspect he's trying to sound positive for me. "He's a Seeker, so locating people is his specialty."

"Pippin," I practically spit the name. "He was supposed to be protecting us the afternoon we got taken by Ellister, but he was too busy flirting with some girls on a trail near our picnicking spot."

"So I've been informed." Kai's grumpiness surges back at the reminder of Pippin's mistake. "If he doesn't find Princess Zaylee, he will not be forgiven. He'll be put to death, and even though he's been a good friend of mine for many years, I wouldn't be able to deny that he deserves it."

We're almost to the first turn in the maze, and when I glance back at the entrance, it seems so far away.

Armand and his crew are no longer there. My guess is, he's inside where he's happy with his husband and his horde of miserable servants.

"Zaylee was sweet on Pippin, too, you know?" I say sadly. "I could tell she was trying to hide it, but it was obvious to me. She worshipped him."

Kai's face scrunches up with disgust. "But she's a child."

My smile is soft. "Children have crushes sometimes. I didn't say he returned her affection. Evidently, he did not, and he broke her heart. His careless actions smashed her idyllic hopes, and I think her feelings about him changed that day. It doesn't matter now anyway because..." I suppress a hitch in my voice before rasping, "Because I think she isn't alive anymore."

The words are hard to say, and they stop Kai in his tracks.

When he rotates to face me, the biggest scar down his forehead and cheek

is deepened from the way he's furrowing his brow. "What makes you think that?"

Once I get past the lump in my throat, I tell him what I saw in Armand's amulet, and before he can refute it with some rational explanation, I say, "Everything else Armand has shown me is true."

"What else has he shown you?"

Closing my eyes briefly, I shake my head to rid myself of the images of bad memories. Of being attacked. Violated in the worst way by my own husband. Forced to watch the horrible scenes of my darkest moments like they were part of a movie.

"I don't want to talk about that," I whisper.

"All right."

Kai steps in close. So close, the heat from his skin warms my body and I can smell him. Sweet, with a hint of spice. Cinnamon rolls?

Warriors shouldn't smell good. They're often sweaty, and bathing isn't high on their priority list. Kai should be especially odiferous with how much Lost Land filth is coating every inch of him, but he isn't.

A slow inhale of his scent gives me a modicum of peace.

"Well, I don't believe Princess Zaylee is dead," he states. "She's too valuable to kill. The main reason the barbarians have survived out there is because they're resourceful. They wouldn't destroy their best bargaining chip."

"Let's say you're right," I humor him. "That means she's stuck with awful men who are probably making her wish for the ultimate escape in the same way I have."

Tilting his head, Kai looks at me like he doesn't agree. "You spent less than an hour with Princess Zaylee before you were separated, yes?"

Nodding, I confirm, "Our time together was brief."

"She probably seemed very sweet."

I narrow my eyes at his word choice. "Seemed?"

It's then that I realize Kai knows Zaylee better than I do. He's been around her during her entire life. He was there when she was a baby and got to see her growing up.

His lips twitch like he's remembering something amusing. "The princess is not one to be trifled with."

"What does that mean?"

"She's got a good heart, but her soul is wild, and she has an odd sense of

humor.”

“Odd how?”

“Dark and sometimes morbid. Situations that would normally frighten a person seem to fascinate her. And her Pyro power is quite strong. Her ability didn’t fully emerge until her teenage years. Perhaps she simply hid her strength until then—I’m not sure. She might’ve been downplaying her power for strategic reasons, but when she found it necessary to display it, she showed it in a very impressive way.”

“What kind of way?” I shift my weight from one leg to the other, trying to get some temporary relief from the rocks poking my bare feet.

We’re still not moving from where we stopped. We should probably be getting through the maze instead of chitchatting, but this is too interesting.

“When the princess was thirteen,” Kai starts, “there was a large sex trafficking ring busted up near the northern coast by Olphene. Two of the snatchers and the leader were sentenced to death. Princess Zaylee asked King Zander to let her sit in on the executions. She was quite adamant about it.”

I place my hand on my upper chest as if I’m clutching pearls. “He didn’t allow it, did he? She would’ve been far too young to witness something so gruesome.”

“Don’t worry. He said no. But the strangest thing started happening to the prisoners once they were put in the dungeon. In the days leading up to the executions, they went bald. They’d wake up each morning with less and less of their hair. Not just on their heads—everywhere on their bodies. Beards, eyebrows. All gone. They were in absolute hysterics because they were going to go to their deaths without their vanity intact, and no one could figure out how or why it was happening.”

“What was causing it?”

“Not what. Who. Princess Zaylee had been bribing the guard to let her sneak down there. While the prisoners were sleeping, she singed their hair off without leaving any evidence. No burns on their skin. No redness.” Kai shakes his head in awe. “The precision it took for her to do that is unbelievable, and the pettiness of it is so very fae.”

As funny as that is, I’m stuck on the fact that Zaylee had to be around such terrible people. “Are there a lot of trafficking rings still? I thought Zander’s harsh punishments had put a stop to them.”

“It’s extremely infrequent. You can take comfort in that. With law enforcement in the cities and the sprites on our side, we usually hear of an

auction before it happens.”

“Since when have the sprites ever collaborated with the royals?”

The sprites have always been one of the greatest mysteries of Valora. The little flying creatures are utilized to send messages across the realms because of how fast and inconspicuous they are, but they’ve never taken orders from any king or queen. The favors they do for the fae come at a high cost. They have expensive taste, and they usually demand a ridiculous amount of jewels or gold for the jobs they do.

“Queen Whitley has formed a profound companionship with the sprite communities, and not just in the Dream Realm,” Kai explains. “All over Valora, they spy for her and report suspicious activity without even asking for payment.”

My eyes widen. “Well, that’s a miracle if I’ve ever heard one.”

“The world you left is not the same as it was,” he comments with pride. “I’d describe it as a sort of utopia now.”

“Utopia?” I repeat with disbelief. “Valora has always been riddled with conflict, rivalry, and inequality. How could it change so much in the short time I’ve been gone?”

“Keep in mind the time difference between the fae world and the Earth realm. While you were in Brazil for a few weeks, over two decades went by in Valora.”

“Still. Twenty-some years isn’t enough to make that much progress.”

“It is when all the realms are at peace. Not just peace...” Kai corrects. “Love. There’s love and friendship among the royals, and for the first time, they’re working together as a united front. You should’ve seen the way they handled the recent famine and sickness. If the dark fae invasion proved anything, it’s that the citizens of Valora are strong enough to get through the worst hardships when we all support each other. Even when there’s starvation and death everywhere, we sacrifice for one another. The royals sacrifice, too. They give up so much for their people, and that hasn’t gone unnoticed.”

“Lead by example,” I comment, understanding.

Kai nods. “The villagers have seen that they can count on their kings and queens when they need help, and that assistance extends beyond the borders. Night Realm citizens can get resources from the Day Realm and vice versa. Certain medicines and foods are no longer reserved for the regions they come from. It’s as if the realms aren’t three separate kingdoms, but one land. And all people are valued, no matter their species or station. Like the gnomes—

they've been given rights and respect they didn't have before, and laws have been put in place to protect them from being taken advantage of in the mines."

"That all sounds too good to be true. It's extremely hard for me to imagine."

"Then don't. You can just see for yourself when you come back with me."

When. There's that word again. Assumptions have been thrown around a lot today.

I guess in very uncertain times—like now—it's nice to know that at least one of us is confident enough to believe we'll win.

"Miracles, destiny, whatever you want to call it..." Kai goes on. "Things can change for the better. Alliances can be forged, and harmony can be achieved." Bending down a little as if he's telling me a secret, he adds, "And fire-wielding princesses with a grudge can hold their own. If the barbarian tribe wasn't already completely hairless, I'm positive they are now."

Releasing a breath, I let out a half-laugh.

Kai just gave me something very special—reassurance, along with an entertaining story about my granddaughter.

Maybe Zaylee isn't dead. If she's as tenacious as he says, she's got a shot here.

"I'm so glad she's not like me," I say, overwhelmed with relief.

"Like you?" Kai asks, oblivious because he has yet to realize he's been saddled with a dud.

"Timid. Weak. Powerless."

"That's what you think of yourself?"

I shrug. "It's who I've been my entire life. Literally. Maybe you've heard that I never developed a fae power, and that's true."

"A lack of magic doesn't diminish your worth."

"Come on, Kai. In Valora, it does. You can't deny that."

With a glare that almost seems angry, Kai looks me up and down. Really looks. Seconds tick by as he towers over me, studying my face and my petite frame.

Under the weight of his scrutiny, I find myself staring at the ground. Ashamed of who I am, of how I look. I'm just a tiny, dirty woman.

This robe is swallowing me up, accentuating my smallness.

And isn't that just an accurate depiction of my life? Me, in over my head.

Me, drowning in my circumstances. Me, never having a grasp on any situation, always at the mercy of someone or something I can't control.

I'm so pathetic.

Kai's hand enters my line of vision as he slowly reaches for my face.

Staying completely still, I watch him get closer, then he tenderly swipes a thumb over my cheek.

The action leaves a wet streak behind.

Patting my damp face, I pull my hand away and I'm surprised by the drops on my dirty fingers. I'd thought all my tears were gone, but I guess I was wrong.

More hot streaks follow the others, and although I tell myself to stop, I can't. The floodgates have officially opened.

Embarrassed, I quickly dash the tears off with the backs of my hands, but they still drip from my jaw and hit Kai's boot with the faintest splat. I glance down at the wet trails cutting through the dust on the dark leather.

"I'm crying all over your shoes," I say apologetically with a sniffle.

"Hey, I don't care about that," Kai responds so softly he's practically cooing.

As he cups my jaw to catch the rivers with his big palms, the same electricity I experienced earlier with him is still present in our physical contact, though it's different now. It's not a jarring jolt. It's like a comforting buzz.

Looking at someone like him, with his massive size and constant frown, you wouldn't think he could touch someone so gently. Kai could crush me if he wanted to, but he would never hurt me. I barely know him, but I truly believe that.

I've never felt safe with a man who isn't a member of my family.

Until now.

Until Kai.

And although I'm glad to realize I have the ability to enjoy a man's closeness, being near him puts a spotlight on my loneliness.

I've been alone for so long, a brief taste of affection makes me crave more. So much more.

Something about Kai stirs up a new desire in me. An urge to hold onto him like he's a buoy among rough waves in a storm. I want to hug him. I want him to return the embrace. I want his hands to slip into my robe so I can feel the roughened scars on his hands rubbing up and down on my back.

Swaying toward him, I put my hands on his forearms.

My gesture seems to break the spell of the moment because he suddenly steps away, severing our connection.

“I apologize, Your Majesty,” he says formally. “I have made many mistakes with you in such a short amount of time. I beg you to forgive me for my transgressions.”

I’m confused. “What transgressions?”

“Getting you dragged into the maze with me, making you cry, putting my hands on you.”

“That’s a lot of stuff you don’t need to be sorry for. It’s not your fault I’m here, and my tears aren’t because of you.” My cheek tingles where his fingers had been, and the lingering evidence of his attention is both pleasant and sad. Because I liked it, and I don’t want it to end. “And I’m not offended by your touch.”

“Still, I shouldn’t have initiated physical contact.” Kai’s staring at his hands as if they’ve betrayed him, like he didn’t mean to reach for me but he couldn’t help it.

“Really, I don’t mind.” Just to show him I’m sincere, I try to grab his wrist.

He yanks himself away. “Well, I do mind. I don’t like to be touched.”

“Oh.” My focus hops around to a few of the scars on his arms. “Is it painful?”

“No.” His answer is short, and he doesn’t elaborate, but I can guess what his aversion is about.

He’s self-conscious, and I’m being improper. I’m so far removed from society, I’m seeing signs that aren’t there and crossing lines that definitely are.

Kai and I aren’t friends. We just met.

I’m his mission. His emotionally unstable, highly inappropriate, ridiculously clingy mission.

The truth is, I wouldn’t be able to recognize mutual sexual attraction if it smacked me in the face, and I must be reading it wrong.

If Kai’s showing me kindness, it’s only because he can tell that I desperately need it.

He’s probably trying to figure out a way to convince me life is worth living. Because if—and that’s a big if—we win this thing and we leave here together, he’s going to send me off to a life I told him I don’t want.

And he proves my suspicion when he says, “Ro, I need you to understand how imperative it is that you survive.”

Scrubbing my cheeks, I smear away the remainder of my tears and hope I can somehow erase my humiliation as well. “You don’t want to disappoint your kings and queens. I get it.”

“No. That’s not it at all.” Kai steps toward me but stops himself before he gets too close. “Don’t you know how *precious* you are?”

“I wouldn’t describe myself as that, no.” I squirm a little from the compliment.

“There’s a pure goodness in you that’s rare,” Kai insists. “In fact, what I see in you, I’ve never seen before. You’re so open. So honest. With faeries, you learn to spot their deceitful intentions. We’re known for our constant calculation. Our manipulation. Our need to strive for the best outcome for ourselves. But you... you don’t have that.”

“Hence, the weakness,” I deadpan because what he’s saying isn’t a good thing.

“No, not weak,” he contradicts. “Special. It makes you special, and when I think about you being wiped from existence, it...” He balls his fist over his chest as if he’s squeezing his heart. “It does something to me.”

If his tone were less passionate, it might sound like a reasonable statement from a loyal warrior tasked with the rescue of a beloved queen.

But with Kai’s guttural rasp, it seems like it’s more than that.

It seems personal.

“What does it do?” I whisper, surprised by how intimate this conversation has gotten.

His eyes dip to my mouth, and his attention lingers. He licks his lips, and for a second, I could swear he’s thinking about kissing me. “It makes me feel devastation like I’ve never known.”

“Why?” I press, feeling like we’re on the verge of a pivotal moment. I don’t know what the moment is—I just know there’s this heightened emotion around us. “Why do I matter to you?”

“I—I cannot explain it.” He shakes his head, his eyebrows pinched together like he’s just as rattled by his words as I am. Before I can delve deeper into this, he grunts, “Let’s go. The faster we get out of here, the better.”

Determination blankets his face, and he resumes his walk.

My head is spinning from the sharp end to our discussion, but I follow,

quickly striding to keep up with how fast his long legs carry him. Twirling his sword, he reverts back to warrior mode like the last few minutes didn't happen.

It's a fae thing. Get uncomfortable, change the subject.

It's probably for the best. If we keep talking, I might blurt out something I'll wish I hadn't.

I completely understand what Kai means when he refers to my transparency. I'm not a beat-around-the-bush kind of gal, and I'm not great at hiding my feelings. The only way for me to keep my opinion to myself is to keep my mouth shut. Because when I speak, the unfiltered truth comes out, no matter how much I try to disguise it with tricky words or riddles.

But that doesn't make me a good person like Kai claims. It just makes me vulnerable. Being an open book turns me into a living, breathing instruction manual for anyone who wants to hurt me.

For a while, the Lost Land made all my pages go blank. I had nothing to show because I was empty. But little by little, and with barely any effort at all, Kai has changed that in a very short amount of time.

Just by being in his presence, he's brought me back to life.

Whether I like it or not, I think it's safe to say whatever shell of a person he found behind Armand's throne no longer exists, and it almost feels like that version of myself is a bad dream I've woken up from.

Unfortunately, I know our nightmare is just beginning.

CHAPTER 7

Ro

“We’ll be at the courtyard in a few minutes.” I can’t stop the worry from bleeding through in my statement. “That’s the halfway point.”

“And you’re wondering why we haven’t encountered any conflict yet,” Kai concludes.

“Well, yeah. We’re in this dangerous game. So where’s all the danger?”

“Perhaps the courtyard is where our first test will be.”

“Maybe.” The suggestion doesn’t make me feel any better.

I don’t know what’s worse—nothing happening, or something happening.

And I don’t know what’s better—getting there fast, or going at a turtle’s pace like we are now.

Part of me just wants to run. I’ve timed myself in the maze before, and I know I can get to the courtyard in seconds if I sprint from this spot. But at this rate, it’s going to take us several minutes.

Scanning our surroundings, I study the twigs and thorns blocking us in. I’m not one to suffer from claustrophobia, but I don’t like being trapped by such ugliness.

Moving toward Kai, I shift a little closer while keeping enough inches between us so I don’t touch his arm again.

He studies me with worry. “Is this place bringing up bad memories from your time as Zarid’s prisoner?”

“No. Actually, the gardens were my sanctuary. When you’re in captivity, you’ll seek out any beauty you can find, and I loved it here.”

“What did you love most about it?” Conversation is a good distraction, and although Kai doesn’t seem like the type of guy who enjoys small talk, he’s participating anyway.

I appreciate that. “Bringing Zander here when he was young. When he was a small child, we used to race, play hide-and-seek, or have chess

tournaments.”

“King Zander still loves chess. He carries a board with him all the time, and he’s unbeatable.”

“Unbeatable for everyone except me.” I smile a little. “Who do you think taught him?”

“Are you saying you’d win if we played each other?” Humor sparkles in Kai’s gaze when he glances my way.

“Undoubtedly.”

“I’m glad you have some good times to remember. It’s amazing that you can think back on that time with any fondness at all. You made the best of it.”

I hum out a noncommittal sound because he’s describing me as way more resilient than I really am.

Unfortunately, all my pleasant memories from Valora have a darkened flipside. Every decent day is bookended with the shadows of sadness, and it’s not just because Zander and I were prisoners living in fear. There’s also what Merina and her coven did to my son.

“After Zander lost his sight because of the coven’s curse, he was brokenhearted,” I tell Kai. “He didn’t want to go to the garden for a long time, and sometimes when I remember how much he loved it, I’m reminded of when it stopped. His favorite part about the maze was the flowers, and not being able to see them anymore was very painful for him. It was many years before he could step foot inside it again.”

“He was just five or six when he went blind, right?”

“Yes. He was so young. Just an innocent casualty in a war that began before he was born.”

“Yet King Zander became a great ruler and an even better man,” Kai points out with positivity.

Praise for my son never gets old, so I perk up a bit. “Thank you. I’m very proud of him. All the princes affected by the blindness curses astonished everyone with their strength.”

We arrive at a T in the maze, and Kai looks to me for direction. I tip my head to the right. Leading with his sword out, we start a long stretch before we get to the last turn that will take us to the courtyard.

“So I’m wondering something,” I say.

“Yes?”

“Since there’s a treaty in place, have the royals given up on justice against Merina? Do they no longer want to punish the witch for the suffering

she's caused?"

"Oh, they'd love to kill her," Kai answers wryly. "But as long as she stays in the Lost Land, no one can touch her."

"It just doesn't seem right. Yeah, this place is awful, but it's not like being here is a penance for her. She'd have to have a heart to be affected by the sorrow. Instead, she probably loves it."

"You talk as if you know her."

"I guess I don't, but I did meet her briefly. At Vaeront's."

"You saw her?"

"Yeah."

"Face-to-face?"

"Yep."

Kai lets out an intrigued huff. "She eluded authorities for thousands of years. It must've been strange to have her standing right in front of you. What was she like?"

"Cold. Enormously conceited. In control. She carries this arrogance with her, like she's aware that she's the most influential being in all the universes."

"Of course she thinks that highly of herself," Kai scoffs.

Lifting a shoulder, I say, "She's not entirely wrong. Like you said, she avoided getting caught for millennia, then she escaped you all completely by taking refuge here."

Not a fan of the fact that Merina bested him, Kai grunts with displeasure.

"It's not your fault," I defend him and all the others who tried to capture her. "She's just too powerful. She's shaped the course of history. She's basically been writing the damn script of all our lives."

Kai gives me a skeptical frown. "You're definitely giving her too much credit. Sure, she's cunning, and she has great talents, but she's just a person."

"A person who's manipulated fate itself."

"You're wrong," Kai disputes firmly. "Very wrong. No one can manipulate fate. Merina might think she's running the show, but she's fate's puppet. She might not realize it, but she'll get what's coming to her. Destiny will pay her dues."

I sigh forlornly. "I used to believe in that—in fate balancing the scales. Because I've seen it, you know? Like with Zander and the other princes. It took a long time and a lot of patience, but they got the best reward destiny could give them when their fated mates came along and broke their curses."

Their love stories are like fairy tales.”

Kai visibly cringes. “Are you forgetting that King Zander found Queen Maelyn at one of those horrible auctions?”

“Of course I haven’t forgotten.”

“Or that he tricked her into marrying him? It wasn’t the most romantic start.”

“I mean, okay, Zander was wrong for that,” I concede. “It was extremely unchivalrous of him, but Maelyn was so rational and forgiving when I consoled her at the palace. After just a few days together, she already cared for him. She wasn’t angry with him anymore.”

“But you weren’t there the day we rescued her.” Kai’s tone is solemn as he recalls the difficult time. “She was terrified and devastated. She didn’t want to be with King Zander, and she made that quite clear. To her, life as she knew it was over when he took her.”

“Well, when you put it like that, it sounds like the worst meet-cute ever.”

“The point I’m trying to make is that she couldn’t see the reward coming her way. Her destiny was right in front of her, literally within arm’s reach, but she didn’t know it.”

I see where he’s going with this, the sneaky devil. “Are you saying I’m in that spot now?”

“Perhaps you are.”

I still have my doubts because of past experience. “Listen, I’ve spent way too much time thinking a better future was right around the corner, only to be disappointed when I realized nothing had really changed. When Zander finally killed his father, it was the happiest day of my life. I thought it would fix all my problems. Instead, I still felt stuck in a prison, only the bars caging me in weren’t physical. They were inside me, keeping me trapped in a body that doesn’t know how to live without fear.”

“But you went on a journey to Brazil all by yourself.” Kai brings up my impromptu vacation. “That took courage.”

I chuckle wryly. “Courage? I abandoned Zander without a goodbye. I couldn’t even say it to his face. I left a short note. It was cowardly and selfish.”

“And why did you leave?”

“I wanted to reconnect with my father and sisters, but mostly, I was trying to find myself again. I wanted to see if I could become the girl I used to be.”

“That’s the least selfish reason I can think of.”

“That’s just because you don’t know how much of a failure it was. It didn’t work. All my trip did was show me that I don’t belong. My old life is gone. I’ll never be who I was.”

“There’s nothing wrong with who you are now.”

“Debatable. Even my name sounds off.”

“Your name?”

“Before the abduction, I was Rosita. Then in Valora, it was commanded that I take a more fae name, and Zarid chose Rowan. After he died, I never wanted to be called that name again, so I asked for Rosita or Ro, but neither suit me.”

After pausing for a few seconds, Kai muses, “What if I were to call you something else?”

“Like what?”

“A nickname.”

“And what would this nickname be?” I decide to humor him.

As if he doesn’t even need to think about it, he blurts, “Sunny.”

I laugh, but the sound is saturated with cynicism. “Oh, I’m certain I haven’t earned that. I’ve been nothing but gloom and doom since the second we met.”

“But you smell like sunlight,” he claims quietly. “And in your presence, I feel warm.”

Stunned by the flattering statement, I swallow hard. “What?”

“Even after all your time away from the two suns of the Day Realm, the scent of the air clings to you. You carry the essence of it as though it’s a part of you. It’s... sweet. Like flowers in the forest, dew-soaked grass at dawn, and fresh honey. And just like sunshine, you’re always giving but often taken for granted.”

The things this man says to me.

Words of affirmation aren’t something I’ve gotten a lot of in my life. Even my son, who I know loves me dearly, is the strong-and-silent type. Zander’s better at showing his feelings than telling. And everyone else in the kingdom has always treated me with so much respect, it’s almost like they’re afraid to say anything that could possibly be misconstrued as negative or malicious, so they say nothing at all.

But Kai is full of praise for me. I’ve never been spoken to with such sincere kindness, and I didn’t realize how badly I needed it until now.

Every single compliment from his mouth is like a bucket of water being

dumped in the desert, and I'm the cracked ground soaking it up.

I can feel it quenching a dire thirst I was unaware of.

"Sunny," I softly repeat. "I like it."

"Would you say life has parallels to chess, Sunny?" Kai ponders, catching me off guard with the random question.

"Parallels, yes, but chess and life are not the same. If they were, I'd be much better at the latter, don't you think? Because in chess, I can kick ass. But in life, I can't *move* people. In fact, it's the other way around."

Kai stops again, and we face each other.

His eyes are serious when he says, "You have to stop thinking of yourself as a pawn in someone else's game."

"Is this the part where you remind me that I'm the queen? Because I don't feel like one. I never have. I was only given the title to officiate the purpose I served as the prince's mother. I didn't do anything any breeding animal can't do. I might as well have been a cow or a goat."

"Well, now you're just pissing me off," Kai says gruffly.

Surprised by his candor, I raise my eyebrows. "Is that so?"

"You do move people. Earlier, when I said you're loved, I didn't just mean by your family. Even after all these years you've been gone, the Day Realm citizens still talk about you like you're a saint. You singlehandedly upheld a crumbling society. If it weren't for all the aid you sent out when so many were dealing with crime and death, I'm not even sure the kingdom would still be standing. And on top of all of that, you raised the next king, and despite the shit you went through, you made him a good person. You gave King Zander so much of yourself, so much love, he became the man he is because of you. It's *all* because of you, Sunny."

More buckets of water on my dry foundation. My cheeks heat and my heart flutters because it's overwhelming to be doused so heavily with a freaking cascade of flattery.

I revert to self-deprecation. "And you said I gave Merina too much credit. You're exaggerating my importance."

"I fervently disagree. You're just as significant as Merina or Zarid."

"Just because I showed people common decency, and I loved my child?"

"No. Because you exist."

I wait for him to elaborate, but when he doesn't, I ask, "That's it?"

"It's that simple. Everyone changes the world in their own way. We all have an impact just by being here. You're moving the pieces as we speak,

and as soon as you realize that, you're going to be a force to be reckoned with."

I thought he was going to say something about my royal status. About how I'll be revered in the history books as a sacrificial lamb. Instead, he humbled me, in a good way.

He humanized me.

That's all I've wanted for so long—to be seen as a person. Not a queen. Not a victim.

Just someone who matters.

I open my mouth to respond, but nothing comes out. Kai has rendered me speechless with his refreshing willingness to give me his differing opinion.

In my experience, warriors don't argue with queens.

After Zander took over, he granted me with the same authority as himself, and I had some frustrating discussions with his men where they'd go along with whatever I say. No matter how ridiculous or nonsensical it was, every request was met with enthusiastic agreement.

I could get them to do anything, and one time, I tested the theory, which resulted in quite a fiasco.

"You're smiling, so I'm assuming I haven't offended you." Kai's statement draws me out of thought.

"What?" I touch my stretched mouth. "Oh. Just remembering something funny."

"Will you share the memory?"

We continue our walk, and after prefacing my story with my curiosity about the undying loyalty of Zander's men, I admit, "I took it a little too far. I told a man to go to the main fountain outside the palace at dawn in his underwear and sing "I'm Henry the Eighth, I Am" while prancing around in the water. I said not to stop, even if someone tried to force him. He followed my instructions, and he was arrested. Just dragged away, soaking wet, belting the song at the top of his lungs. His sanity was seriously questioned, and it wasn't until I told them to let him go that they cleared him of his charges."

There's a tightness around Kai's lips, and creases frame his blue eyes.

That's the closest he's come to a smile yet.

"You say you and Princess Zaylee are not alike," he quips, "but I'm going to call bullshit."

I grin at him. A big, silly smile. It's weird to make an expression my facial muscles aren't used to, but I like it.

Unfortunately, the light moment doesn't last long.

Turning my head to the left, I gaze at the open area in the middle of the maze.

We're at the courtyard.

CHAPTER 8

Ro

Stopping just inside the entry point, we look out at the desolate square. Cobblestone pathways lead to a crumbling gazebo in the middle. The marble dome ceiling has caved in on one portion, and the columns are cracked and corroded. Four dry fountains are placed around the perimeter, and there are some concrete benches here and there.

Oh, what I wouldn't give to sit down.

My stamina is lacking, and I can't ignore the pain on the bottom of my feet any longer. The rocks have been digging into my flesh with every step, and my bare soles feel like they've been through a meat grinder.

Lifting the bottom of the robe, I peek at my feet to see if I'm bleeding. I'm not. The callouses I've built up have protected me, but it still hurts.

"You will wear my socks," Kai orders, rapidly taking off his boots.

Before I can protest, he's barefooted and guiding me over to a partially broken bench. Giving my shoulders a light push, he applies pressure until my legs buckle. I have no choice but lower myself to the seat, and I sigh with relief once I'm not standing anymore.

Kai crouches down to shove the dark brown coverings onto my feet.

The first one goes on, and I want to whimper with relief at how pleasant it is against my skin. These socks are made from a special type of wool you can only find in the Dream Realm. They're soft, fuzzy, and warmed by Kai's body heat. Instantly, my aching is soothed.

"It might be gross to wear someone else's socks," Kai says, pulling the material up to cover my calf. "But I won't let you be in pain."

"It's not gross." Maybe it would be disgusting if it were anyone else, but it's not when it's him.

He's kneeling before me. In my long lifetime, I've had men bow down to me thousands of times, but it's never given me butterflies.

With his arm under the robe, it's strangely erotic to see Kai with his hand up my skirt. Biting my lip, I try not to get carried away with the image.

I don't want to misconstrue his compassion for something it's not. I did that before, and I'm not going there again.

When he finishes pulling the second sock up, he lifts his face, and we lock eyes.

Zing.

That electrical current shoots out from where he's touching the inside of my knee, and it bounces up to my head before settling in my stomach where it bursts like lightning.

Forget butterflies.

This is something else.

My nipples suddenly feel tight, and the rough fabric of my bra scratches against them. There's a warm ache deep inside my lower belly. Wetness floods my loin cloth, and an intense pulse goes through my clit at the thought of Kai sliding his hand higher.

Any confusion I've had about my surprising attraction to Kai clears.

I haven't lost my mind.

What I'm experiencing is something totally natural and new.

A crush.

Kai's activated a side of myself I wasn't sure I ever had in the first place. Some people are asexual, and I've often wondered if that's why I'm never romantically interested in anyone. Because if I'm being honest, even before the abuse I suffered with Zarid, I didn't have a pull to men. Or women.

This is literally the worst time to have a sexual awakening.

For one, I'm relying on Kai for survival, and that complicates our dynamic.

Two, there's nothing but terror and probable death in our immediate future.

And three, there's a good chance this crush is unrequited.

I think the last reason is the biggest mindfuck of all because Kai's been giving out a lot of mixed messages. He wipes my tears away. He says I'm strong and *precious*. He says I smell good when I'm sure I reek. He talks about how much I mean to him...

But he recoiled at my touch.

However, for someone who claims to dislike physical contact, he sure does dish it out when he finds it necessary.

The socks have been in place for several seconds, but Kai's hand is still on my skin, just below my knee. He drags his fingers along the top of the wool like he's checking the fit, but it isn't necessary. This material molds to the person wearing it, and that's a well-known fact.

Very reluctantly, Kai separates from me and stands.

His cinnamon scent wafts through the air again, and I'm left sitting with googly eyes and a racing heart.

As if he's deliberately acting distant, Kai looks everywhere but at me, shoves his feet into his boots, and picks up his sword.

His eyes are trained on the courtyard exit as he offers me his hand to help me up.

Fitting my fingers against his, I overanalyze every second we're connected. The extra squeeze he gives me. The way his fingertips graze the inside of my palm. How his thumb softly bumps over my knuckles right before he lets go.

"I'd expected to run into trouble at this point." Kai gets back to business, planting his hands on his hips as he glances around. "It's suspicious and disconcerting that we haven't."

If his huffing is any indication, he doesn't like admitting things haven't gone as he predicted.

"I warned you this game wouldn't be what you thought." I can't help throwing out an *I told you so*.

Kai gives me the side-eye, though his grumpy expression doesn't communicate annoyance because his mouth is relaxed.

The stone-faced warrior might think he hides his emotions well because he never smiles, but his lips are actually quite expressive.

He has many different kinds of frowns.

Angry ones, where the corners of his mouth turn down.

Disappointed ones that are more of a pout.

Confused ones, where his lips thin and he works his jaw, which he starts doing as he pokes around at some dried bushes with his sword.

"Perhaps we should go to the dead ends," Kai suggests with an unsure tone.

"You want me to go the wrong way on purpose?"

"Maybe the challenges will be in a place perceived as a failure. Somewhere we'd be trapped."

"That makes sense." My focus drops to one of the many weapons Kai has

strapped to his belt. “Should I have a dagger or something?”

“Can I trust you with it?”

“I know how to use a knife. I’m not as skilled with it as you are, but I can defend myself if I have to.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about.”

My gaze bounces up to his. “You think I’m going to use it on myself?”

“Will you?” he asks, direct.

Mortified by my rock-bottom moment, I heave out a sigh. “Can you just disregard what I said earlier?”

“That’s a hard thing to forget.”

“Well, try,” I insist. “Listen, I’m rooting for you, Kai. I want you to win, and I’m going to do everything I can to make that happen.”

“*Us*, Sunny,” Kai practically barks.

“What?”

“You want *us* to win,” he emphasizes. “I’ll give you a weapon, but only if you tell me you’ll fight for yourself as hard as you seem to want to fight for me.”

“I’ll fight for myself,” I agree.

Cupping his ear, he pretends he didn’t hear me. “What’s that?”

He just wants me to repeat it, and I do, louder this time. “I’ll fight for myself.”

Pleased, his nostrils flare and his shoulders dip as though I just took a thousand pounds off him.

Approaching me, Kai invades my personal space while lifting a six-inch blade from his belt. “Hide this dagger in your pocket. Only use it if you must.”

Passing the sheathed weapon to me, he presses it to my palm. When I try to grab it, I just end up wrapping my fingers around his because his hand stays glued to mine. Instead of releasing me right away, he keeps us connected, holding my hand as he stands close.

We keep having these moments where we’re in each other’s bubble, close enough for our body heat to mingle.

In the inches between us, the air is heavy, charged, and alive.

When I look down, a little delight goes through me at the sight of his large hand engulfing my small one.

Finally, Kai lets go, but he doesn’t step back. Reaching for my face, he pauses just an inch away from my cheek as if he’s going to caress me with

his knuckle. Then he veers off course and tucks some wayward hairs behind my ear.

It's such a tender gesture, and for a second, it's glaringly obvious to me that Kai's feeling this crackling attraction, too.

But the shutters fall back into place. With a rough clearing of his throat, Kai's eyes become hard, and he stomps toward the doorway leading to the maze.

Glancing over his shoulder, he sends me a frown that says it's time to continue the game.

Just like that, doubt about his emotional investment creeps back in.

Mixed messages, indeed.

CHAPTER 9

Kai

A warrior isn't supposed to fall for a queen, especially one he's meant to save, and there's a reason for that: my feelings could cloud my judgment and I could make a deadly error.

I can't afford to be distracted by heightened emotions and annoyingly frequent erections, but it's happening anyway.

Discreetly adjusting the front of my pants, I attempt to lend some relief to my engorged cock. It's no use. The swollen shaft is trapped inside the leather, and all I can do is try to ignore it.

I don't know what's happening to me. I've never felt this way about a woman before.

I *care* about Ro. I admire her, I'm intensely protective toward her, and I have this uncontrollable urge to claim her as mine.

It'd be a lot easier for me to understand my pull to her if it were just physical. Obviously, she's beautiful. Any man would notice her, but it's deeper than that.

Earlier, Ro's tears triggered an unnerving reaction inside me that I can't quite describe.

I've seen many women cry, but it's never made me want to crawl outside of myself, burn the world to the ground, then kneel at her feet with the ashes of all her enemies in my palms as an offering.

As I wiped the wetness from Ro's cheeks and looked into her shimmering eyes, I wanted to give her promises of retribution. I wanted to lay my sword down and pledge my fealty to her for the rest of my days.

I wanted to tell her she could have me, as long as I shall live, in any way that she needed me.

Friend. Bodyguard. Lover.

In that moment, I forgot where we were for a second. Most surprisingly, I

forgot *who* we were.

I wasn't an ugly warrior. She wasn't a traumatized queen.

We were just two people who needed each other.

Then she touched me back, and she shocked me out of my reverie.

When her fingers bumped over the puckered scars on my arms, I was reminded of how mismatched we are, and I jerked myself away from her.

My negative reaction was purely out of habit, and I gave her the same canned response I've been dishing out for centuries.

I don't let anyone touch me.

If I must touch others because of my job, it's fine. Healing someone, comforting them with a platonic pat, or carrying a person to safety is required sometimes.

Letting someone explore my scars is another matter. It's always been against my rules. I'm too exposed that way.

Only, I didn't feel unsafe with Ro. I liked having her hands on me. For that brief second, I felt invincible.

Powerful.

Right.

I'd give anything to go back to that moment so I could redo it. Instead of pulling away, I'd stand my ground. I'd let her soft fingers rub my arms, and I'd love every second of it.

The chance for that is gone, though.

I ruined it.

Since then, I've been trying to sneak a dutiful touch that I can excuse as part of my job. Putting the socks on her was unexpectedly sensual. Passing her the dagger was divine.

I want to give her all my clothes and weapons. Disarm myself just so I can feel the silkiness of her skin while I run my hands up her legs. Soak up the sensation of her warm palm against mine.

However, I'd be a fool to think I have a chance with Ro. These innocent moments are all I'll ever get with her, and I can accept that because she deserves someone better than me. Someone as beautiful as she is.

I glance down at my gorgeous companion.

She's focused on the trail ahead with bravery in her eyes, but there's concern in the brown pools, too.

"I thought we were supposed to stay inside the maze," Ro says as we head toward the final exit.

When Armand told me his maze is complicated and vast, I didn't understand what he meant. I'd assumed we'd be completing the challenges inside these walls but apparently, I was mistaken.

We've visited every dead end. We've explored all the nooks and crannies. Unfortunately, or fortunately—I can't decide—the destinations have been uneventful, and now we have nowhere else to go but out.

“Armand said we have to be inside the maze when we announce the end of a challenge,” I specify, reading between the lines of his trickery. “He never said we wouldn't be leaving it.”

“But where will we go? Back to his castle? He said it was *'too messy.'*” Ro does air quotes with her fingers and makes her voice deeper to mock the overlord.

I almost smile.

I find myself wanting to do that a lot with her, but I refrain. Happy expressions only enhance my disfigurement because of the worst scar down my face. When I got that injury, it damaged the muscles in my left cheek, and my lips don't lift fully, making my smile lopsided.

“We'll find out soon enough,” I say cryptically because I don't have answers right now.

We've been in this maze for well over an hour, and absolutely nothing has happened.

Honestly, it's fucking with my head.

I'm not normally this uneasy on missions, but fear of the unknown is getting to me. I can't assess a threat if I don't know what it is, and the unpredictability puts me at a disadvantage.

Once we're about thirty feet away from the exit, a yellow glow radiates from the opening.

I squint because it's getting brighter by the second, and I feel a bit of relief because this means we're headed in the right direction.

“Finally,” I grunt.

Apparently, Ro doesn't share my sentiment. With obvious apprehension in her shaky voice, she murmurs, “Light like that doesn't exist in the Lost Land.”

“No, it does not.” Arming my other hand with a machete, I glance up at the sky.

The gray cast above us doesn't match the blinding light ahead. It's almost like the exit is a portal to another world.

Next, changes start happening to the bushes.

On either side of us, the walls gradually come alive. Green leaves grow. Purple and pink flowers bloom and multiply.

After staring at nothing but death, it would be tempting to stop and watch, but I don't slow my pace, and neither does Ro.

"How is this happening?" Ro whispers as if talking too loud will cause a terrifying event.

"An illusion?" I guess. "It can't be real."

Only fifteen more feet to go. In theory, that doesn't seem like a lot, but it's way too far when shit is about to go down.

My gaze darts to some rosebud clusters. They're multiplying and spreading out overhead. Connecting with the flowers from the other wall, they form an arch.

I don't like being closed in.

"Come here." I lift my left arm, inviting Ro to take shelter on my machete-wielding side.

Without hesitation, she presses herself against me, and a burst of vibration flares from the spot where her body melds to mine.

Ah, there it is—the sensation I've been craving. Satisfaction rises and falls through me like a much-needed sigh.

Being this close to Ro is intoxicating. My nerves immediately calm. The unfamiliar fear dissipates, and my courage is bolstered.

Self-consciousness is still present, but Ro has a way of making me feel accepted.

Her hand is resting on my abdomen, right over one of my biggest scars, and she shows no signs of revulsion. She doesn't balk at the imperfection, and she isn't poking, prodding, or examining the thickened skin with her fingers like most people would if they get the chance.

Every now and then, women have been fascinated by my scars instead of appalled. They're intrigued by an affliction they haven't seen before, and they come on to me because I'm unique and interesting. They think I have a great story to tell—a battle tale for every mark.

They're always disappointed when they find out I got them all on the same day and that the event didn't end in the heroic defeat of my opponent.

The truth is much less interesting—I was tortured, then discarded like garbage.

That's why I stopped telling my story. Even some of my closest friends

don't know how I became this way.

I find myself wanting to tell Ro, but now's not the time.

We're just five feet away from the exit, and I'm glad we're almost out because that six feet of leeway we had has shrunk to three. With how thick the greenery has gotten, our space is being encroached on. Branches scratch my broad shoulders. Twigs get caught on my hair.

Doing my best to shield Ro, I hunch over her and quicken my strides. She's basically running to keep up, and I'm not opposed to carrying her if I must.

We emerge from the maze...

Almost.

At the last second, Ro yelps and comes to a halt.

Just past the threshold, I spin to face her, and I see that her robe is stuck on some thorns.

"Grab onto my wrists," I order because my hands are occupied by my weapons.

As she clings to me, I try to yank her away, but the shrubbery is coming for her. It's like it has a mind of its own, and it doesn't want her to leave. Vines wrap around her arms and encase her midsection.

Ro looks at me with terror-filled eyes as we both conclude that I won't be able to pull her free. No matter how hard I tug, the ropes won't snap.

I need a new strategy, and I'll require a full range of motion to accomplish it.

"Let go of me," I tell Ro firmly.

She violently shakes her head. "I can't."

"You have to."

Wincing, like she's bracing for the worst, she releases my wrists.

Immediately, with expert precision, I use my sword, cutting through the vines.

Joining my plan, Ro grapples with the dagger in her pocket. She gets ahold of the weapon, but it's not going to do her any good in this instance. The blade is still sheathed, and even if it wasn't, she's too restrained to use it.

She flails while I pluck at the plants.

Right as I sever the last vine, something shoots out from the bushes and bites me on my left forearm. I look over to see a purple rose with its teeth sinking into my skin.

The flower has an actual mouth.

I twirl my machete, successfully slicing the stem and trimming away some of the hedge around it.

Unfortunately, the growth is fast, and more roses replace the one I cut.

The carnivorous flowers swarm Ro. Their teeth latch onto the material of her robe, all along her back and arms. It's disturbing, seeing them chomp and hearing the fabric rip as they try to get to her flesh.

Soon, she could be swallowed up.

Thinking fast, I discard my weapons, dropping them on the ground so I can use my hands. Then I grab the material on either side of Ro's chest and rip as hard as I can.

Buttons fly and the robe begins to slip away.

Hooking my arm around Ro's waist, I fall backward, letting gravity take us the rest of the way out of the maze as we abandon her outfit.

My back hits the solid surface of the ground, and a half-naked Ro lands on top of me.

Teeth snap at my boot.

Doing a sort of crabwalk, I scoot a few feet away, putting some distance between us and the maze.

Shrieks of displeasure come from the roses when they realize they won't be getting a bloody meal, and the sound of their loss is music to my ears. I know defeat when I hear it, so I can assume we're out of the danger zone. For now.

"Shit," I hiss, collapsing on the lawn.

The lush and vibrant lawn.

The cool softness of overgrown grass is like a pillow beneath me. The suns shine brightly, warming my skin, and the smell of soil baking invades my nostrils.

"We're in The Day Realm." Disbelief tinges Ro's words as she runs her fingers through the green blades by my head. "How? How are we here?"

"We're not here," I answer with certainty, blinking while I adjust to the new light. "Armand can't send us to another universe. He doesn't have that power, so it has to be an illusion, just like the end of the maze."

"An illusion doesn't leave bite marks," Ro quips. "You're bleeding."

Grasping my forearm, she examines the wound the flower gave me. I don't pull away from her this time. No, now, I silently beg her to never let me go.

Without even giving it a glance, I claim, "It's nothing."

“Kai.” She sounds alarmed, her focus still on my arm, and she wildly gestures to it.

“Really, I’m fine. Just a scratch.”

“No, it’s not that. You... your scars...”

Now she has my full attention.

Lifting my arm in the air, I see the bite mark she’s referring to—a circular shape of red cuts.

But that’s not what has me gawking.

Sitting up and bringing Ro with me, I look for all the scars I’ve memorized. I’d normally find dozens of lines on my knuckles, but they’re no longer there.

I scan the rest of my arm and my shoulder. I pat my chest and touch my face where my marks used to be, but it’s all just smooth skin.

My scars are gone.

Gone.

“Am I—?”

“Healed, it seems.” Ro’s face gets closer to mine and she traces my forehead and cheek where my most hated scar was.

My nerves are so reactive. I feel every single millimeter. The pad on Ro’s finger almost tickles like a feather as it bumps over my eyebrow again and again.

She’s practically petting me.

Dread mingles with desire in the pit of my stomach while Ro admires me in this state of perfection.

After seeing me like this—aesthetically pleasing—there’s no way she could look at me the same when I return to my normal appearance. And I *will* return to the way I was.

This is temporary. My scars cannot be erased. I’ve consulted wizards and witches. Tried tinctures and tonics. Slathered on terrible-smelling pastes. Nothing has worked.

What a cruel trick for Armand to play. Ro warned me of his sadism, but I didn’t realize he would know how to emotionally demolish me.

And this... this could wreck me.

Suddenly registering the fact that Ro’s straddling my lap, I become keenly aware of her weight pressing down on my cock. I can feel the warmth of her pussy through the layers of burlap and leather between us. Thankfully, she doesn’t seem to notice how hard I am because she’s too busy studying the

absence of my scars.

When she leans forward to peer at my back, she squeezes the place where my neck meets my shoulder. It's almost like a massage, and I can't help the quiet groan that escapes.

"Sorry." Ro quickly removes her hand with an apologetic grimace. "I forgot you don't like that."

I shake my head. "You can touch me as much as you want."

"But you said—"

"What I said doesn't apply to you."

Understanding emanates from her when she says, "It's different now."

No, it's different with *her*, but I keep that tidbit to myself.

Switching the topic, I ask, "Did the flowers get you?"

She glances down at herself. "I don't think so."

Her skimpy scraps give me an unobstructed view of her front, and I scrutinize her arms, her torso, and her thighs.

Her much thicker thighs.

I'm not the only one whose physical appearance has unexpectedly changed.

Ro isn't as thin as she was before. She's healthier, more filled out. Her breasts are so big they're nearly spilling out of her top.

Suppressing a moan, I stare down at her ample cleavage. Her lungs are working hard from our run-in with the flowers. With her chest rising and falling the way it is, it's making her flesh bulge in the most titillating way. I lick my lips when I think about pulling the fabric down and sucking on one of her nipples.

This is exactly why I can't allow lust to take over.

I'm a stoic warrior, damn it. I'm supposed to be searching for wounds, not drooling like an undisciplined teenager.

I resume my inspection.

There's no blood on Ro. Moving my hands to her back, I run my palms over her shoulder blades to feel for any abrasions I can't see.

Bad idea.

Checking someone for injuries isn't exactly my idea of foreplay, but *fuck*.

Her skin is warm velvet.

Plus, she smells incredible, and having her right under my nose isn't doing me any favors.

Earlier, when I told her she's like flowers, honey, and sunshine, I wasn't

being poetic. Her scent is intoxicating. If I could bottle it and own it, I'd sniff it every day just to get the euphoric high it gives me.

My cock throbs insistently as my study becomes slower, softer.

I trace her spine. Traveling from the top to the bottom, I get to the small of her back, flatten my palms, and splay my fingers out so I can feel more of her. My pinkies drag over the swell of her ass and my thumbs rub along the sides of her rib cage.

I end up grazing one of her tits with my thumbnail. Accidentally, of course.

Her breath hitches, and the little puff coming from her mouth caresses my jaw.

Our faces are so close.

We're almost kissing.

It takes every ounce of resolve I can muster, but I extract my hands from her, raising my arms in a surrendering gesture. "Many apologies, Your Majesty. I'm not trying to violate you."

A small smile tugs at her lips, and her eyes give me nothing but trust. "I know."

It's her trust that does me in. I feel special because it should be impossible for her to put her faith in any man—especially when that man is having dirty thoughts—yet she looks at me like she's content to lay her life in my hands.

I want to be worthy of her confidence.

Which starts with me *not* acting on the urge to fuck her brains out.

"We should get going." Gently lifting Ro from my lap, I place her in the grass before standing to help her up.

She accepts my hand while holding the still-sheathed dagger in the other.

Looking at the weapon, she shrugs with a slightly ashamed expression. "I guess I'm not as good with this thing as I thought."

"In your defense, I don't think anyone teaches a class on what to do if you get attacked by roses," I tease.

She catches onto my slightly playful tone, and it makes her smile. I love that smile.

After she assesses her outfit, she decides the best place to stash the weapon is inside the right strap of her loin cloth.

Oh, to be that dagger, against the bare skin of her hip.

It's completely irrational for me to be jealous of an object, but I am.

“Do you think that was the test?” Ro glances back at the frenzied flowers that have turned her robe into shredded strings. “Because if it was, that means we have to go back through there to announce the end of the challenge.”

“No,” I respond, certain it wouldn’t be that easy. “That was simply a nuisance.”

Chin up and shoulders squared, Ro looks to me for guidance. “Well, what should we do next?”

She’s projecting the courage of any seasoned warrior, but I don’t miss the way her fingers are balled up into tight fists or the slight tremble in her knees. Her toes anxiously wiggle inside my socks, and just seeing her wear an article of my clothing—knowing the material that was once on me is now touching her—sends more heat rushing to my cock.

Ignore it.

I nod to the pristine palace shining in the distance. “I think that’s our destination. I say we enter it with caution.”

CHAPTER 10

Ro

Again, Kai and I are puzzled by the lack of action. I thought the challenge would be obvious once we got inside the palace.

But nope.

“It’s so quiet,” I observe as we stand in the foyer, my voice echoing off the high ceilings.

Closing his eyes, Kai listens intently. With his fae ears, he has better hearing than I do, and a few seconds later he gives his assessment. “I don’t detect anything at all. Not a whisper. There are no scuffles or thumps.”

“Is the palace abandoned?”

“Abandoned? No. Empty for the time being? Perhaps.”

“When is a palace ever empty?”

Never. That’s the answer. There’s always a bustle of activity, whether it’s for royal events or meetings, honored guests staying a while, or the staff carrying out their daily duties.

“Don’t think of it as a normal palace,” Kai says. “Armand is making us see what he wants us to see.”

“He’s good at it.”

Kai grunts in agreement as he strolls over to the detailed marble banister leading up to the second floor. “I’ve never known an Illusionist to have this much power. I can’t believe Armand transformed the Lost Land into this. Somehow, he’s making ugly things look beautiful.”

His comment makes me pause.

Is he talking about our surroundings or himself?

I wonder how he’s feeling now that his scars are gone. There was a moment when he looked at his smooth skin. A split second when he let his grumpiness slip, and I saw joy spark in his eyes.

“Is this always here?” Motioning to a round entry table with a big vase

full of flowers, Kai circles it while keeping his distance from the roses as if the stems and petals might attack him again.

And it could happen.

I'm wary of them and literally everything else.

The only thing I know that's safe is Kai.

"Yeah," I reply, "and I recognize these flowers. It's a rose hybrid from a part of the garden outside of the maze."

The blooms are bigger than normal roses, like peonies, and the petals are multicolored. I've always called them watercolor flowers because it looks like someone took a rainbow paintbrush and let white paper soak up the pastel hues in a nonsensical pattern.

They were my favorite, but they also stir up sad memories. They were a silent apology for the abuse no one could stop.

Whenever I was healing from an unfortunate scuffle with Zarid, Zander would do the only thing a little boy could to help his mother—he'd bring me a present. The bouquets were his go-to because he knew they cheered me up.

After he went blind, a man from the landscaping staff took up gathering the flowers instead. I once saw the gardener passing the vase to Zander outside my bedroom door. Then, it wasn't so much the gift that I appreciated, but the help someone gave to my son.

That good man was not repaid for his kindness. Zarid saw the gesture as a tactic to woo me, and he sentenced the gardener to death. Not a quick or merciful one. The terrible screams of agony still echo inside my mind as if I witnessed his execution just yesterday.

Stalking over to the double doors leading into the great hall on the left, Kai peeks into the throne room.

I don't need to look inside it to know it's constructed from luxurious materials. Gold. Marble. Crystals.

"I can see why so many people spoke of the yearly masquerades," Kai says with wonder as he studies the space. "I bet the event was dripping with lavishness."

Confused, I tilt my head. "Why are you acting like you've never been inside the palace before?"

Kai's serious eyes swing my way. "Because I haven't."

This is news to me. "You didn't attend the ball or military meetings after Zander and Kirian established peace?"

"No."

“How is that possible? Surely a warrior at your level would’ve been invited.”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t invited. I just never accepted because... reasons.” The way he reluctantly mumbles *reasons* leads me to believe he doesn’t want to be here anymore than I do.

He might be able to admire the palace, but he’s avoided it until now.

Well, that explains how we never met before today. I didn’t leave the castle, and he stayed away.

Suddenly, a growl comes from my stomach, and it’s loud enough to startle us both. At the sound, Kai takes up a fighting stance with his sword while I jump.

Laughing self-consciously, I press a hand to my rumbling abdomen, embarrassed by my body’s rude complaint.

“You need to eat,” Kai states, patting his sack of snacks. “I don’t have much, but we can at least get you a small meal to tide you over.”

Aiming my voice at the ceiling, I boldly goad, “I wonder just how extensive Armand’s skills are. If he’s as good as he thinks he is, there might be food in the kitchen. Do you hear me, Armand? I dare you to prove your talent.”

I’m sort of joking. Sort of not.

Motioning to a short hallway beneath the staircase, I show Kai to the kitchen. I start to push the wooden swinging door open, but Kai puts his hand on mine to stop me.

“Allow me to go first but tell me if something doesn’t seem right. Anything out of place could be a significant clue to the challenge.”

After I nod, he has me stand back while he looks left and right. Once he deems it empty of threats, Kai shuffles into the room while I hide behind him.

My stomach growls again when I breathe in the sweet evidence of recently baked goods in the air, and peek around Kai.

Just as I remember it, the kitchen is large but not fancy. This room isn’t meant for royals. Royals don’t cook their own food.

The space is practical with an ice box, an industrial-size stove with eight burners, and gray cabinets I know to be filled with fine plates and cups. The large farmhouse sink is filled with batter-covered bowls, utensils, and soapy water as if the cooks had just finished making a meal.

My hungry gaze goes to the long table where four shiny silver domes sit on top of the gray tablecloth. At one end, there are stacked crystal plates and

a pile of polished silverware.

Like it's a feast just for us.

Did Armand seriously take me up on the dare? He wouldn't actually give us something nice, would he?

"Is this usually here?" Kai waves at the spread.

I shake my head. "No. These domes and dishes are reserved for big banquets in the throne room. The staff would never set them up in the kitchen."

"Fuck." Apprehensive, Kai muses, "It's probably another trick. Anything could be in there."

He's right. The domes could be concealing a swarm of bees. More flowers with teeth. A monster.

There's no end to the nightmares Armand can create.

"I'm sorry," I say, stressed. "It's my fault. I shouldn't have provoked Armand."

Always on my side, Kai defends, "You don't know that this wouldn't have been here anyway. He knows how to hit you where it hurts the most."

That's the truth. It's ridiculous how Armand can pinpoint our deepest desires and hijack our weaknesses. He knows what we need, and he likes to use it against us.

"Should we move on to another room?" I throw the decision to Kai.

He glances at me.

On cue, my belly emits another cry for help.

Then Kai gets that hardness in his eyes that I recognize as anger mixed with a little bit of *fuck this and everyone who hurt her*.

"Stand over here." Putting an arm around my shoulders, he ushers me to a place by the stove.

When he pivots away from me to face the table, his elbow bumps into my boob. He's not trying to turn me on, but his innocent accident makes more wetness flood my loin cloth.

This sad, stupid loin cloth. It's practically soaked now. I can feel the dampness between my thighs where my skin is a bit sticky.

What I wouldn't give for some new underwear. A real bra. Jeans and a T-shirt. I'd even take a formal fae dress, as uncomfortable as those damn things may be.

"Kai, we don't have to do this," I insist, fear getting the better of me as he approaches the domes. "We could forget about the food and see if we can

find me some decent clothes instead.”

My attempt to aim his efforts elsewhere does nothing.

“No.” Turning his head, he gives me a severe frown. “You’re hungry, and you need more than what I can give you.”

“I’ll live.”

“Be ready to run.” His determination is steel. “If something bad happens, don’t wait for me. Just go.”

“Go where?”

He pauses. “Not too far. Armand could be trying to separate us.”

My lungs get tight with panic at the thought of being without Kai, and I croak, “We should have a meeting place.”

“Any suggestions?”

I try to think of a location where I feel somewhat safe.

I hate almost every room in this palace, but the library is one of the few places I have neutral feelings about. Nothing bad ever happened there. People tend to be on their best behavior in a room that represents civilization. It’s always been a respected space, valued for all the vital information it holds.

“There’s a library on the second floor,” I answer. “It’ll be the first door on the right at the top of the main stairs.”

“Sounds good.”

Going to the end of the table, Kai points his sword at the dome next to the plates. He hooks his long blade under the handle, using his weapon as a tool to keep some distance between himself and it.

I back up until my butt presses against the oven door. Warmth still radiates from the stovetop as if it were recently fired up. It heats the skin of my exposed backside, but my fingers are cold from the adrenaline running through me.

I can’t stop moving. I’m balling my fists and shifting from foot to foot.

Kai lifts the lid with his blade.

And...

Steam billows up from the pile of hot bacon and sausages.

I blink, dumbfounded.

Face pinched with confusion, Kai sets the lid down on the tabletop, and he moves onto the second dome.

Lid number two comes off.

Pancakes. Chocolate chip. Oozy brown chunks are melted in the flattened shapes.

Number three. Scrambled eggs topped with melted cheese.

And the fourth; a huge, round chocolate cake. From its height, I can tell it has at least five layers. The icing on the outside is dark, rich, and shiny. On top, there are eight dollops of frosting with a ripe strawberry on each one.

For several seconds, Kai and I gape at the table in silence.

Armand, that son of a bitch.

He actually did it.

My stomach projects another disgruntled rumble, and the organ twists to the point of painful. Crossing my arms, I try not to double over as I grimace through the cramp.

“That unbelievable asshole,” I mumble through gritted teeth.

After giving me a sympathetic lift of his mouth with understanding in his eyes, Kai paces around the other side of the table.

He thoughtfully scrutinizes the buffet. “Perhaps this is the test.”

“I don’t think so.” My mouth waters as I stare at the cake. “Armand is taunting me. Chocolate is my favorite. I could survive on the stuff and be totally happy never having anything else. On my birthday, Zander used to have the kitchen staff shower me with chocolate everything. Pancakes, muffins, cupcakes, drinks. Chocolate soups, even.” I lick my dry lips and accept the disappointment of this moment. “I can’t eat this food.”

“Why not?”

Throwing my hands up, I huff because the answer is obvious. “I’m hungry, but I’m not a fool. It’s probably poisoned or something.”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out.” After laying his sword on the tabletop, Kai grabs a hunk of the cake. Just digs into it with his bare hands.

“What are you doing?” I squeak.

I can see exactly what he’s doing, but it’s so idiotic, I can’t believe he’d be that careless.

His eyes twinkle with rebellious excitement. “Finding out.”

“No.”

“Yes.” He shoves the messy bite into his mouth.

“Kai, don’t!” I shout, but it’s too late.

CHAPTER 11

Ro

Kai chews vigorously, then he swallows before going back for more without a shred of caution.

With my jaw hanging open, I look at him like he's lost his mind and his manners. Although, I'm not sure what his manners were like in the first place. Maybe he's used to eating without utensils.

He is a warrior, after all.

But I know he's smart enough to know better than to do this. We have every reason to assume the food isn't safe.

As he finishes a large portion of the cake, I study his face for signs of trouble.

He's not flushed with distress, flinching from pain, or foaming at the mouth.

"Kai?" I'm so tense, waiting for him to drop dead, and a place deep inside my chest aches from the devastation I feel at the mere idea of a world without him in it.

He makes a noise in the back of his throat.

It could be a sound of satisfaction. Or... Or it could be his esophagus closing up before he keels over.

"Kai." My voice shakes and tears prick my eyes. "Say something."

"It's good," he simply mumbles.

I blink. "Good?"

With disbelief, I watch him go for the pancakes next. Taking three at a time, he grabs some bacon along with them. He layers the food like a sandwich and polishes it off with impressive speed.

"It's... good?" I ask again with skepticism.

Other than being a complete mess, he seems fine. Chocolate surrounds his mouth, the icing clinging to his beard. Instead of getting a napkin, he licks his

fingers.

“Yeah.” Casually rattling off a review like he’s a food blogger at a hotel’s continental breakfast, Kai drawls, “Not the best I’ve ever had. The cake is a bit too sweet for my taste. The pancakes are a little spongy, and I like my bacon on the crispier side. But it’s a solid meal. I’d give it seven out of ten.”

A breath whooshes from me. “Are you being serious right now?”

“Well, I haven’t tried the eggs yet, but—”

Irritated by his recklessness, I mumble out a few expletives in Portuguese while rubbing my temples. “You shouldn’t take risks like that.”

“Like what? Like this?” Kai grabs a nugget-sized piece of the eggs, tosses it up into the air, then catches it with his mouth.

His cheeks puff up as he chews, and he winks at me.

He. Winks. At. Me.

The grumpy warrior is actually being playful, and I find it both unnerving and charming at the same time. “I’m not sure if I should laugh or yell at you.”

“You wanted to eat,” he plainly explains, like testing the safety of food for me is no big deal. “Now you can.”

My little crush moves toward intense infatuation, and my heart patters a little faster. “You shouldn’t put yourself in harm’s way for the sake of my appetite.”

“I will not see you suffer.”

“And I don’t want to watch you die.”

“I wasn’t going to die. I thought it through first, and I realized something.”

“What’s that?”

“What are the chances that Armand’s watching us right now?”

“Oh, one hundred percent. I’m absolutely certain he is.”

“Armand’s biggest kink is deprivation,” Kai analyzes. “This food is an opportunity for him to flaunt his abilities while fucking with us. He wants us to drool and battle with desire, but ultimately, he wants to watch us refuse to indulge in something we desperately want.”

That’s a very astute observation, and I couldn’t have said it better myself. Kai really gets it.

“Yeah, okay.” I calm down. “I see your point.”

“Besides, can you imagine how anticlimactic it would be if he were to take us down with a cake? No way. He’s not going to ruin his fun with something as quick as poison. I’m just returning his mindfuck with a fuck

you.”

Kai lifts his fist and waves it around with his middle finger sticking out.

I smile a little.

Kai must’ve learned that crude gesture from Quinn, the Night Realm queen. When she came to Valora, most citizens of the kingdom had never met a human before, and they were unfamiliar with many human customs.

The first time Quinn met the gnomes, she gave them a thumbs-up and they adopted it as their own personal salute for her. I remember hearing it had spread to the gnome districts in the Day Realm, and they always give a thumbs-up to the royals as a sign of respect.

How adorable is that?

I wish I could’ve seen it for myself.

I never should’ve left Valora. If I’d stayed and stuck it out, maybe I could’ve had a chance at happiness. Maybe I could’ve met someone like Kai and had a love story of my own. I could’ve traveled and been a true explorer of the magical world I wasn’t allowed to experience.

That’s a lot of *what-ifs* for a past I can’t change, and I tell myself to quit it.

Wallowing in the hole I’m in won’t get me out of it.

“What are you thinking about?” Kai asks. “You became very sullen.”

“Possibilities.” I flick my hand flippantly like it doesn’t matter. “Ones I missed out on.”

“Well, you don’t want to miss out on this.” Sweeping his arm over the table, he uses a proper tone when he asks, “Won’t you please join me for this meal, milady?”

Nibbling my lip, I step away from the stove and closer to the food.

Now that I’m letting myself believe I can have it, I’m filled with giddy anticipation.

Kai rotates to the counter behind him and grabs a cake knife from a large ceramic jar of utensils. Then he cuts into the chocolate dessert, sinking through the thick layers.

After placing the slice on a plate, Kai comes around to my side of the table with a fork in his other hand. Instead of handing me the food, he scoops a gooey chunk onto the utensil.

Extending the fork to me, he holds the cake just a few inches away from my face.

“You’re going to feed it to me?” I ask, thinking he’s joking around

because the action feels so intimate.

“Why not?” Kai responds seriously, his voice a bit huskier than normal. “I live to serve you because you are my queen.”

My queen.

I’ve hated that title for so long, but coming from Kai, it sounds like possessiveness.

Like belonging. Not to a kingdom, but to *someone*.

To *Kai*.

I like it.

Flips of excitement join the hunger pangs in my stomach.

I want Kai. I want the cake. I want Kai and the cake at the same time. In a perfect world, I could eat it off his abs, but I’ll settle for this.

Swaying forward, I take the bite.

The sugar explosion hits my tongue. Closing my eyes, I chew slowly, savoring it.

I’d almost forgotten what good food tastes like. In Armand’s captivity, I was occasionally given crumbs. Literal crumbs. Whatever was left of the broken crackers at the bottom of the empty crate was mine. The chalky pieces were dry and too salty, and they always made me hungrier and thirstier than I was before.

But this cake... it’s so moist I could probably inhale it with a straw.

Once I swallow, I look at Kai, expecting him to have the fork loaded a second time, but he’s just standing there with the empty utensil suspended in the air.

The way he’s staring at me sends a white-hot chill through my body.

His pouty lips are lightly parted, and his hastened breath passes through them. Usually, his eyes are a light blue, but the pupils are enlarged, and his lids are heavy, making them shadowed by his lashes.

Something primal and raw passes between us.

Sexual energy.

Tension fills the room, making the air feel palpable. The hairs on my arms stand up. My pulse skyrockets so much it feels like I’m running.

I almost gasp when I look down at Kai’s crotch.

I can see his cock in his pants. It’s shockingly big, the outline of it stretching the leather as it sits along his right thigh.

Earlier today, I’d caught a glimpse of the bulge when we met, and I’d thought maybe he was hard at that time.

I was wrong.

The size difference between then and now is telling.

Well, well, well. I guess I'm not delusional about Kai's attraction to me. His signals might be all over the place, but his erection is unmistakable proof.

When he notices what I'm staring at, he gently passes me the plate and fork and mumbles, "I should get started on my own meal."

Giving away the fact that he's rattled, there's some clattering as he clumsily collects his own plate and some cutlery from the end of the buffet.

After he loads his dish, he starts shoveling the eggs into his mouth like he might not get to eat for a while. That's smart. We don't know when or if food will be available to us again.

For me, this could be my last meal.

In fact, it's a probability, and I feel a deep sorrow when I think about my inevitable death. Hours ago, I was ready for it. Begging for it, even.

I don't want that anymore.

If I die now, I'll go to my grave knowing I didn't make the most of my life.

Knowing my life was wasted.

"Do you want to know what my biggest regret is?" I ask Kai while we eat.

There's genuine interest on his face. "Yes, I do."

"Wishing the days away. The truth is, I took time for granted. Every minute of every day, I thought about tomorrow. Or next week. Or the year after that. I was always looking ahead."

Sympathy warms his eyes. "You've had a hard life. Anyone in your circumstances would've done the same."

Sighing, I shake my head. "Wanting time to go faster is something I've always done. Even before the kidnapping, I had trouble living in the now. When I was a kid, I was too busy being impatient about the future to bask in the present. I remember hating my teenage years. Not because they were bad, but because I was just so excited about what lay ahead. I wanted to get to the successful career, the loving marriage, the perfect house, and the ideal family."

"There's nothing wrong with wanting those things."

This subject has ruined my appetite, but I pick at my eggs and force down a big bite anyway.

"After the abduction, it obviously got worse," I say. "It became a

different kind of wishing. I felt like I had nothing to look forward to, so instead of being excited, I just wanted the days to be over. I counted every second until I could go to sleep and dream about nothing. Isn't that silly? I didn't even want to dream. I just wanted to shut off."

"No one could blame you for that, Sunny." Kai's use of my nickname cuts through some of the darkness of the conversation.

"I should've tried to love life more, especially after I had a child. If I couldn't do it for myself, then I should've done it for Zander. He deserved to have a mother who appreciated the fleeting moments of joy instead of going through the motions."

Kai sets his cleared plate down to give me his full attention. My stomach is painfully stretched after being empty for so long, so even though I've only finished half my food, I abandon mine, too.

I don't expect Kai to have a solution or words of wisdom for me, but then he says, "What if we were to enjoy ourselves now?"

I narrow my eyes at him like he's speaking gibberish. "What?"

"Just a thought—we could enjoy this day."

My mouth opens and closes a couple times because his suggestion is so ludicrous. "There's a metaphorical guillotine hanging over our heads."

He hikes a shoulder. "It hasn't dropped yet."

"But it will. Can't you see what's going on? All this uneventfulness? All the waiting?" I fling my arm out to indicate the lack of danger we've encountered. "It's psychological warfare. Armand wants to make us sweat. He wants us to let our guard down so he can deliver the first blow when we least expect it."

"Yeah, I figured that out." Kai doesn't seem bothered by the revelation.

"He'd love for us to have fun just so he can ruin it," I go on. "If we decide to have a good time, we'll be playing right into his hands."

"You're doing exactly what you said you didn't want to do anymore," Kai points out. "You're looking to the future. Yes, shit will go down eventually. Until then, we can spend our time cowering and quivering. Or... We could soak up all the positive experiences we can get. Take it minute by minute."

"Okay." Still thinking he's talking nonsense, I put a hand on my hip. "The food was great, but what's next?"

He steps toward me until I catch a whiff of his cinnamon scent. "If you could do anything right now, within our current circumstances, what would it

be? What do you want to do? If the palace is functional, as it seems to be, where would you go?"

I seriously consider his questions, and it doesn't take me long to come up with an answer.

When I look down at myself, I see the smudges and streaks on my body. I can feel the grime between my toes when I wiggle them. My hair is unwashed and stringy.

"I'd want to get clean," I reply with certainty. "Scrub every part of my body while hot water rushes over my skin."

Seeming satisfied with my answer, Kai nods as if the decision has been set in stone. "Where's the closest shower?"

I gesture behind him to a door on the other side of the ice box. "There's a staff bathroom through there."

Crooking a finger for me to follow him, he grabs his sword from the table and leads with the long blade out and ready. He opens the door, checks inside the room, then lets me know it's clear.

Moving just past Kai, I look around at the plain bathroom.

The walls are covered with beige tile, and a long horizontal window near the ceiling lets in enough light to fully illuminate the space. There's a toilet to my right and a small pedestal sink on the other side of it. A rectangular stand-up shower makes up most of the room, and it's enclosed with glass. On a little shelf just outside the shower, there's a simple bar of soap and two containers of what I'm assuming are shampoo and conditioner. Next to that, there's a toothbrush with a wooden handle and a tube of paste. On the floor, there's a brown woven basket with rolled-up white towels in it.

The room is dull and practical. No frills. Just stocked with the basics.

And I love it. After what I've been through, having the bare necessities seems like the most luxurious thing in the world.

"So." I grin up at Kai's perpetually grumpy face, and I can't resist teasing the warrior a little. "You're going to have fun, huh? Does that mean you're going to smile?"

He haughtily lifts his chin as he looks down his nose at me. "You think I can't?"

"I haven't seen it yet, and it makes me wonder what it's going to take." I tap my jaw thoughtfully. "I'm not good at telling jokes. Has anyone ever tried to tickle you?"

"Not if they wanted to keep their hand."

Ah. The no-touching rule. I keep forgetting about that, especially now that his scars are gone.

“To be honest, I don’t remember,” Kai admits. “Maybe I was ticklish in my youth, but that was long ago. Before... the incident.”

I understand without further explanation. “Have you truly gone without affection for most of your life? Haven’t you had romantic relationships?”

“Occasionally, I’ve had brief encounters.” His voice is flat, and I can tell he’s uncomfortable because his gaze is pinging to everything that isn’t me. “But I’ve never trusted anyone enough to let them touch me. There were rules, and I was right to assume their intentions weren’t pure. The gossip they spread afterward was proof.”

Rage bursts inside me at the idea of anyone betraying Kai that way, and I get a taste of the protectiveness he’s shown toward me.

My voice is hard when I ask, “They talked shit about you?”

He shrugs like he doesn’t care. “They were thrill seekers. The ones who wanted to be able to say they were with a hardened warrior. The women who thought I was rough or dangerous because of how I look. Though, I suspect they were disappointed when they found out I’m not.”

“You’re not what? Rough or dangerous?”

“Not in bed,” he states bluntly. “I’m a gentle lover, and I believe that’s a letdown.”

A gentle lover. I don’t even know the definition of that term, and I can’t imagine what it would be like to experience it. What would a soft caress feel like? A feather-light kiss? A slow rhythm?

“I meant it when I said I would let you touch me, though,” Kai adds sincerely. “If you want to, you’re allowed. Any time.”

“Why? Because I’m a queen?”

His eyes bore into mine. “Because you’re *you*.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Do you need me to say it?” Kai asks, but it’s not in a combative or reluctant way. When he tips his head and gazes tenderly at me, it’s like he’s realizing how much his words affect me, and I see nothing but willingness to give me what I desire.

“Yes,” I answer with a whisper. I want him to spell it out. I can’t go off mixed signals anymore. I have to know if Kai’s feeling what I’m feeling. “Tell me.”

As if it’s difficult for him to explain it, his lips twitch with a thoughtful

frown as he considers his reply. “You, Sunny, are the exception to my every rule. Everything that I am—my life, my heartbeat, my very soul if I had one right now—is yours. You became my purpose the instant I heard your voice. Every breath I take is for you, and I don’t know how or why this is. I just know it to be true. Just like the Day Realm has two suns or the Night Realm has three moons, *you have me.*”

His honesty steals my breath because now I know his attraction to me is personal. It’s not just because I’m a woman and I’m here.

For a lot of fae, that’s all it takes. Convenience and opportunity.

But what Kai and I have isn’t casual.

It’s big. Important. Life-changing.

I’ve sensed it, and he just confirmed it.

As awesome as that is, I’m right to be afraid. We’re in so much fucking trouble. Armand is going to have a heyday with this. We just made this game way more interesting for that sick asshole because he would take absolute delight in watching two people fall for each other, just to rip them apart.

Maybe staying in the present is the best idea. Because the likelihood that we’ll get to be together in the long term is slim, and if I think about what it will be like if either of us die in this game, it’s too painful.

Kai bends over to turn on the water. The spray becomes hot almost immediately, and warm humidity fills the air.

“I’m going to stay in here with you,” he informs me with an uncompromising tone. “I promise to keep my back turned so you can have your privacy.”

After the harassment from Armand’s cronies, Kai’s plan to keep me company should have me melting down with panic, but I wouldn’t have it any other way. Even if he wanted to leave me alone, I’d beg him not to.

“Okay,” I simply agree, trying to keep my heart reined in.

Kai gives me one of his almost smiles. “Paradise awaits you, my queen. Nothing bothers Armand more than someone else’s joy and nothing could make me happier than yours. So enjoy the fuck out of this shower.”

CHAPTER 12

Kai

Enjoy ourselves? I'm not sure if the suggestion is genius or totally irresponsible. Perhaps it's both, but it doesn't matter because I'm committed to it now. Consequences be damned, I'm going to show Ro a good time, even if it's to my own detriment.

My senses are highly reactive, but not for the reason they should be.

If I were a better warrior, I'd be listening for the footsteps of incoming enemies. Instead, all I hear is the splatter of water as it sluices over Ro's skin and her occasional content sigh.

Rather than sniffing the air for the scent of someone else, my nose is focused on the floral soap and the sweetness Ro carries with her.

And I should be watching under the door for moving shadows, but I'm too busy picturing Ro's glistening silhouette through the fogged-up glass. Mere feet away, she might be massaging her perky breasts with suds. Her fingers could be slipping over every curve, dipping into each crevice.

I told her I wouldn't turn around, and I won't, but that doesn't mean I'm not battling with a level of temptation I've never encountered before.

Though, perhaps it's lucky she can't see my front. Then she'd realize how hard I am. She saw my erection in the kitchen, but I was half-mast then. If she looked at my cock now, I think she might be terrified of it.

Physiologically, I can't be too rough during sex because my cock is abnormally large. Yes, I realize any complaints I have about this make me seem like a privileged asshole. Poor me, with my huge dick. But with someone as tiny as Ro, I might split her open.

It's just another testament to why she and I would never work. We don't fit, in every sense. We're too opposite.

However, I still want her.

Badly.

She makes me want to throw caution to the wind. She brings out my wild side.

I shouldn't have said the things I said to her. I might as well have told her I was in love with her, and it was wrong of me to burden her with my feelings.

Curiously enough, she didn't seem put off when I poured my heart out to her.

On the contrary, she appeared surprised and happy.

I think I know why Ro was so content to accept my forwardness.

Lifting my sword, I put the reflective metal in front of my face and use it as a mirror to look at my scarless skin. This illusion of my physical perfection must be making her body react in a way it normally wouldn't.

Glancing down at the floor, I look at the discarded scraps of Ro's outfit. There's an obvious wet spot in the crotch area of her panties. Even before seeing the evidence of her arousal, I could smell it. In the kitchen, I knew her pussy was soaked.

That fact does not help me in the least.

When she lets out another satisfied sound, almost like a moan, my cock gets stiffer. I place my hand over my shaft and squeeze, just trying to get some relief. The urge to rub it, to strangle it in my grip and stroke it until I come is becoming more and more difficult.

"What's the most fun you had when you returned to Brazil?" I ask, hoping a mundane conversation will distract me from my current condition.

"Fun? Uh..." She pauses like she's having trouble coming up with the answer. "Remember, I'm not very good at that. Honestly, it felt wrong to be there. So much had changed. Life moves very fast for humans. After living without electricity for so long, I was confused by all the technological advances. Cellphones are so important to people. You can barely function without one. You have to have an app for everything."

"I don't even know what an app is."

"Exactly. And my sisters are grown up. My dad is on the verge of retiring and selling his farm. My fiancé married someone else."

At the word 'fiancé' my heart does a strange jump like it's throwing a fit. "You were engaged?"

"Briefly, for about a month before the abduction."

For some reason, hearing about her being in love with another man ignites physical discomfort in me. My chest tightens and my esophagus feels

like it's burning.

Clearing my throat, I gulp my jealousy down. "I didn't realize you'd been separated from someone you love. It must've been very disappointing to find he hadn't waited for you."

Surprisingly, Ro laughs lightly. "Oh, I wasn't sad. I'd hoped he'd found someone, and he did. He moved on quickly enough to have four children with his new wife in the seven years I was gone."

"And this didn't upset you... why?"

"He and I weren't exactly a match of passion. We met in church, he was a nice guy, and we were about the same age. Our area was rural and small. Neither of us were travelers, and it just made sense for us to marry. That's all it was—sensible. I'm glad it didn't happen because we both would've been settling for something less than what we really wanted if we'd gone through with it."

Relief loosens my tense muscles. I shouldn't be happy that Ro's plans were derailed, but I am.

That's fucked up.

I'm fucked up.

She should've married that boring, unremarkable man and lived out the remainder of her days being totally unaware of Valora or the fae. If I were a better person, that would be my true opinion, but it's not. It's not at all, because then she wouldn't be with me now.

"How did the abduction happen, if you don't mind me asking?" I pry.

"I'd gone for a walk that morning on a road near my farm." Her reply is garbled, and in between her words, I hear the distinct sound of a toothbrush scrubbing inside her mouth. "It was a remote area, very safe. Or so I thought. Someone came up from behind, seemingly out of nowhere. At the time, I didn't realize the person taking me wasn't human and that they had a portal to another world." She swishes some water, spits, and finishes, "The man pulled me through it, and the next thing I knew, I found myself looking up at the Day Realm castle."

So much for mundane subjects.

This conversation took a heavy turn, but I want to know Ro better, so I push on, "Did you ever find out why you were chosen? Why did the snatchers go to Brazil in the first place? The reason I ask is because it's uncommon for them to take someone from a country where English isn't the primary language. They would've had to go out of their way to find you."

She lets out a bitter chuckle. “I was told I’d been handpicked for the king, but I wasn’t the only one. The snatchers scoured the human world for the women Zarid would like best. And yes, it was the worst for those of us who didn’t speak English well. Training someone to be obedient is already hard enough when they’re being held against their will, but when they can’t even understand the orders being given... not everyone is patient or understanding.”

So it’s true, then—Zarid sent his men to find females, and all he cared about is that they were gorgeous and innocent. It’s been said he preferred inexperienced girls because he could mold them to cater to his specific tastes.

“Fucking scum,” I growl out, and Ro releases a resigned sigh.

“I thought we were supposed to be spending this time being happy,” she reminds me wryly. “Zarid is dead. There’s no need to dwell on him. My life happened the way it happened. I’m trying to accept that the best I can. You should, too.”

Her tone is placating, and I have a feeling she’s become very skilled at deescalating angry men.

It’s not her responsibility to manage my emotions, so I force myself to calm down. “You’re right. We shouldn’t speak of such dreary subjects.”

We’re quiet for a minute. The water is still splashing as Ro continues scrubbing, but at least my conversation tactic worked on my cock. My erection is completely deflated.

Any time I think of the practice of abducting women, it makes me sick.

My job has often put me right at the center of the trade, so I’ve seen the tragedy, and it’s taken a toll on me. I’ve busted many auctions where we got there before the girls were sold, but I’m haunted by the few instances when we arrived too late. In those times, we had to hunt down the victims, but by then, sometimes they’d been violated already.

I’ve witnessed the aftermath of lives altered forever. I can heal the physical injuries the women sustain during their trauma, but I can’t fix their mind. I can’t erase what’s been done to them.

A lot of the outcomes had a silver lining, though. Most of the humans who were brought here were taken from hard lives. Snatchers usually target people who don’t have families and won’t be missed, so many of the women we’ve saved have decided to stay in Valora under royal protection instead of going back to homelessness and poverty.

Giving someone a choice is the least we can do.

What will Ro choose?

Valora? Brazil? Somewhere else in the human realm where she can start over with a clean slate?

I can't help thinking about how I'll feel when she and I go our separate ways. I picture dropping her off somewhere and watching her walk away while knowing I'll never see her again.

My gut churns with... panic? Dread?

I rub the unsettled area on my stomach. "So what will you do after we escape the Lost Land?"

"You know what? I actually have no idea. With my tendency to plan to look to the future, it's crazy that I can't see it. It just seems like wherever I go, I am... misplaced."

I frown at the way she sees herself in the world, as if she's not a part of it. "In my experience, fitting in has less to do with where you are, and more to do with who you're with. I think I could be content anywhere, as long as I'm surrounded by the right people."

"Who are the right people for you?"

You, a voice in my mind whispers. "I found a home with King Kirian and my fellow warriors."

"And that's enough for you?"

"It has been. I've never wanted anything more until—" I stop myself before I can blurt out more of my feelings.

"Until...?"

Until you. This time, the voice isn't a whisper. It's a loud exclamation knocking around in my skull. Almost a demand.

For a moment, I envision Ro and me together. Living in the same home. Loving each other. Building a life.

Such a silly thought.

It's one thing to tell Ro how much I admire her. It's another to make her feel as though I'm going to stalk her for the rest of her life.

And honestly, the idea has its appeal, which scares the shit out of me. I'm not that person. The kind of man who can't thrive without a woman at his side.

"What you need is a reinvention," I declare. "Especially for the fae, because we live so long, we have to reinvent ourselves sometimes. It would be absurd to think we could live thirty thousand years without any drastic changes."

“You sound like you’re speaking from experience.”

“I am. I know it’s possible because I’ve done it. I’m loyal to the Night Realm now, but I was born in the Day Realm.”

“Wait, what?” Her tone is incredulous with shock. “Under what king and queen?”

“Zed and Lynnea.”

“Zarid’s parents.”

“Yes. I was just a teenager when Zed died and Zarid took over.”

“I hadn’t come here yet, but I’ve heard that was a very turbulent time.”

“It was. I remember the chaos the realm was in. So much upheaval, political and personal.”

“Is that why you joined the military? To protect the kingdom?”

“Sort of. I knew it was the best choice for me because I was an orphan. My mother had died of the plague when I was eight, and my father took his own life the year after.”

“Oh, Kai,” Ro says, then she mumbles to herself, “I’m such an inconsiderate jerk.”

I furrow my brows. “Why would you say that?”

“I never would’ve asked you to... to do what I asked you to do if I’d known you’d been touched personally by suicide.”

“I didn’t even think of it,” I reassure her. “That was over two thousand years ago, and I don’t harbor grief about the loss or the way it happened. I don’t blame my father either. He didn’t want to leave me alone, but what he wanted less was to end up going insane from mate withdrawal. I remember him explaining that he was afraid he would hurt me, so he dropped me off at the orphanage. The next week I learned of his death. He’d driven an iron spike into his own heart.”

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that.” Empathetic waves come at me from the other side of the glass door of the shower. They’re so strong, I almost feel it physically, like the steam that’s collecting on my skin. Like a hug without even touching.

“Apologies are a nice sentiment, but in my case, it isn’t needed. At that time, orphans were common because so many of us had lost our parents the same way. I had no shortage of company. There were dozens of boys my age at the children’s home, and they became my new family. We all joined the Day Realm military when we turned twenty-one.”

“And so a warrior was born.”

“Yes.”

“Then how did you end up in the Night Realm? Once you pledge your fealty to a kingdom, it’s impossible to switch.”

“I haven’t told very many people this story,” I state hesitantly. “I’ve allowed tall tales to circulate because the rumors are more interesting than the facts.”

“You sound ashamed.”

“I’m not. It’s just that this part of my past is anticlimactic and sad, so brace yourself,” I warn her before I give her the gruesome history. “One day, soldiers came to the barracks to retrieve me. I’d been summoned by King Zarid himself, and I thought perhaps I was being promoted to a higher rank. Maybe I would be given a position in the royal guard, for no warrior was more dedicated than I. Serving my kingdom was my first priority. I always volunteered to lead missions when given the chance, hoping to prove my worth.”

“Zarid didn’t reward people,” Ro says quietly. “He only punished. He liked to punish.”

“I was dragged to a public courtyard, strapped to a pole, and flogged with a whip that had an iron tip. It was the worst pain imaginable. I don’t know how long it went on for. I lost track of the minutes. Maybe it was hours.” The memory of my own gut-wrenching screams resounds in my head, and I close my eyes and take a deep breath through my nose. “When I think about that day, I can still feel the stinging burn of every crack of the whip, how it split my skin open. How they didn’t just aim for my back, but every part of me. My arms, my face, my stomach, and chest. I remember looking down at the cobblestones. Usually, they were varying shades of brown, but at that moment, they were red. Bright red. From my blood.”

“Kai.” Ro is horrified, her voice breaking.

I should stop. I shouldn’t describe my ordeal in such great detail, but just as I want to know her, I want her to know me.

“At first, I was confused. Surely, I’d been wrongly accused of some crime. My fellow warriors felt the same, and they were outraged on my behalf. They had to be subdued with iron shackles when they tried to intervene, then they were forced to watch. Seeing their faces in the crowd... their expressions mirrored mine—the indignation of being betrayed by our own king. By the end of it, I wasn’t even able to remain standing. It was too excruciating, and when Zarid came out, I was sure he’d see me lying there in

a pathetic heap and realize he'd made a mistake. I didn't even care about getting an apology. I just wanted it to stop and to have the king's favor once again. But he looked me right in the eyes and spit on me before telling me my sentence was death for offending him. After that, he walked away."

"That's how you got your scars," Ro concludes. "But you're a Healer. Why couldn't you heal yourself?"

"The iron part of the whip was infused with Valonite." I lift the collar around my neck and fiddle with the gold plate that contains a chip of the gem. "It contaminated my wounds. Tiny shards were left in my flesh, and they inhibited my power. I don't think Zarid knew it would make the marks permanent. After all, he didn't expect me to live."

"How did you survive?"

"Zarid ordered his men to take me just past the border of the Day Realm into Dawn and Dusk and behead me there. He wanted me far away from my homeland, dumped in an unmarked grave. Fortunately, King Kirian and Torius came upon us. They were on their way to bury a warrior in the Sacred Cemetery, and they heard the soldiers taunting me while they tied me to a tree. Right before they swung their axes at me, they were interrupted. I don't remember much of what was said because I was in and out of consciousness, but the confrontation turned hostile, and a fight ensued. King Kirian and Torius won, and then the Day Realm men were the ones in the grave."

"I'm glad they died for what they did to you," Ro growls because of how angry she is on my behalf, and it feels good to have her on my side.

"Don't be too upset for me, Sunny. My story takes an excellent turn. Once King Kirian and Torius questioned me, they realized I was telling the truth—that I was innocent. They loaded me onto a cart and carried me with them on the rest of their journey. They thought I'd be a great addition to their entourage because I was a Healer. However, they soon found out I couldn't use my powers, and they weren't sure if I'd ever be able to heal again. Yet they still accepted me and gave me a place to belong. In the following weeks, my injuries improved but the road to total repair was long. My body had to push the Valonite out, much like it does with splinters. Until every particle was gone, my power was suppressed, but the other warriors were patient with me. They bandaged my wounds every day and nursed me back to health. After that, my loyalty was to the Night Realm."

Ro's quiet for a few seconds, and her sympathy has shifted into something different. Something that feels a lot like guilt. I don't know how I

can tell that without even looking at her, but I sense her remorse.

“Kai, when did that happen?”

“I don’t remember the exact year, but it was shortly after Zander was born. He was still just a baby.”

After an anguished noise, Ro blurts, “I swear, if I’d known what Zarid was going to do to you, I would’ve tried to stop it.”

“It’s not your fault,” I tell her seriously. “You had nothing to do with it.”

“But I was queen at the time.”

“You were a prisoner. It’s me who should be apologizing to you.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I knew what Zarid was doing. The entire kingdom was aware of how he’d taken a harem of human women because he was trying to produce an heir. And I knew he’d gotten one of them pregnant and forced her to marry him. I’ll admit, I thought about storming the castle more than once. I wanted to rescue all of you—especially you. Maybe that’s why he did what he did to me. Perhaps somehow, he found out about my treasonous thoughts.”

“That could be. He did have a powerful wizard in his employ, and that man knew things.”

“I’ve also considered that he might’ve been trying to make an example of me. There’d been whispers of rebellion amongst the people. So many families had been ripped apart by the plague, and Zarid was not a philanthropic ruler. However, after my public torture, that kind of talk stopped. If he wanted to display his cruelty, he did it successfully.” I shrug. “I could drive myself to madness if I try to pin down a reason. It doesn’t matter anyway. I’ve moved on from it.”

“Have you?” Ro calls me out.

I thought I had.

Before today, I’d fully accepted my scars.

Then Ro came along, and she’s made me yearn for something I’ve been denied my entire life: intimacy. Real intimacy, the kind where you can be completely vulnerable with the other person and know they won’t judge you. The kind of closeness where someone becomes your sanctuary, the place you can go when you need a respite from the harshness of the world.

And, yes, I’ve been missing out on the physical aspect of it, too. Primal passion combined with a deep emotional connection—I imagine sex under those conditions would be the best high I could ever experience.

I want that.

With Ro.

The longer I'm around her, the more my desire for it becomes a need.

Maybe I could have it with her today, temporarily, while I'm handsome and unflawed. We wouldn't even have to fuck. I'd happily take any affection she's willing to give, even if it's just a cuddle or a kiss.

However, there are cons to keep in mind.

If Ro is amenable to my advances, I'll feel like I used my attractiveness to entice her. The last thing I want to do is manipulate her and cause her to have regrets later.

Plus, I suspect I'll be fucked up for the rest of my life if we get any closer. As it is, we've only shared a few brief touches, and I already know I'll never be the same. I'll always be thinking about each caress, and after we part, I'll miss her fiercely, madly, until the end of my days.

The absence of her will be agonizing.

It might be worth it.

"After you're finished," I say gruffly, "I'd like to take a shower as well."

Perhaps a cold one.

The water turns off. "I'm done."

After the shower door rolls to the side, I hear her get a towel from the basket next to the tub. The white fluffy material makes soft sounds as she rubs it over her skin before she wraps it around her body.

Her dainty little feet patter on the floor as she comes around to my side and gives me a small, shy smile.

Although she's more covered than she was when she wore her scraps before, there's something insanely erotic about seeing her wrapped in only a towel. Her youthful face is clean and glowing with wetness. Her dark hair is sticking to her neck and shoulders as water drips from it.

There's a drop on her bottom lip. I want to suck it off.

Suddenly, her eyes become troubled, her mouth twists, and she says the last thing I ever expected. "Why didn't you look?"

"What?" I'm not sure what she's asking.

Her gaze darts to the shower behind me. "You could've easily turned around, but you didn't."

"Because." I'm almost too stunned to give a coherent response. "Because it would've been a violation to do so."

"So you weren't tempted at all?" She sounds... disappointed?

"My temptation doesn't override my respect. I'm not an animal."

“That’s too bad,” she mutters under her breath before snickering wryly. “This world really is backward. The one time I actually want someone to ogle me, and he’s too much of a gentleman to do it.”

“Excuse me?” I catch her wrist when she starts to step away. She can’t just say something like that without giving an explanation. “If you wanted me to watch you, all you had to do was ask.”

“Well, it’s too late now, isn’t it?” she questions, and I seriously consider telling her to get back in there. Bashfully batting her eyelashes, she’s adorably flirtatious when she says, “What if there’s something else you could do...?”

“Anything,” I agree eagerly. “Whatever it is, I’ll do it.”

“It’s extremely inappropriate for me to request it.” Ro’s cheeks, already pink from the heat of the water, get redder.

“Request it,” I demand.

Her focus drops to the floor, and her clean toes flex against the beige tile. “Let me watch *you* in the shower?”

CHAPTER 13

Ro

Kai doesn't react. He just stares blankly. I can feel his eyes boring into the top of my head as I wait for an answer.

Did he not hear me?

It was hard enough to say it once. I don't think I'll be able to muster up the words a second time.

"Never mind." I try to pull away from his grasp, but he maintains his hold on my wrist.

"I'm not refusing you." His grip loosens, and it allows his hand to slip down to mine. He cradles my fingers against his own. Like lovers do. Gently, he runs his thumb back and forth on my palm. "I'm just wondering why you want this."

Complete honesty is the only way to go. "I've never had a naked man in front of me without the presence of some threat. I've never been allowed to just look without knowing something very bad was about to happen."

"So you need this to take some control back? Or do you want to see me without clothes on?" He doesn't smile, but his second question has a playful tone.

I appreciate his ability to bring some lightness to the conversation, and I like the transparency between us.

"Both," I reply. "But if that feels like a violation to your privacy—"

Kai stops my backtracking by letting go of my hand and getting to work on unbuckling his belt. "It would be my honor to allow you this. But I must warn you, the state of certain parts of my body might be alarming. I promise it's not an indication that I'm going to act upon my desires."

"What does that mean?"

"It means my cock is hard. I can't seem to get the damn thing to behave. And I'll give you one guess why."

“B-because of m-me?”

“You got it.”

“O-oh.” He’s making me stutter. I’ve never had an issue with speech, even when I had to switch to English as my primary language.

Maybe I’m having trouble with my words because my brain is too focused on other areas. The hot throbbing between my legs is back with a vengeance. My knees are weak. My nipples are tight. Sweat mingles with the steam on my skin.

Kai drops his belt to the floor, weapons and all, with a heavy thud.

As he removes the sack that’s slung across his torso, his pecs and abs flex with every little movement. Next, he unbuttons his fly. The metal slips through the leather holes, parting the material until I see a patch of blond hair surrounding the base of a very thick erection.

Holy crap, he’s not wearing any underwear.

When Kai pushes his pants down, his cock bobs out like a freaking Jack in the Box toy.

My eyes widen comically.

I didn’t know dicks could be that big.

I look at my forearm. Look back at the dick. My arm. The dick.

His cock is wider than the circumference of my wrist, and it must be close to twelve inches long. It’s sticking straight out, the head of it reddish purple. Squiggly shaped veins bulge under the smooth skin. If I look closely, I can see the whole shaft moving slightly with Kai’s heartbeat. Every time a pulse goes through it, it jerks a little.

It’s a very intimidating sight, and I have very conflicting thoughts ricocheting around in my mind.

I’m aroused and I obviously like Kai, but if he and I were to attempt penetration of any kind, he might hurt me without even meaning to.

I’m a gentle lover.

That’s what he’d said. He also referred to it as a letdown, but it wouldn’t be a disappointment for me. It would be a requirement.

Maybe I’m getting ahead of myself here.

No one ever said anything about fucking. All I’m doing is watching him shower.

Kai toes his boots off, and his pants get kicked away.

Then he’s totally nude within arm’s reach.

Off balance, I sway, and he steadies me by grasping my shoulder. “Are

you all right?”

I nod, apparently mute.

“Perhaps you should sit down,” he suggests.

Groping behind me, I find the ceramic back of the toilet and lower myself to the closed wooden lid.

Rotating, Kai gives me a view of his extremely muscular ass as he turns the water back on. When he steps into the shower and closes the sliding door, the fog on the glass blurs the show a little.

Still, his outline is visible from the side. As he begins using the bar of soap, his horizontal cock bobs.

Tearing my eyes away from the appendage, I watch him scrub his chest, his arms, and his stomach. Then he vigorously cleans his face, making sure to get into his beard before using the shampoo on the shaved sides of his head. After removing the tie keeping his braid in place, he lathers up his long hair.

Water sprays off him when he rinses himself, and the rivulets cut through the fog on the glass, giving me clear peeks here and there in the vertical stripes.

My lips part when he washes his ball sac.

From the way his breath hitches, I’m betting that part of him is pretty sensitive right now. It probably feels good to slide his soaped-up hand over it.

I’m a bit envious that I’m not the one doing it.

I’m merely an innocent bystander, and if I’m being honest, that’s not enough.

I want more. Maybe not sex, but something.

Licking my lips, I think about sucking on the tip of Kai’s cock and what it would taste like. I’m curious about how much of it I could get inside my mouth before my gag reflex kicks in.

Would he be patient with me and my inexperience? I think so.

“Can I speak honestly with you?” Kai’s gravelly voice draws my eyes to his.

“Please do,” I croak, my mouth dry.

“When you look at me like that, it makes me ache.” He grabs his swollen shaft at the base.

“It’s painful?”

Nodding, he continues squeezing himself firmly, but he doesn’t move up and down. His knuckles are white, and his arm trembles. He’s basically vibrating. Little droplets of water are being shaken from his limbs as if he’s a

tree in the wind during a rainstorm.

“I know how you feel.” I press my knees together because the pulsing in my clit has become very uncomfortable. “I’ve never... my body has never...”

“You’ve never needed gratification so badly?” Kai finishes for me. When I dip my chin in confirmation, he mirrors my undeniable urges by giving his cock a slight tug. “Yes. Resisting is... unbearable.”

“What are we going to do about it?” I ask, hoping he won’t say *nothing*.

“What do you think we *should* do about it?”

Putting the ball in my court. Smart move. He can tell how skittish I am, and he knows it needs to be my decision.

I nervously bite my thumbnail. “What you said about enjoying ourselves... Do you still think that’s the right call?”

“Yes,” Kai answers confidently.

Sucking my bottom lip between my teeth, I worry the flesh before letting it pop out along with a huff of surrender. “Let’s do that, then.”

“I need you to tell me exactly what you want from me. No assumptions.”

His long fingers are still wrapped around his thick cock, and I wish he’d move his hand up and down. I want him to show me how he likes to be touched down there, so maybe, if I happen to get the chance to do it, I’ll know how.

“I want to watch you get yourself off,” I burst out, putting my fingers up to my mouth because I can’t believe I just said that.

Kai’s lips lift with a smirk.

Grabbing the soap, he swirls it around between his palms and fingers, getting them all slippery. My heart pounds faster when he sets the bar down on a ledge and encases his cock with both hands.

With his fists, he covers the majority of his length, but he doesn’t pleasure himself yet.

He stares at me.

I gaze back at him. “What are you waiting for?”

“Your instructions. Give me your commands, my queen, and they’ll be fulfilled.”

For a moment, I’m silent. He wants me to talk him through this, but I’m embarrassingly clueless.

As if he can read my mind, Kai assures, “Nothing you say will be wrong. Trust yourself. Trust *me*—I won’t hide how much I like it.”

His encouragement fuels my confidence.

He knows I need this—to be in control for once.

“Face me,” I order, and he turns my way. “Now stroke it.”

Kai doesn’t hesitate to do so, moving slowly as he rubs himself with both hands, sticking to the middle of his shaft. “Like this?”

“Is that how you’d do it if you were alone?”

“No. I’d cover more area.”

“Do that, then. I want to see the way you like to touch yourself when no one is watching.”

His motions become bigger. At the tip, he swirls his hand around the head, and I note the way his thumb swipes the slit.

One of his hands leaves his cock while the other continues pumping it.

He rubs his stomach before zigzagging to his chest. Tweaking his right nipple, he circles it before sliding to the other side to dole out the same treatment.

Continuing the path upward, he grazes his neck and gets to his pointy ear. He massages the tip, and then he does something that breaks my heart.

He nuzzles his own hand, rubbing his cheek on his palm.

I’d assumed he’d be keeping all the action below the belt, but after a lifetime of imposing a no-physical-contact rule on himself, I’m sure he yearns for touch in other places.

He’s had to provide his own affection for so long, and I wish I could be the one stimulating his sensitive areas.

Suddenly, he shudders and hunches over. “When can I come?”

My eyebrows raise. “Are you going to already?”

“I very well could if you let me.”

If you let me.

If I let him.

I think that’s the hottest thing I’ve ever heard in my life.

“I don’t want it to be over yet,” I admit.

“Then it won’t be.”

“You can keep going?”

“I won’t come until you tell me to,” Kai vows, jerking his cock with one hand while cupping his balls.

To be honest, I’d like to see how far I can push him.

“Faster,” I demand.

He complies. Letting out a soft grunt, he wobbles as his fist speeds up. He’s weak in the knees, and he stops touching his sac to brace his hand on the

glass. With his fingers splayed out against the transparent barrier, his digits curl, making his fingertips white from the pressure.

“You need more hands,” I boldly tease.

“Are you offering yours?” Before I can answer, he says, “Because then it would be done. If you lay one finger on me, I’m going to explode.”

“Do I really have that much power over you?”

“What do you think?”

“So if I were to lick you right there...” I point at his swollen tip. “—you’d lose it?”

A full-body quiver racks him. His abs clench, and he shuts his eyes.

On the next stroke, he groans, “Oh, fuck. Just imagining it... I thought I could hold off, but I can’t.” He pins me with his desperate gaze. “Sunny. My queen. *Please.*”

Reduced to begging.

This strong man is begging me for something only I can give him.

If I were like Armand, I’d embrace the intoxicating control and cling to it for as long as possible.

But release is more satisfying than denial. To deprive Kai is to deprive myself, and I want to see him come just as much as he wants to do it.

“Now,” I say, giddy with anticipation. “Do it now.”

Kai’s rasp of relief follows along with a couple swear words in the Old Fae language. His motions become clumsier, and his hand starts to slip on the glass with a wet squeak.

A second later, he lets out a guttural shout while a cloudy white substance bursts from his cock.

Like a hose, it hits the shower door with force. Not once. Not twice.

Three times.

Those forceful spurts paint an area the size of my hand, then it runs down in thick streams.

There’s so much of it. I’m actually surprised by the amount, and he’s not done. Smaller jets drip onto the shower floor as he gives himself a few extra pulls.

With a final moan, Kai tugs his cock one more time before falling back. It’s a good thing there’s a wall behind him, because it looks like he needs the support.

Leaning on the ceramic tiles, he holds eye contact with me as he catches his breath.

My heart skips a beat as I look into his crystal blues.

The way he's looking at me now affects me more than anything else that's happened between us.

There's a strange and enthralling familiarity, like we've known each other for years. Like we've met before. Like we've been together all our lives.

A tingly sensation travels through my chest, making me want to giggle, and it takes me a second to figure out what it is.

Fun.

I just had fun, and Kai made it happen in the most unlikely of places.

Unfortunately, we still have a problem.

Kai might be satisfied, but I'm not. Don't get me wrong—it was very fun to witness his pleasure—but I feel like I might actually die if I don't get off.

CHAPTER 14

Ro

Squeezing my thighs together, I clasp my hands tightly in my lap so I don't do something crazy like shove my fingers between my own legs and rub myself until I come.

My pulse is racing. I'm hot all over. My extremities are buzzing. It's like my entire body is filled with a fizzy drink that got shaken, and the bubbles have nowhere to go.

I glance down at my laced fingers. My knuckles are white. Every muscle in my body is tense, and I'm wondering how the hell I'm supposed to go on about my day as if I don't need an orgasm like I need my next breath.

After Kai rinses himself, he shuts off the water. The door rolls back. He steps out.

Soon, he'll get dressed, and then what?

Kai answers my question without me even voicing it.

Wet, nude, and still rock hard, he says, "If you need something, just tell me."

"I need something," I automatically respond, practically whining.

Kai glances at the exit as if he's thinking about leaving to give me some privacy. "Do you want to do it yourself, or would you rather I do it?"

My reply spills out before I can think about it. "You."

His lips twitch, and his eyes flash with excitement. "I can't tell you how happy that makes me."

"Yeah?"

"Absolutely."

Nervous, I squirm and wiggle my toes.

I can't be in control for this part. Because when it comes to what I like, I just don't know. It's a bit humiliating to admit, but thankfully, I don't have to.

Somehow, Kai can either assume this or he reads the fact on my face.

“You don’t have to say a word, Sunny.” Lowering himself to the floor, he kneels in front of me in all his naked glory. “I’ll do it all, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I would never hurt you.” His voice is steady and calm. “You believe that, right?”

“Yes.” I’m not the least bit scared of him.

“I can make you feel good.”

“I know.”

“Do you?” With a challenging look, he prods, “Do you really understand what it is that I can do to your body?”

Swallowing hard, I shake my head and confess, “No, I actually don’t.”

“Then I’ll show you, and I’ll tell you what I’m going to do before I do it so you know what to expect.”

“Okay.” Yeah, he can talk dirty to me all he wants.

“Open your legs.”

I do, and the air in the room hits my clit. I’m so heated down there, even the warm steam feels cold against the sensitive bud, and I gasp at the contrast.

Oh so gently, Kai runs the backs of his knuckles on the insides of my calves.

Those sparks.

It’s like shooting stars on my skin.

When he gets to my knees, he flattens his hands and keeps going up.

The sensation of his big palms rubbing the inside of my thighs sends chills through me. My stomach flips and flutters as his fingers get closer to my aching core.

Come on... just a little higher...

Instead of touching me where I crave him the most, he goes for the towel I’m still wearing. From the bottom, Kai lifts one corner, placing it on the outside of my hips, before repeating the same action with the other side. It reminds me of how someone would open a book, but people don’t usually look at paper pages as if they’re a treasure trove.

Kai’s expression is a compliment all on its own. He looks at the place between my legs as if it’s something sacred.

“So pretty,” he coos. “So perfect and pink and wet. You’re just glistening down there. I bet you taste delicious.”

“Taste?” I repeat incredulously.

Licking his lips, he declares, “I’m going to put my mouth on your pussy.”

“O-okay.” I’d assumed he was going to use his hands because oral sex seems so intimate, but I’m definitely not opposed to it.

“Has anyone ever done this to you before?”

“Nope.”

“If you don’t like it and you want me to stop, I will.”

“Don’t stop.” My response is strangled because my throat is tight. “Please, don’t stop. I don’t care what you do. Just do it.”

Kai smirks again.

Nudging my knees with his elbows, he wedges his broad shoulders between my legs. He’s not shy about making room for himself as he pushes my thighs apart. I’m still covered by the towel on top, but my bottom half is completely exposed.

Keeping me informed, just like he said he would, he explains, “I’m going to hook my arms under your knees like this.” He proceeds to drape my legs over his biceps. “And I’m going to put my hands right here.”

He cups the sides of my butt. His fingers squeeze the flesh a couple times, but not because he needs to hold onto me—he’s feeling me. He’s enjoying the way my ass bulges in his hands, and I like the obvious approval oozing from him.

I’ve always had a disproportionately large backside compared to the rest of my body, and I’m glad Kai likes it. I’m not waif-like, and I never will be. Even when I’m emaciated, I’ve still got some junk in the trunk.

Since emerging from the maze, I’ve noticed how much more filled out I am. It’s as if the starvation I went through never happened, so Kai’s getting to see the real me.

“Then…” Kai continues, locking eyes with me as he leans in closer and dips his head.

“Then?” I whisper, my breaths quick and shallow.

“I won’t be able to speak for a while because my tongue will be occupied.”

An uncontrollable tremble of arousal goes through me.

Registering my body’s response, Kai gives me an encouraging nod. “It’s normal for you to shake. You’ll sweat, too. You might get a sort of numbness in your fingers and face. You might make sounds you’ve never made before. If it tickles and you want to laugh, that’s okay as well. Anything you do is

right. Understand?”

I nod, thankful he’s putting so much effort into making me comfortable. But I still have a concern. “What if—”

I stop myself before I reveal too much, but Kai won’t let me off the hook. “What if...? Don’t hold out on me.”

“What if there’s something wrong?”

“Wrong?”

“With me.”

“In what way?”

“I mean, what if it doesn’t work?”

“Doesn’t work?” he repeats with a deadpan tone like the idea is ridiculous.

“What if I can’t get off? Like, what if it feels good, but I can’t finish?”

It’s a valid concern. This is one of those unknown areas of myself that scares me; uncharted territory that’s gone unexplored for so long that I’m not even sure there’s anything to discover.

One of the most awkward outcomes would be if Kai does his best to make me orgasm and he fails. It wouldn’t even be his fault. Maybe I’m just too broken.

Reacting with an almost-laugh, a puff of air comes from Kai’s nose. When it hits my clit, my entire channel spasms, and he can see the way my flesh contracts.

Answering me with sexy fae-like arrogance, he states, “That won’t be a problem. Ready to find out?”

“Uh huh.”

Bending down, Kai closes the distance between his mouth and my center.

Immediately spearing my entrance with his stiff tongue, he groans against me, and I’m hit with the vibration from his sound of pure satisfaction.

Choking out a gasp, I buck involuntarily, but Kai’s hold on my body won’t let me go anywhere.

As he licks me, his facial hair is scratchy against the inside of my thighs. There’s a light pressure on my throbbing core while he stimulates nerve endings at the opening. He traces it, around and around.

Then he fucks me with his tongue, pushing in and out a few times. The tip of his nose nudges my clit, and his breath caresses the space between.

Changing the shape of his tongue, he makes it flatter and wider, like he wants to cover as much area as he can while he takes the path to my clit.

A second later, he gets to the sensitive spot, and he lashes at it.

My jaw drops as Kai flicks up, down, back, and forth. Small circles. Repeat.

When he starts sucking on my clit, pulling the sensitive mound into his mouth with a strong rhythm, I begin to lose control of my body.

I'm trembling so hard I'm buzzing. I can't feel my face. I'm making high-pitched noises along with loud panting and an occasional whimpering grunt.

While I dig my heels into Kai's back, his words of reassurance replay in my mind.

Anything you do is right.

I hope that includes shamelessly riding his face.

Rocking my hips, I tug at his hair. If it hurts, he doesn't let on. In fact, he rumbles out an encouraging noise.

The towel around my chest comes loose, and it falls away, revealing my breasts. They bounce and jiggle, and Kai growls against me when his eyes lock onto my hardened nipples.

Fluttering starts up inside my channel, along with some tightness in my lower belly.

Shit. I'm on the edge already.

Any concerns I had about not being able to get off disappear. I can't think about anything but how amazing this feels, and I actually want to slow it down. I don't want it to be done so soon, but I can't stop it.

It's happening.

Closing my eyes, I give in to Kai. To the way my body locks up, to how my walls clamp around nothing.

I wail as the repeated clenching continues longer than it should.

I've never felt anything this fucking amazing, and I want to live inside this bliss where everything is perfect.

The past doesn't matter. Neither does the future.

Now is the most important moment of my entire existence.

For once, my physical body and my emotional state are perfectly aligned. They're in harmony with each other, and the euphoria of realizing *I'm not defective* is literal magic.

A sob escapes my lips as the spasms taper off.

Kai pauses, his tongue still on my clit, and he studies me with a question in his eyes. Like he's waiting for my regret.

"I'm good," I assure him. "I'm unbelievably good."

My limbs are so relaxed that my legs start to fall off Kai's shoulders. He catches them, cradling them in the crooks of his elbows.

Not in a hurry to go anywhere, he returns his attention to my tingling flesh. He licks me a few more times, and I jolt from how overly sensitive I've become down there.

"I knew it," Kai mumbles, turning his head to kiss my inner thigh.

Dazed, I slur, "Knew what?"

He rubs his soft beard on my skin. "That you'd be addictive. In all my years, I've never tasted anything better."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. No cakes, custards, or chocolate could even compare to you." When he tenderly nuzzles the tuft of hair above my slit, kissing me wherever he can, heat comes surging back.

Usually, after I've had one orgasm, I'm set for weeks. Sometimes months.

Kai could make me a very greedy woman, and as I gaze down at him, my heart feels warm and light.

He might think I'm the ruler in this dynamic, but he's wrong. He owns a part of me now. No matter what happens with us going forward, he'll always have one of my firsts.

Assuming he's going to slip away and stand, I grope for the towel hanging down on either side of me. I start to cover myself with it, but Kai bats it from my hands and lets it drop away.

"What do you think you're doing, Sunny?" He hikes my legs up like he did before in the beginning. "We're not done here."

He dives for me, and I gasp when he sticks his tongue inside me.

Giggling, I give his hair a gentle yank. "Kai, you've accomplished what you set out to do."

"Are you telling me you don't want another?" He doesn't move his mouth away from me as he speaks, and the caress from his lips gets me more revved up than I already am.

"I don't know if I can." Even as I make the claim, I know it's bullshit. It wouldn't be hard for Kai to get me off again.

His voice is deeper, and his eyes are darker when he looks up at my face. "Do. You. Want. Another?"

"Yes," I confess with a whisper.

He takes my clit into his mouth.

My back arches, and I moan.

And we start over.

There's licking. More sucking. Rhythmic pulls and pushes with Kai's talented tongue.

How can he do this to me with just one part of his body? He hasn't tried to finger me yet. He hasn't even touched my breasts, for crying out loud.

My eyes are closed as orgasm number two builds.

While my legs are wrapped around Kai's head, I feel his body twitching. It's not a slight shake... the motions are bigger, threatening to knock my ankles from their locked position behind his head.

I look down to see what's going on.

I gape at the scene before me.

He's jacking himself off while he eats me out. With his face buried between my thighs, he's furiously pumping his cock.

It's so hot.

I come on the spot.

CHAPTER 15

Kai

I just defiled a queen. I've never been prouder of myself.

I made her come so many times. Four, to be exact.

And she's not the only one who's had multiple orgasms. I've gotten off just as much as she has. My cock can't seem to get enough.

Even now, as my tip drips with the remaining evidence of the load I just blew onto the floor, my erection isn't waning.

Breathing hard with my eyes closed, I rest the side of my head against Ro's stomach.

I'm kneeling in front of her as if she's a deity I'm worshipping, but she's not an immortal god. She's a human, and I'm reminded of that fact by her frantically beating heart. The fast rhythm matches my own, and I can't remember the last time my pulse raced like this.

Her soft hands come up to languidly sift through my hair, and it's a tender moment, but when her fingers run over my shoulders, I'm reminded of how different I look right now.

I don't know how long I have before my scars return, and I'm dreading it.

I push the thought away.

We're supposed to be enjoying the present.

But... I think we enjoyed ourselves a little too much.

We've been irresponsible. Absolutely reckless. Because while I've had my mouth on Ro's pussy, the entire castle could've come caving down and I probably wouldn't have noticed until it was too late.

"How long do you think we've been in this bathroom?" I ask.

"I have no idea." Her response is wobbly, and I glance up.

Wet streaks shine on her cheeks.

I frown. "You're crying."

"I am?" She looks confused as she dabs at her damp face.

Immediately, I go into protective mode. Even if the person I have to protect her from is myself, I'll do it without hesitation.

I quickly wrap the towel around her, and I sit back on my heels. "Have I hurt you? Offended you? I will atone. Tell me what I've done, and I'll find a way to punish myself."

Surprisingly, she lets out a giggle. At first, I can tell she's trying to stifle it, but her urge to laugh wins, and she ends up clutching her stomach while the happy sounds bubble up from her like a pot that's boiling over.

"You're so serious." She giggles some more.

"Because you're crying." I frown harder.

"My body... the release." Her smile fades as she wipes her cheeks until they're dry. "I think I'm letting out a lot of pent-up stuff."

I understand. I really do. She reminds me of a bird with a wing that was clipped for so long, she'd forgotten she could fly. Maybe she never knew she could in the first place, and I just proved to her that she can.

She yawns, appearing so tired with her heavy eyelids.

"You need to rest." I stand and start collecting my clothes.

After putting on my pants and boots, I don my gear.

Tucking the towel under her armpits, Ro gets up. Well, she tries to. Her knees give out, and I scoop her into my arms.

"I can walk, you know," Ro claims.

"Are you sure?" I inquire seriously with an amused tone.

She shyly glances away. "Okay, maybe not. God, I'm so annoying. I swear, I'm not trying to be such a damsel."

I hate it when she puts herself down, and I shift the blame—rightfully so—to myself. "It's my fault for making your limbs into jelly. If I hadn't been so gluttonous with your delicious pussy, you'd be able to use your legs just fine."

She looks at me like she can't believe I just said what I said. It's so easy to get a reaction out of her, and I thoroughly enjoy her scandalized expression.

Opening the door, I leave the mess we made behind us, including her makeshift bra and the loincloth.

"What about my clothes?" Bending her head to the side, Ro searches for her discarded scraps.

"You're not putting that garbage back on. There was food in the kitchen and the bathroom was stocked, so it's logical to think there might be clothes

in the castle. Where would we find outfits for you?”

“The fourth floor.”

The highest level. Of course we’re being led there.

Armand hasn’t forgotten us. There’s a reason he didn’t interrupt us in the bathroom.

We weren’t in the right spot.

If shit goes down on the ground, it’d be too easy for us to escape. At the top, however, there will be dozens of rooms and hallways separating us from the exit.

Despite knowing that, I don’t pause when I reach the servants’ stairs and start climbing. I persist, and I’m silent on the journey up.

When we make it to the final landing of the stairwell, there’s a fancy wooden door that leads out into the hallway of the fourth floor. Nudging it open with my elbow, I peek out.

I look left, then right.

At one end of the corridor, there’s a grand staircase leading down to the floor below. In the other direction, rows of doors line the long hall.

It’s quiet, and the silence is unnerving. You’d think we would hear something—the ticking of a clock or the wind outside.

Nothing.

Letting go of Ro, I let her feet touch down. I steady her by the shoulders, making sure she’s balanced before drawing my sword.

Positioning myself in front of her, I reach behind me and take her hand in mine. “Which room?”

She points to an open door near the end of the hall, diagonal from us. Bright sunlight shines out from it.

I move that way. Stealthily. Cautiously.

Scanning my surroundings, I study each door we pass, watching for movement. The air is different up here. Fresh and clean, like all royal spaces should be.

When I get to the room Ro specified, I stay at the threshold while searching for danger.

Suddenly, Ro gasps.

I tense up, raising my blade because I’m ready to fight, but she says, “It’s okay, Kai.”

Before I can stop her, she pushes past me. Making a beeline for the far corner on the right, she goes straight to a cream-colored crib. There’s a light-

yellow blanket folded over the side.

“Careful,” I warn as I follow behind her, thinking it’s a trap.

Gathering the blanket in her hands, Ro brings the soft knitted material to her nose and sniffs. As she exhales, she lovingly pets it as if it’s familiar.

Now that I’m closer, I can clearly see that the crib is empty. Yellow sheets are tucked tightly around the mattress, and a brown teddy bear sits propped up against one end with a little silk pillow. A wispy gray canopy hangs from the ceiling, surrounding the whole thing to make it dimmer.

Going to the end of the crib, Ro runs her fingers over the sleigh-style headboard. The woodwork is fancy, with designs carved into it. Ivy. The leaves are painted gold. This piece of furniture was designed for royalty.

As I look around, I note the big four-poster bed, the standing wardrobe, a vanity, a desk, and a rocking chair. It’s the perfect set up for a new parent.

A nursery for a prince.

“This is where Zander slept when he was a baby,” Ro tells me, even though I’ve already come to the conclusion myself.

Raking my fingers through my loose hair, I muse over the confusing question in my mind.

Why is this crib here now?

King Zander would’ve used it when he was young, but that was thousands of years ago. So, either Ro kept it around for sentimental reasons or the crib belongs to someone else. Maybe one of King Zander’s children.

“Was this crib handed down to Queen Maelyn?” I bump over the bars on the side.

“No,” Ro replies with sadness as she lays the blanket on the railing where it was before. “That wouldn’t be possible. Zarid liked to destroy things I valued, and this crib had become meaningful to me when Zander was a baby. One day, after Zander had outgrown it, I found it burning on the lawn. I was devastated.”

As much as I’d like to comfort her amidst a terrible memory, I’m too busy having an epiphany.

“So you’re saying this is from the past.” I gesture to the setup.

“Yes. And that duvet.” Walking to the silky gray fabric on the big bed, Ro smooths the surface. “I remember picking it out for myself when I designed the nursery. And I always used to keep a burping towel right—” She lifts one of the pillows to reveal a yellow flannel square. “—here.” Baffled, she squints at the familiar item before turning toward the standing

wardrobe. “And all my dresses were in there.”

After marching over to the chest, she flings the doors open. I’m not far behind, ready to pull her away from danger if I must.

Inside the wardrobe, there’s nothing nefarious. It’s just a row of about two dozen dresses of different colors.

Spinning, Ro faces me and voices the same realization I’ve had. “We’re in the past.”

I nod. “That’s why my scars are gone. Armand is showing our minds and bodies a different time. But the question is, why?”

Ro’s face is confused and thoughtful as she ponders my question.

Then a crease forms between her eyebrows, and her lips tighten with anger as she states, “He wants to rewrite history. He’s going to taint one of the most peaceful phases of my life with something terrible.”

“Peaceful?” I glance around the room that was her prison. “You call being kept here, forced to have your abuser’s child, peaceful?”

She flinches at my harsh analysis, and she explains, “I know it sounds awfully like Stockholm’s Syndrome, but these short years at the beginning of Zander’s life were almost normal. Zander was the light of my life. Zarid was satisfied with the outcome of an heir, and he had other women to give his attention to, so he wasn’t coming to my bed. Although he wasn’t kind to me, he wasn’t always cruel either. Most of the time, he ignored me, and I thought that was how it was going to be. I was okay with that. It was the best I could hope for.”

“When did that change?”

“When Zander was three, Zarid started to become impatient about his son’s power. Or lack thereof. He thought a prince should develop his power early. You see, Zarid’s talent for creating fire showed up when he was only twelve months old.”

“That’s extremely dangerous. Youngsters lack impulse control, so that’s a recipe for disaster.”

Ro nods. “He harmed people.”

“I heard he burnt one of his governesses to a crisp, but he was celebrated instead of punished.”

“That’s true. I knew the woman, Junie. Although she was restored immediately by a Healer, she was traumatized. After the incident, she was demoted to the kitchen staff, and Zarid’s parents threw him a party. Junie had to bake the cake he was served. Isn’t that sick?”

“And so his sociopathic training began.”

Hugging herself, Ro tugs the towel tighter around her chest. “Zarid expected the same from his son. He watched Zander every day, with his impatience and irritation growing with every uneventful hour that passed. After Zander’s third birthday, when there was still no sign of magic, Zarid started to... provoke him.” Uncomfortable with the topic, she shifts from foot to foot. “That’s when things got really bad.”

“Zarid hurt him,” I conclude. “And you. To try to get a reaction.”

“Yes.” Ro’s eyes are haunted as she relives her hell. “It’s then that I got to see who Zarid really was. How far he was willing to go to get what he wanted. The things he did to me in front of Zander... Zander and I have never talked about it, and I just hope he was too young to remember the worst of it.”

Time for a change of subject. Not just for her, but for me. She doesn’t have to go into detail about what happened. I can guess, and it fills me with a type of wrath I’ve never experienced before.

I’m not a vengeful person. I’m a Healer. I fix people.

But I want to do things to Zarid that are the opposite of who I am. I’d give anything for an hour with him and a lot of knives. I’d cut him a thousand times. Chop off toes and fingers. Watch him become weaker and weaker as he bleeds out.

Forcing a pleasant expression so Ro can’t read my torturous thoughts, I motion to the wardrobe. “So which dress will you choose?”

Reaching out, she touches a light-yellow gown. “I’ve always liked this one the best because there’s no corset, and yellow is my favorite color.”

“Just like sunshine. I knew your nickname fit you.” I wink, and she gives me a small smile.

As Ro pulls the garment from the hanger, I don’t turn around. She complained when I didn’t watch her in the shower, and far be it from me to deny her my attention.

Plus, there’s something satisfying about being able to stand back and appreciate her beauty in an ordinary situation such as changing outfits.

Keeping her chin high and maintaining eye contact with me, she lets the towel drop.

She’s bolder now. Since I had her naked, spread open, and screaming, she’s become a different version of herself.

A better version.

One that has an improved relationship with her own body.

She's stunning, and she knows it.

My eyes ping from her cute belly button, to the way her inner thighs crowd each other, to the tuft of dark hair covering her pussy.

Holding the dress by the cap sleeves, Ro fluffs it a bit before zeroing in on the big hole to step through. She bends, bringing it down lower so she can slip it on. One dainty foot goes in. Then the other.

While she's hunched over, her tits sway. As she straightens and wiggles to tug the gown up, the shimmying makes for a titillating show as her brownish-pink nipples bounce.

The sight of her actually makes it difficult to breathe.

My cock goes back to being fiercely erect. After coming as much as I have, I wouldn't think it's possible for me to get hard, but here we are.

Ro's arms thread through the sleeves, and then for the first time, I'm seeing her in clothing that's right for her.

She was beautiful in scraps. She was gorgeous when she was naked.

But now, she's a queen.

The gown was obviously made for her, tailored to her measurements, and it fits her like a glove. A high empire waist emphasizes her breasts, and the scoop neck displays a healthy amount of cleavage.

Like most Day Realm dresses, the fabric is extremely thin to be more breathable because of the high temperatures, and I can see the silhouette of her shapely legs through the semi-transparent layers.

Finger combing her hair, she sections it before giving herself a quick, messy side braid. When she gets to the end of her woven strands, she searches the inside of the wardrobe to find a ribbon. The yellow tie holds her hair together with a neat bow.

Letting out a somewhat satisfied sigh, she smooths the dress and gives me a self-conscious half-shrug. "Well, it'll have to do."

One of my eyebrows goes up as I repeat her self-deprecating statement. "It'll have to do?"

"Yeah." She fusses with a few wrinkles on her skirt. "I think this is as good as it's going to get."

I don't like it when she downplays her beauty. "Sunny, there is no one and nothing more exquisite than you. No matter what you're wearing, you're the best there is."

Her eyes get soft, and a gratefulness sparkles in them. "Thank you, Kai."

“Just being honest. Here’s your weapon.” After I hand her the dagger, she slips it into a hidden pocket on the right side of her dress between folds of fabric.

I look down at her adorable—and very clean—toes sticking out of the hem at the bottom of her dress. “You need suitable shoes.”

Nodding, she goes back to rummaging around in the wardrobe. One yellow slipper gets tossed to the floor before it’s followed by another. Absent-mindedly sliding her feet into them, she continues looking for something else.

“Aha!” She makes the happy sound and spins toward me with something small and white in her grasp like it’s a trophy.

At first, I think it’s a handkerchief. Then I realize what she’s holding.

Day Realm panties. I’d almost forgotten how thin they are. The undergarments are designed with airflow in mind, and they’re basically mesh.

I could lick Ro’s pussy through the netting if I wanted to.

But then Ro yawns, reminding me she should be using this time to get her energy back.

I gesture to the bed. “Sleep.”

Obliging, she takes a step that way, but then she pauses. Biting her lip, she twists her fingers together and fidgets.

I’ve noticed the endearing nervous habit. She does that when she wants to say something, but she’s holding back.

“What’s wrong?” I ask gently. “You can speak plainly with me. Always.”

“Will you join me?”

“That’s not a good idea.”

“Why?”

Because if I get in that bed with her, I have a very strong suspicion sleep won’t be happening for either of us. I might try to fuck her. Clothes wouldn’t stop me. All I’d have to do is yank her skirt up, pull her panties to the side, and slip my cock into her pretty little pussy.

I bet she’d be tight. So incredibly tight. I’d have trouble fitting, but with how wet she’s proven to be, I could work my cock in slowly.

Turning away from her, I palm my crotch where my shaft is jerking in my pants like it wants to escape. “You need a nap.”

“But you said we were supposed to stay within two feet of each other,” she argues softly.

“That was different.”

“Different how?”

“We were in the maze, and I thought something was going to jump out at us. Now, I don’t know what to expect, but whatever it is, it could happen in a minute or next week. We don’t know how long this peace will last, and you should use the time we have to rest while I keep watch.”

“I—I—” Ro’s unsure voice makes me glance over my shoulder, and I watch her face go through a series of emotions as she tries to find the words to explain her feelings.

Uncertainty. Realization. Acceptance. Courage.

She’s used to not being heard, and she’s gotten into the habit of staying silent, so I know it takes bravery when she admits, “I don’t want to be apart from you. It almost makes me feel... panicked. Even the distance between us now—not even ten feet—it’s too much. Please?”

I can’t say no. Not when she’s so honest, looking at me with such genuine pleading in those big brown eyes.

It would be best if I refused her request.

Against my better judgment, I move toward her.

CHAPTER 16

Ro

“Your sword is poking my backside,” I tell Kai, feeling the hard object prodding my tailbone as he spoons me from behind.

Pause. “That’s not my sword.”

“Oh.” I grin a little.

When he’d gotten on the bed with me, he’d insisted on wearing his belt with all his weaponry so he’s ready to fight. And that’s a great idea, but cuddling with a warrior who’s wearing various long and solid objects isn’t the coziest arrangement. He’s even got his big boots on.

Wiggling my butt, I snuggle in closer, and I find immense gratification when Kai grunts quietly because of the pressure I’m putting on his cock.

“Sunny.” His voice is stern with an edge of warning.

“What?” I use my best innocent tone.

“What are you doing?”

“Just trying to get comfortable.”

It’s not a lie. If my idea of comfortable is his erection notched between my ass cheeks, then I’m being completely truthful.

I understand I’m supposed to be sleeping. Kai has made it very clear that he values my well-being.

But how much he cares for me is partly what’s fueling my arousal.

A good man, who’s an honorable protector, who puts my needs above his own? Nothing is hotter than that, and the fact that he’s not trying to fuck me makes me want it even more.

Glancing down, I look at his thick fingers dangling just a couple inches away from my stomach. With his arm slung over my side, he’s in the perfect position to grope me. He could go higher. Or lower. I’d take either, but he’s not making a move.

“Take a deep breath,” Kai bosses. “Loosen your muscles. Clear your

mind.”

Beyond sexually frustrated, I huff, relax against him, and attempt to turn my thoughts elsewhere.

Outside the window, the suns are close to merging in the east. I don't know if it's dawn or dusk, but it doesn't really matter what time it is.

When we came out of the maze, the suns were colliding. Since the orbs cross each other twice a day, that means we've been in Armand's version of the Day Realm for almost twelve hours.

Armand's patience isn't endless. He's got to be getting restless by now, and I feel our time running out.

The air is beginning to change. It's heavier.

“Do you think the challenge will happen soon?” I ask Kai.

“Yes,” he replies with a hint of dread.

“When?” I glance over my shoulder at him.

He's so ridiculously handsome. The sunlight is making his piercing eyes glitter. Like silver and diamonds. His hair is tied back, but he hasn't redone his braid. I'd love to do it for him. My fingers itch with the desire to comb through his strands.

“Maybe it won't happen at all,” he muses. “Maybe we're stuck here together. Forever, just us, with magical breakfast buffets and showers whenever we want.”

He doesn't sound upset by the notion, but it's purely fictional. This is one of those times when people talk about beautiful, impossible possibilities to cope with reality.

I play along like he could be right. “Wouldn't you get bored?”

“Not a chance.”

“Because of all the books in the library, right?” Turning my head forward, I smile as I tease him. “Or all the chess tournaments we could have?”

His arm tightens around my middle with an affectionate embrace. “It would be years before I'd need to explore any hobbies other than memorizing your body.”

Now we're talking. “Why not start memorizing it now?”

“Because if we have all the time in the world, there's no reason to rush into anything.”

“That's the tragedy of it, though, isn't it?” I whisper, getting serious. “We don't have all the time in the world.”

Kai just grunts because he knows shit is going to hit the fan, sooner rather than later.

Before that happens, I want to experience as much physical affection as I can get. I don't want to sleep the moments away.

This is Kai's fault, really. He wanted to show me what it's like to enjoy the present, and he achieved it a little too well.

Now I just have to convince him to give up on my nap, and I'm not above some mild manipulation. I didn't survive in a fae world for over two millennia without learning a few tricks, and I'll utilize those skills to get what I want.

"Could you scratch my back?" I request, thinking if I can get him to touch me, he'll be persuaded.

Unfortunately, he doesn't seem to understand what I mean. "Scratch it? Like, hard?"

"No." I laugh. "Soft. Just lightly with your fingertips."

"What will that do?"

"It just feels nice. You've never done that with anyone?"

As soon as I ask the question, I wish I could rewind the last few seconds and stop the words from ever leaving my mouth.

With Kai's aversion to touch, something as simple as a back scratch could be a very unpleasant experience for him.

He doesn't have scars now, though. He could enjoy it without self-consciousness in the way.

I roll to face him, and our legs tangle together. "In my early human years, we didn't have a lot of money, and our house only had two bedrooms. My sisters and I used to share a bed. Sometimes at night we'd give each other a back scratch while we talked or told stories. It's relaxing."

"All right, I'll try if that means you might fall asleep," he compromises as if I'm a disobedient child who's acting up at bedtime.

Using the arm that's still draped over me, Kai drags his fingers along my bare spine.

Fae dresses are always designed with lowcut backs to allow for wing release, and although I don't have wings, I'm grateful for the access now.

Goose bumps break out on my body while he travels upward to the nape of my neck, and I shiver.

Pushing up on an elbow, Kai curiously studies the raised hairs on my arm. Moving his hand to the pebbled skin, he flattens his palm over the area

and asks, “Does something so simple really feel that good?”

“Yeah, it does. Can I show you?”

He lets out a low sound I recognize as a yes.

With his eyes narrowed, he apprehensively waits as I reach around to his back. Since my arm is short, I end up scooting toward him until our fronts are smashed together.

Placing my fingernails between his shoulder blades, I make a soft line to his tailbone, hopping over the strap of his snack bag.

Hissing in a breath, he arches as a startled expression takes over his face.

I stop and lift my hand away from him. “You didn’t like it?”

“No,” he responds with awe. “I mean, yes. That felt very good. Do it again.”

I do, and now that he knows what to expect, he doesn’t react so extremely. He stays very still as I get into a rhythm. Covering a wider range, I go from the base of his neck to the waistband of his pants. Sometimes I do zigzag motions, making sure I get all the areas of his back.

He closes his eyes, and every now and then, a deep groan rumbles in his throat.

After a couple minutes, he starts panting, his chest rising and falling dramatically, and the motion makes my body rock slightly with his.

The way we’re rubbing together, it’s kind of like dry humping. It’s getting me worked up, and I’m so close to begging him to just fuck me already when he rasps, “Sunny.”

I stop scratching and when I look up at Kai’s face, I realize I’m not alone in this need.

His attention falls to my mouth.

We haven’t kissed yet. After all the intimate things we’ve done, we still haven’t kissed.

That’s absurd, and we both know it.

Grabbing my waist, Kai yanks me up so our mouths are level, and I place my hand on his face as we close the inches between us.

With his strength, I’m expecting a bruising kiss, but he surprises me.

He presses his lips to mine, slowly and tenderly. Just a peck. With little nips, he gives the outside of my mouth adequate exploration.

I can’t breathe, but in a good way.

Just when I think it can’t get any better, Kai’s kisses get deeper. His tongue sweeps in, brushing against mine before he catches my bottom lip

with his teeth.

“Kai,” I whimper.

“Yes?”

“Just... I need you. I need you, I need—”

Quickly, he rolls us, then he’s on top of me, spreading my knees apart with his muscular thighs.

His resolve is totally cracked, and I’m positively delighted.

“Clothes must stay on,” Kai commands, fumbling with his clunky belt and the buttons along his fly.

“That’s fine,” I reply, yanking up my dress.

I can deal with his sword and various weapons digging into me. They’re all sheathed, so I’m protected from the sharp edges. I’ll take a few bruises and some chafing if I have to.

Once Kai’s pants are open enough for him to get his cock out, he pulls his huge dick from the leather with a relieved sigh.

The massive rod rests on my stomach, and the swollen tip of it reaches the bottom of my sternum. I’m worried about it fitting, but damn it, we’re going to give it a go.

Grabbing the back of Kai’s head, I smash his lips to mine. Letting out a sexy rumble, he devours my mouth with kiss after kiss.

He’s hungrier, almost aggressive, and I’m glad he’s less controlled.

Desperate to touch me everywhere, he gropes at different parts of my body.

First, his hand runs down my neck, squeezing a little. He’s not trying to cut off my air. He’s just studying me, like he’s trying to memorize me by touch. With his fingers, he massages and prods my tendons, the pulse at my artery, and the hollow of my throat. Then he moves to my breast. On the outside of my dress, he finds my stiffened nipple beneath the fabric. When he gives it a light pinch, I make a high-pitched sound.

“Good?” Kai checks in with me.

“Uhn huhh,” I release the incoherent ‘yes’ because it’s hard to talk when his lips are occupying mine.

Words aren’t required now.

Our bodies can do all the talking for us.

He moves his mouth to my jaw and kisses his way to my ear. When he finds a good spot on my lobe, he sucks.

I release a long, shaky whimper that echoes in the room.

I might not have fae ears anymore, but it still feels really good, and the pleasure zone of my brain lights up.

Dragging the cap sleeve of my dress off my shoulder, Kai pulls the top down far enough to let a boob out.

He lowers his head, and he engulfs the nipple with his lips before swirling his tongue around it.

Unbearable heat flares in my core, pulsing painfully. Demanding to be filled.

As if my hand has a mind of its own, I reach down to grab Kai's cock. Again, I'm shocked by the girth of it, but my desire is eclipsing all my concerns.

Hiking up my knees, I push his length toward my soaked center with obvious impatience.

"Romance," he mutters, lifting his head with a feral look in his eyes. "You deserve romance."

"No, I need to be fucked. You can be a gentleman later."

Any plans he had to woo me go out the window.

Holding himself up on one of his elbows, Kai hovers above me while his free hand goes to my panties.

At first, I think he's going to tug them down, but he just hooks a finger around the fabric. His digit slides against my slick entrance before pulling the material aside to give himself a way in.

Then he positions his cock where it belongs.

The head is notched perfectly, and my inner muscles contract like they want to suck him in.

Pausing, Kai settles his arms on the mattress on either side of my head. I'm framed in by him. Surrounded by him.

"I'm never going to be the same after this," he swears.

"Neither will I," I admit.

He strokes my cheeks while gazing at me with total adoration.

Love?

Is that what I see? Can I even recognize love if I'm not familiar with it?

I don't have the opportunity to think about it because he starts to push himself into me, and I have to brace myself to be impaled by the massive shaft. Spreading my legs wider, I dig my heels into the mattress.

Kai's tip slides in easily, but intense pressure quickly follows when he sinks in a couple inches. Gasping loudly, I cling to his back, being careful not

to hurt him with my nails.

He kisses me in his gentle way, and it makes me melt.

“That’s so good,” he praises. “Let me in, Sunny. Yes, that’s it. I can feel your pussy relaxing.”

Tensing, he prepares to drive forward, and—

“Rowan!” The shout comes from down the hall.

Kai freezes, and alarm widens his eyes. The color drains from his face, and his expression mirrors mine—we both look like we’ve seen a ghost.

Instantly, I go from shaking with arousal to trembling with fear.

Because I recognize the voice. It’s a voice I never thought I’d have to hear again.

“Zarid,” I whisper, my heart skipping with panic.

“But he’s dead,” Kai growls.

“Not in the past,” I say with building terror as I realize what Armand has been waiting for.

That asshole has been waiting for us to have sex.

This whole time, it wasn’t about *when* the challenge would happen, but *what* would happen to cause it.

Sexual intercourse was the catalyst, and *enjoying it* is officially over.

CHAPTER 17

Ro

“ROWAN!” My nightmare is louder. Closer.

My eyes go to the closed door of the bedroom. Any second, Zarid could come bursting in here, and then what?

Kai will have to protect me.

He *will* protect me.

Withdrawing his cock from me, Kai gets up onto his knees, tucks his erection into his pants, and starts buckling his belt. At the same time, I push my dress down, cover my legs, and pull my top back into place.

We’re quick about it, almost like a couple of teenagers who are about to be caught in the act.

I have to remind myself that we’re not doing anything wrong. Zarid doesn’t own me. Even if we are in the past, it doesn’t make me his. I never considered myself his property. He might’ve forced my compliance, but he didn’t have my loyalty.

Suddenly, Kai bellows with pain and his entire body jerks. He collapses onto me once again, his weight heavy.

“Wha—what’s wrong?” I struggle beneath him, flailing a bit.

With his face buried into the mattress next to my head, he cries out a second time, and it’s one of the most anguished sounds I’ve heard from a person before. It’s the kind of noise someone makes when they’re in excruciating pain.

“Kai? Talk to me.”

I’m answered with blood. It’s dripping down his arms and over his shoulders.

The red spots rain down on my arms, my dress, and the bed.

He yells a third time, and more blood follows.

After a lot of wiggling, I manage to slip out from under him so I can see

what's going on.

When I get onto the bed next to him, I gasp and sob at the same time when I see his back. Three thick lines of split-open flesh are there, and the wounds are deep. The white of bone peeks through layers of muscle in his shoulder blade.

I clap my hand over my mouth in horror. "What's happening?"

"The past," Kai answers through gritted teeth. "To be specific, the day I was flogged."

A fourth gash appears within the next second, and on instinct, I throw myself over him in a protective way.

It's stupid of me to shield him with my own body, but I don't even think about what the consequences could mean for me. I just want to keep him from getting hurt more, but my efforts are in vain.

His lashes are coming from something magical, not physical.

One of the worst parts is that I can hear it. There's no crack of a whip, but the sound of flesh being ripped open is something I'll never forget—the squelching.

More marks come in quick succession. Kai's skin is being sliced in places other than his back. They're appearing on his arms and hands, too.

And I can't help him.

Just the opposite, I'm causing him more pain by touching him. He growls and grunts, his fist gripping the blanket so hard it rips.

When I move away, I look at myself and the blood covering me. My yellow dress has red splotches all over it.

Tears streak my cheeks as I beg to no one in particular, "Make it stop, make it stop."

"Be strong, Sunny," Kai rasps. "It's just an illusion."

"It seems really fucking real to me."

"Rowan, you adulterous bitch." Zarid's voice is no longer blocked by wood.

It doesn't echo from the hall.

He's here.

My head snaps to the open doorway where a monster in an aesthetically pleasing bodysuit stands.

Just as I remember him, Zarid's blond hair hangs like a glossy curtain framing his elegant, yet masculine face. A shiny crown adorned with jewels sits on his head. He's wearing his normal everyday attire of tan pants and a

sleeveless white shirt with diamonds for buttons.

He's muscular, but not bulky. His skin has a sun-kissed glow. All his facial features are individually flawless, and when you put them together, it's almost as if someone created him with perfection in mind. If I had to compare him to a human, I'd say he resembles a surfing model. Or a fashion model. The kind of person who *always* gets the job.

Many people have been fooled by the pretty mask he was born with, but not me. I see his ugly insides, and he loathes me for it.

Zarid's golden eyes glow with pure hatred. "I've always known you were dumb, but I thought you were smarter than this." He flicks a finger at Kai. "Fornicating with scum under my roof? Such an idiotic infraction."

My dead husband comes toward me with lazy strides. The way he stalks, slow and measured, only makes him seem scarier. He's like the killer in the horror movies, always walking with a cool, calm, and collected air, but he's still able to catch up to his target no matter how fast they run.

"You're so worthless." He slings more verbal abuse. "I wish you could see how pathetic and weak you look right now. You're just a frightened little fawn, aren't you? You can't save your lover. You can't even save yourself."

I don't disagree with him. I'm like a deer in headlights as he approaches me.

Unfortunately, I do this a lot in times of crisis—I panic and lock up.

If I were a better person, I'd do anything other than just sit here. I could try to defend myself somehow, but instead, I do nothing.

What I hate most about my reaction to fear is my inaction. People don't talk often enough about the third companion to fight or flight.

Freeze.

But even if I could run, where would I go?

There's no escape. In a world where I don't belong, where I stand out because of how different I am, hiding has always been impossible.

That's why I stayed. I didn't have anyone to go to for help. I couldn't get back to the Earth realm, and no one in Valora would've taken me in because that would've meant cementing their own death sentence.

No matter how much people liked me, they weren't going to stick their neck out for a human queen.

Kai would have. I believe that. Eventually, he would've rescued me.

I think he's right to suspect that's why Zarid did this to him. This torture. And now it's happening again. Kai's enduring unimaginable pain.

He's lying on his stomach while the mutilation continues in real time.

There's blood spatter everywhere. The blankets, the headboard, the walls. Me. There are even some spots on the ceiling.

I've never witnessed a more gruesome scene, and I've seen some terrible shit.

This isn't fair to him, and it's too much for me to handle.

"Kai," I whimper softly, big hot teardrops continuously falling down my cheeks. "I think we should surrender in the game."

"Don't you dare," he snarls.

"I can say it if you don't want to."

"I'll never forgive you if you do. Do you understand me? Never."

"Why are you talking to him?" Zarid barks with unveiled offense over the fact that I took my attention off him. "Don't even look at him. Look at me." When I do, he goes on with his berating as he gets closer. "Such an ungrateful wench. I've clothed you, fed you, and given you the highest position a woman can have in this realm. I made you a queen! And how do you repay me?" He points at Kai. "By tainting your royal cunt with this garbage."

His insult to Kai is maddening enough to make my vocal cords work.

"That garbage is a thousand times—no, a million times—better than you," I snap, knowing I'm going to get that look from him.

The look that says I've misspoken and I'm going to regret it.

Zarid's mouth twitches, his lips thin, and I hear his teeth grind. "Why do you have to make everything so hard on yourself?"

Well, I've already talked back. I'm going to be punished regardless, so I might as well make the most of it, and I finally tell him something I've wanted to say for centuries.

"Being your queen was not a gift. It's a hell I never wanted and certainly don't deserve. I'd rather die than be with you."

He sneers, just a few feet away now. "I can make that happen."

Giving up on his languid prowl, he lunges for me.

My pulse skyrockets because I know what's coming next.

He'll grab me by the wrist so hard he'll bruise me. He'll drag me around like I'm a ragdoll as he takes me to wherever he wants to go.

The location depends on his mood. Sometimes he likes to make a spectacle and humiliate me in public. When he wants others to witness his cruelty, his favorite place for that is the throne room.

The worst part about being beaten in front of a crowd is knowing they won't—can't—intervene. All they can do is watch. The bad ones cheer. The good, they just pity me.

If Zarid's in a merciful mood, he'll stick to open-handed slaps. There've been a few times when he used his fist to punch me, but he doesn't like hurting his knuckles. He's not the kind to sacrifice his own comfort to punish others.

So, if he really wants to make me suffer... he'll use fire.

His fingers wrap around my fragile arm just like I knew they would. Yanking hard, he pulls me off the bed, and the force he uses is so strong there's pain in my shoulder as the socket is strained.

When my feet land on the floor, I stagger and almost fall before jogging behind Zarid. It's a struggle to keep up with him because he's walking so fast.

"I've always known you're a dirty whore," he says as we get to the doorway. "Deep down, you've wanted to spread your legs for every man you see, haven't you?"

He's ridiculous. I was a virgin when he took me. I've never been with anyone else until Kai, but Zarid used to love accusing me of promiscuity.

Which is ironic, coming from him. He's the one who had a harem of women at his disposal.

Kai lets out another shout of agony, and when I glance back at him, he's rolling to the side, reaching out for me as he tries to crawl across the bed.

Even in his injured state, he's wanting to put me first, but I don't think he can. When he told the story of how he got his scars, he said he couldn't even stand up when it was done.

If he's down for the count, we're going to lose the challenge because I'm certainly not going to be able to beat it without him.

Kai disappears from my view as I'm pulled out into the hall, and now that we're separated, the panic threatens to choke me.

As I gasp for air, I try to search my mind for any way out of this, but it's like my thoughts are filled with mud. Everything is murky and slow, and my body feels heavy as if I'm sinking.

Tugging me along, Zarid goes in the opposite direction of the way that would take us to the throne room.

Instead of going left, he heads right.

Toward his bedchambers.

Through the doorway, I can see Zarid's four-poster bed, the fancy rug, and all the other fixtures that make up my own personal hell. Dark curtains hang over the windows. Gold-framed mirrors are plentiful. Paintings—mostly portraits of himself—are mounted on the walls.

We both know what happens in there.

Confirming my petrifying suspicion, Zarid maintains his unyielding hold on my wrist and threatens, "It seems you've forgotten who your cunt belongs to, so I'm going have to show you."

"No!" I scream.

I've withstood a lot, but being raped again is something I can't handle.

It's my breaking point.

An unfamiliar sort of wild rage bursts inside me.

When we get to the doorway fight takes over the freeze, and I try to run backward as I resist going into the room. Unfortunately, these shoes are too smooth on the bottom, and I can't get any friction. I'm slipping and sliding.

I grab onto the door frame instead. Clinging to it with my free hand, I kick Zarid with my legs.

His eyes go wide with shock because I've never been this violent with him. I've never put up a decent struggle, and for a moment, he's the one who's frozen while I deliver blows to his stomach. His groin. I even get high enough to kick his throat.

My little feet don't do a ton of damage, but the fact that I'm aiming for the susceptible soft spots is giving me results.

Zarid barks with pain when my heel connects with his nose.

A second later, he releases a frustrated roar, and his temporary pause ends.

He catches my ankle while focusing his eyes on my hand. I'm still holding onto the door frame, but the wood beneath my grip becomes hot. It smolders. I try to stay strong, but the pain becomes too intense, and I have to let go before my skin is seared and blistered.

With his grip on my arm and my leg, Zarid jerks me forward until I almost collide with him. At the last second, he uses my imbalance to his advantage, moves out of the way, and pushes me to the floor.

Then he pounces on me. He's not above raping me wherever he can. He doesn't need the bed. As long as I'm on the bottom, he has the upper hand.

Still, I keep scratching, kneeling him, slapping, and punching.

Surprisingly, I'm actually causing some injuries. His nose is bleeding.

There are numerous streaks on his arm where I scraped his flesh away with my nails. I got one good wallop on his face, and his cheek is red.

“Stop it!” he yells, but I don’t.

If anything, I get more violent.

I’m slightly aware that I’m making animalistic noises. The desperate cries of a creature just trying to survive.

I don’t even feel like myself. I’m detached in a way.

I’m back to being the person who has nothing left to lose. The empty woman who’s ready to die.

Suddenly, Zarid gets off me and stands. However, I haven’t won. What I’ve done is pushed him too far.

I can tell because he goes dead behind the eyes. The anger leaves his face. He brings his right hand up with his palm facing outward.

A ball of fire appears there.

An orb of destruction.

He’s done with me, with this fight. He’s never had to work very hard for anything, and a woman he doesn’t even like isn’t worth his effort.

He was probably planning to kill me anyway, so I’d rather just get it over with before he can put me through any more torture.

On the bright side, if he incinerates me, at least there won’t be a body left for him to abuse, and I’ll die knowing I did something right. Not only did I defend myself until the end, but my death will ensure that Kai gets to go home.

I know he wanted so badly to save me, but maybe this is for the best.

I’m sorry, Kai, I silently apologize. I wish we could’ve had more time together.

Closing my eyes, I brace myself for total annihilation.

CHAPTER 18

Ro

Instead of blazing heat and crackling flames, there's an unexpected sound.

A wet cough.

I peek through an eyelid.

A long knife is lodged into the right side of Zarid's throat.

His eyes are wide with surprise as he grabs the handle of the blade. Staggering back, he chokes and gurgles. When he pulls it out, blood pours from the one-inch slit. He rasps, drawing in a rough, wet breath.

Unfortunately, such a small maiming won't kill him. It'll just piss him off.

He pivots to his attacker behind him, and I gasp at the sight of Kai.

He's here. He's staggering a little, but the fact that he's on his feet at all is astonishing. Somehow, he managed to get up through his torture, make his way down the long hall, and defend me.

And his whipping isn't over yet.

More invisible strikes come. I can hear it every time his flesh splits open, but he barely flinches. It's like he's tuned them out.

When I first met him, I saw his scars as a sign of someone who's suffered.

That's not what they signify now.

He survived.

Kai's a survivor, and I'm about to see just how strong he really is.

My warrior shuffles around to Zarid's side, making the king turn to him, effectively taking my monster's wrath off me.

The fright on Zarid's profile is almost funny. With his mouth hanging open, he's literally gawking at Kai's gory state.

None of Kai's tan skin shows through the red. Blood drips from everywhere—his hair, his beard, down his leather pants to pool around his

boots.

Sword in hand, shoulders squared, and stance defensive, Kai's voice is chillingly calm when he says, "Now, that's no way to treat a lady. You, of all people, should have better manners, *Your Majesty*."

The way he drawls the term of respect, it's obviously a mockery.

Sitting up, I'm careful not to put weight on my slightly burnt hand as I scoot back. I'm shaking, adrenaline and relief clashing together in a dizzying cocktail. Woozy, I rest against the wall behind me.

"I'll treat my wife however I please," Zarid retorts. "And you, my lowly subject, will be punished so severely, you'll wish you were never born."

"You've already done your worst." Kai spreads his arms. "Guess what—I'm still here. So..." His tone turns casual and conversational. "How skilled are you with a sword?"

Not one to miss an opportunity to brag, Zarid boasts, "I've been training with the Day Realm's best warrior since I was old enough to hold a stick."

Tipping his head to the side, Kai hums skeptically. "That can't be true."

"It is true."

"No."

"No?" Insulted, Zarid scoffs. "What do you mean, *no*?"

"You couldn't have trained with the best because you've never trained with *me*."

Zarid's nostrils flare at Kai's confident statement, then he makes one of his own. "I can beat you."

"If you're such a talented swordsman," Kai taunts, twirling his blade, "fight me the old-fashioned way. No powers. Just weapons."

I see what Kai is doing. He's leveling the playing field. By challenging Zarid's pride, he's making sure they have a fair encounter. Because if Zarid uses fire, Kai doesn't stand a chance.

"Fine," Zarid agrees, retrieving his blade from the mount on the wall. "No powers."

"Swear it," Kai pushes.

"I swear." Without hesitation, Zarid leaps forward and swings his blade.

Kai blocks, and then the battle begins.

The clank of metal repeatedly hitting metal echoes in the room as the men duck and jump from one spot to another.

I've never seen a real sword fight before.

I've watched sparring and games. Zarid used to make his entire harem sit

in the audience during his fencing tournaments. He always won. Always. Though, I strongly suspect his opponents let him win.

Or maybe he just never allowed himself to go up against someone more skilled than he is.

He never took on a warrior like Kai.

Kai, the most graceful fighter I've ever seen in action. With every twirl and jab, blood flies from his wounds, but despite his injuries, his movements are smooth.

It's like his sword is an extension of his body. He reminds me of a painter, using his brush to create a unique scene.

One by one, Kai plucks the diamond buttons off Zarid's shirt. The little jewels ping across the floor every time they fall. Red is slowly taking over on the white silk, and Zarid's cuts are countless.

They're all shallow slices, not significant enough to cause major weakening, and I'm betting that's intentional on Kai's part.

He's playing.

Zarid hasn't actually made contact with Kai yet. Every time the king gets close, Kai moves out of the way as if he predicted it. It's mesmerizing—the footwork, the spinning—like a choreographed dance.

However, he hasn't forgotten about me. Allowing himself a moment of distraction, his eyes dart to me for a split second.

I must look so cowardly. Knees drawn up to my chest. Jittery and small.

At least I'm not crying anymore. I think my body has gone into a state of shock because I feel a bit numb.

A flash of remorse falls over Kai's face. Determination replaces it, then he advances on Zarid to end this faster for my sake. His motions become bigger as he forces Zarid back.

Clang, clang, clang.

Squelch.

Kai makes a deep slash above Zarid's right pectoral.

The fight reaches its tipping point when Kai knocks Zarid's sword to the floor. Clattering loudly as it hits the marble, the weapon slides across the room and knocks into the standing wardrobe.

In a last-ditch effort, Zarid runs to the corner and grabs a spear from a tall barrel containing various fighting tools. Unfortunately for him, his aim is off when he throws it. It goes wide, missing Kai by a foot. The point of it becomes embedded in a clothing trunk at the end of the bed.

Next, Zarid hurls a hatchet.

Again, a miss.

Charging at Zarid, Kai pins the king against the wall with the tip of his sword poised at his sternum. The blade is in the perfect position to impale Zarid's shriveled heart.

To most spectators, they'd assume Kai has the win, but I know better.

Lifting his arms, Zarid acts like he's surrendering, but the devious smirk on his face says otherwise. "Now, now. This doesn't have to end so violently. I'm sure we can work something out."

"Watch his hands!" I shout.

The warning is barely out of my mouth when two fiery orbs shoot from Zarid's palms.

Jumping to the side, Kai avoids getting burnt to smithereens, and he glares at Zarid. "We said no powers."

"Did we?" Zarid croons facetiously, moving away from his trapped position as he circles Kai. "I suppose I lied."

"Then you should be weakened from the consequences of your deceit."

Zarid cackles like the evil villain he is. "Dishonesty isn't going to disarm me. I could be reduced to one tenth of my power, and I'd still have enough left to obliterate you."

It's true. Zarid's Pyro abilities are so abundant, losing a bit of it temporarily isn't going to make much difference. He doesn't even need to use his hands. He can create the fire with his mind, but it's more theatrical when he directs it with motions.

Zarid's finger is basically a blowtorch on steroids.

Standing in place, he simply points at where he wants the fire to go, and Kai hops this way and that to avoid getting burned.

Now Zarid is the one having fun with his opponent.

Kai is like a puppet without strings. Fireballs come at his feet, forcing him around the room. Every time the fire hits the floor or the walls, it leaves a dark charred mark. The air smells of smoke, burning my nose and making my eyes water.

Kai grunts as he dodges a flame that almost hits him in the face. "So you're forfeiting our match? You couldn't beat me after all. Admit it."

"I'm not admitting anything."

"Oh, come on, mighty king. Be a good sport. Don't get butthurt."

Confused, Zarid's face screws up. "You didn't hurt my butt."

Kai actually grins, showing some teeth. A strip of white appears in the sea of his blood-covered skin as his lips lift on the right side of his face. It's the first time I've seen him smile. Really smile. I wasn't even sure if he was capable of it, and as shitty as the circumstances are, I love seeing it. I'll take his smiles anytime.

"It's a human term," Kai explains. "Perhaps you'd know it if you listened to your female prisoners once in a while. Though, I suppose they're probably too busy saying things like, '*Stop. That doesn't feel good. You're a terrible lover.*'"

The low blow is witty and ridiculously accurate. I'd laugh if I didn't think it would make things so much worse for Kai.

As it is, he's pushing Zarid too far.

The king's cheeks are flushed with anger. The direct hit to his manhood damaged his ego, and he's not going to pull any punches with his retaliation.

Any second, Kai could be engulfed in flames.

I've seen Zarid set someone on fire before. It was the gardener who picked the flowers for Zander. His death replays in my head sometimes. It's one of the most horrific memories I have because faeries don't die by fire. Not right away. They can burn and burn, but as long as their brain and heart are still intact, they'll stay alive. They feel everything until they're a crispy corpse, until the heat finally destroys every part of them.

And Zarid can make that go on for hours.

I remember that poor man screaming and begging until he couldn't anymore because his vocal cords were destroyed. Then he just let out wheezes and rasps while his lungs slowly turned to ash.

I can't let that happen to Kai.

I have to intervene somehow.

Standing on rubbery legs, I step away from the wall. "Kai's right. You are bad in bed, Zarid."

Everything stops.

Both men look over at me with shock on their faces, and silence befalls the room.

Zarid narrows his eyes. "What did you say to me?"

"You heard me. You're truly awful at sex. Not once did I ever enjoy your touch. You'd think with your extensive experience, you'd have learned how to turn on your partner. But no. You're extremely selfish and, quite frankly, uncoordinated and clumsy. When you were on top of me, it reminded me of

the way a fish flops when it's out of water. And I'm not the only one who thought so. You should've heard the other women in the harem when you weren't around. Even the ones who pretended to like you were faking it. You were a laughingstock."

Now I've done it.

Zarid's face contorts with an ugly snarl I've seen too many times. He starts trembling, and the veins in his neck bulge. Heat radiates from his feet, cracking the marble as it becomes blackened.

"Oh, and one more thing," I add, just to drive the last nail into my coffin. "Have you ever looked in the mirror when you're this upset? You look hideous."

Letting out a roar, flames shoot from Zarid's mouth in my direction.

I close my eyes, surrendering to the fate of instantaneous combustion once again.

Air moves over my skin, but I don't feel any pain, and I wonder if the burst is so hot, it won't hurt for even a second.

But then I smell cinnamon.

Kai.

When I open my eyes, he's just inches away, facing me. He's holding up the dark blue comforter from Zarid's bed behind him. His arms are extended above his head, and he's got it up high enough to protect us both.

The blanket is heat resistant. A lot of materials in the Day Realm are flame retardant because Pyro power is the most common ability here. Accidental fires happen all the time, and since we're in the king's room, this comforter is extra protective with many layers.

"What the fuck, Sunny?" Kai grumbles angrily. "Why would you provoke him like that?"

"Um, so you wouldn't die?" I say like it's obvious.

"I had it handled."

"The fact that you think you did just proves you did not."

"Your faith in me is heartwarming." Kai's sarcasm is heavy.

"Don't tell me you're one of those men who gets upset because he had to be rescued by the woman. Butthurt, as you put it?"

"This is not about my pride. It's about your survival."

The shooting flames continue, and although the fire is blocked, the air is getting very hot. Sweat trickles down my temple, and I wonder how long the blanket can hold up. It's a good shield for now, but it won't last forever. The

blue is already becoming duller, turning to gray as it succumbs to Zarid's torching.

Kai winces. Some heat is coming through the layers. It's probably not hot enough to hurt normal skin, but with how raw his back is, any extra aggravation is going to cause him pain.

"We don't have the time to argue about this," I state.

"Agreed." Instead of scolding me more, Kai moves onto the plan. "When I say go, you go. Get out of this room."

"Without you?"

"Yes. Run. Go to the library like we planned. I'll catch up." His tone is final and firm.

I don't have a chance to protest, because the flames are starting to pitter out. Zarid is losing steam.

When the blast finally stops, Kai forcefully barks, "Go!"

I dash toward the door. At the same time, Kai chucks the charred blanket at Zarid. It cloaks the sadistic king like a net, burning him.

Although Zarid is immune to his own fire, he can be harmed by the objects he's heated, and his agonized howls follow me down the hallway as I obey Kai's instructions.

I sprint past the nursery and a few other rooms.

I don't look back as I get to the main stairwell.

Quickly going down, I hold my skirt up so I don't trip and fall. The slippers on my feet are bad enough. Such flimsy shoes aren't meant for running for your life.

As I'm passing the third floor, audible footsteps approach me from behind.

It could be Kai, Zarid, or some other enemy. At this point, anything is possible.

I go faster.

Bad idea. I'm already at top speed, and I end up stumbling on a step. My arms fly out and I feel my body losing balance.

A strong hand grips my elbow, keeping me upright, and I yelp from the sudden contact.

"It's just me," Kai says, rushing beside me.

"Did you kill him?" I ask with hope.

"No, I couldn't get close enough, but I threw a spear at him. Got him through the shoulder and pinned him to the wooden frame of one of the many

paintings of himself. It's really lodged in there, so I think I've bought us some time."

"Good."

"Listen, we need to have a talk. Are you paying attention?"

"Yes?" It comes out more like a question, because right now isn't exactly a good time for a conversation. I don't know what could be so important that it can't wait until we've stopped running for our lives.

"You will not sacrifice yourself like that. Ever again. Not for me. Not for anyone. You put yourself first always." Kai's practically yelling, and I'm surprised by the anger he's projecting.

"I-I'm sorry."

My apology is automatic, but I don't mean it. Apologizing for things I don't regret is a bad habit, and I want to take it back.

I just faced my biggest enemy. My worst nightmare. The man who made my life hell for over two thousand years.

I'm glad I said what I said to Zarid. I saved Kai's ass, and while I was at it, I got to get some shit off my chest.

Most people would praise me for my courage, but Kai is intent on chastising me.

"You could have died," he continues. His voice hasn't calmed. If anything, he's getting more worked up.

We're nearing the bottom of the staircase on the second floor. From there, we'll have to go through the hallway to get to the steps that lead to the foyer.

Exasperated, I stop when we arrive at the landing, and I pull my arm away from Kai.

Facing him, I look him straight in the eye and raise my chin defiantly. "You know what? I'm not sorry."

"What are you doing? Let's go." He reaches for my hand, but I yank it back.

"You'll have to excuse me." Being a smartass, I stick a finger in my ear and wiggle it like I'm trying to unclog something. "I thought I heard you say 'thank you' for saving your life but it sounded like a word salad of ingratitude."

Kai huffs, and I can tell it takes a lot of effort for him to grit out, "Forgive me, my queen."

"For what?" I want him to say it. I want to hear him tell me I did a good job.

Instead, he doubles down.

“Forgive me for caring about you too much. Forgive me for valuing your life above my own. I cannot—will not—entertain the idea of harm coming to you. Even if your intentions are good and your actions are noble, I can’t stand it.” His statement is husky with conviction. “I can’t lose you.”

Well, it’s not the credit I deserve, but I do get where he’s coming from. I can’t fathom losing him either, and that’s why I can’t sit idly by.

“I’m not completely useless,” I claim, old and new hurt coming through because my interaction with Zarid ripped a Band-Aid off my past trauma, then gave me some more on top of it.

Kai’s eyes soften. “I never said you were.”

“You didn’t have to. I know who I am. I know I’m frightened and fragile. But you make me want to be strong, and I just showed you and myself that I can be sometimes. Maybe those moments are few, but I’m proud of myself. Why can’t you be proud of me, too?”

“Because I’m too terrified to feel anything else. If you want to help me, just look out for yourself. Please, Sunny.” Kai sounds so exhausted, and it’s hard to be cross with him when he’s in this condition.

My concern for him takes center stage. “I’m not even going to ask if you’re okay because I can see that you’re not. You must be in a lot of pain.”

He scowls. “I’ll live.”

“I know, but this—” I lift my hand to indicate his skin. “This is just awful.”

“I’m aware that it’s grotesque.” Obviously taking my comment the wrong way, he says, “I’d suggest you try not to look if it offends your eyes.”

“Kai, I meant—”

“I think escaping Zarid is the test,” he cuts me off. “In fact, I’m sure of it. We should get back to the maze.”

He’s right. We can iron everything out later.

Before we continue our trek, I quickly say, “A word of advice—if Zarid catches up with us, I’m not being metaphorical when I say we’re toast. You can’t beat him with tricks or physical fighting because as long as we’re up against his fire power, we can’t win.”

“Good intel,” Kai praises, pushing our tiff aside for now. “That means we need to go.”

On edge, we move forward.

When we get out into the hallway on the second floor, the corridor is

empty. All the doors are open, and there's a bright glow ahead where the stairs lead to the foyer.

Light at the end of the tunnel.

One of the suns is shining directly through the stained-glass windows over the main entrance, and it sends rays of yellow, blue, and pink onto the walls.

Unfortunately, we don't get far before all hell breaks loose. We're not even past the first guest bedroom when Zarid's shout echoes through the castle.

“Traitors! Traitors are escaping! KILL THEM!”

CHAPTER 19

Ro

Guards suddenly appear in the doorways of the rooms as if they've been there the whole time, waiting for Zarid's command.

Three guest suites, the tactical office, and the library are full of men.

I do a quick headcount.

Thirty that I can see, but crowds are clustered behind the leaders in front. The dark outlines of their heads are shadowed by the suns shining through the windows at the back of the rooms.

It could be fifty. Eighty. A hundred.

All the guards are wearing the Day Realm palace guard uniform. Khaki pants. Nice brown boots. White tank tops with racer backs to allow for wing release. Many of them are holding long spears. Others have axes, swords, or machetes.

"Some more intel," I whisper to Kai. "I know for a fact that they only have one weapon each. Zarid made that rule out of pure vanity. He didn't want his staff to appear cluttered."

Meaning, Zarid didn't want his men to look like rough, uncivilized warriors.

Like Kai.

"That helps," he responds, sounding surprisingly unconcerned.

"How are we going to get through this?"

"One head at a time."

"You're going to take them on? All of them?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure you can do it?"

"Don't start doubting me now, my queen."

Without glancing at me, Kai advances on the closest guard in the nearest doorway. He easily dodges the spear the man tries to impale him with, then

with one swing of his blade, his opponent is beheaded.

Kai's sharp sword cuts through sinew and bone like butter. Blood sprays as the body slumps to the floor in a crumpled heap, and the head rolls somewhere off to my left.

I gape at the lifeless eyes staring blankly up at me.

It's a little too close for comfort, and I back up until my spine is pressed against the wall at the end of the hall.

Kai is already onto his next target. Another head gets separated from a man's torso.

Then there's a third. A fourth. And a fifth.

On and on it goes.

One head at a time. Kai was being literal when he said that, and the corridor is filling up with corpses.

And blood. A lot of it.

You never realize how much blood a person holds until it's pouring out in front of you.

Kai has taken down at least forty men, and a river of red is growing on the floor. The glossy liquid expands, coating the stones and filling any cracks.

It spreads so much it reaches me, and I grimace when it soaks the satin of my slippers. The hem of my dress is next, and the red slowly overtakes the yellow as my gown gets saturated.

I tell myself it doesn't matter. I was already covered in Kai's blood anyway.

Clanking noises, grunts, and random yells snag my attention. The sounds are becoming sparse, and I glance up.

In the short time I've been looking down at myself, Kai has wiped out most of his opponents.

There are only a handful of guards left. Instead of coming at him one by one, they're taking a different approach by surrounding Kai. I guess they've realized joining forces is their best choice.

They don't really have a chance, though. Not against Kai.

He's got blades in both hands, and it's almost like he's two different people with the way he's using his weapons.

In quick succession, he cuts off one man's arm, beheads another, and stabs a third in the gut by jabbing his sword behind him.

I'm most impressed by the ones he doesn't look at. He doesn't even have to have eyes on everyone. He just knows how they're going to attack, and he

can defend himself from the front and the back at the same time.

Multitasking at its best.

Two remaining guards join in the effort to take Kai down. One sprints from the tactical office, and the other dashes out from the library.

Kai smoothly spins with his sword and his machete, cutting off the last two heads simultaneously.

Just as the bodies drop, I sense a presence near me. Air moves to my left, and all the hairs on my arm stand up while prickles crawl along the back of my neck.

I'd forgotten about the secret passages in the palace. There are hidden doors everywhere, and I've been standing right next to one.

A split second later, arms wrap around me. One encases my waist and the other snakes in front of my chest.

As the hold on me becomes firm and unyielding, I feel the cold metal of a sharp blade at my neck.

I go completely still, keeping my chin raised while I barely breathe.

I don't have to see my attacker to know who it is. Zarid carries the smell of a campfire wherever he goes, and that smoky scent invades my nostrils.

A gag rises in my throat, but I suppress it because any movement, even a rough swallow, could cause me to get cut.

Unaware of the danger I'm in, Kai quickly peeks into the library to make sure he got everyone.

"It's safe now, Sun—" Turning my way while making the premature announcement, he goes silent as soon as he sees me.

Anguish enters his eyes because he realizes I could die just as quickly as the guards he killed. One deep slice is all it would take. My arteries and my airway would be severed, and I'd bleed out.

"Well?" Zarid prompts, his hot breath grazing my temple. "Start begging, scum. Aren't you going to try to convince me to let Rowan go?"

"There isn't much to say." Kai feigns defeat, dropping the machete to one of the bloody puddles and lowering his sword.

"What?"

Kai shrugs while slowly pacing toward us, but he's too far away to get to me. If he wants to rescue me, he's going to have to be a hell of a lot closer.

Zarid starts walking us forward, eating up the distance even more, but he isn't foolish. He probably just wants Kai to have a really good view when I'm flayed open.

“You’ve obviously got the power here,” Kai tells Zarid, sounding genuinely humble. “I figure this will go one of two ways. First, I could charge at you, but in the time it takes me to get to Ro, she’ll be dead.”

There’s about ten feet between us now. Still not enough.

“And the second scenario?” Zarid’s taunting tone definitely suggests he’s wearing his signature evil grin.

Kai’s face is serious when his eyes drop briefly to my pocket, reminding me of the dagger in my possession.

Oh, yeah. I have a freaking weapon.

Hope makes my heart speed up. I’m sure Zarid can feel my quickened pulse, but he’ll just assume it’s because I’m scared out of my mind.

He’s always underestimated me, and I’ve given him every reason to.

Well, that could work in my favor now.

Very slowly, I wrap my fingers around the hilt and flick the sheath off the blade with my thumb.

Once I’ve got the dagger firmly in my white-knuckled grip, Kai finally answers, “Ro kicks your ass herself.”

Zarid scoffs, laughing at the farfetched notion. “Excuse me?”

Taking a lesson from Kai’s book, I jab the dagger behind me. Hard. The point hits something and sinks in. From the height of my hand, I’m guessing it’s Zarid’s thigh.

Zarid screams, but I don’t stop with one stab. I rapidly pull the knife out of his flesh and stick him with it again and again.

I plan to keep going, but he loosens his hold on me, which is what I’d hoped for so I can get away.

Turning in his arms, I push his stomach with my elbow while bending my neck to the side to avoid getting cut by the blade that’s still so close to my skin.

The cold metal of his knife skims me, but I don’t feel a sting as I separate from him.

Clutching his thigh, Zarid staggers back, limping as blood gushes down his leg, adding to the rest of it in the hallway.

When his head snaps up, he stares at me with an expression bordering on disbelief and betrayal. He actually looks hurt, not just physically, but like he can’t believe someone he trusted would maim him so violently.

That’s because somewhere deep down, beneath all the heinous accusations about infidelity and doubts of my loyalty, he viewed me as a sort

of faithful pet. He never thought I'd bite the hand that fed me.

Taking advantage of Zarid's momentary shock, Kai moves quickly on the opening he's got.

But instead of coming at the king with an aggressive attack, Kai goes behind him, kicks the back of his knees, and forces him to drop to the floor in an execution-style position.

Then Kai gets down there with Zarid, and he maneuvers some kind of debilitating hold. It's impressive, the way Kai has his own leg wedged under Zarid's ankles, using his body weight to keep the pressure where it needs to be so Zarid is immobile. Kai's front is flush with Zarid's back, and he has the tip of his sword poised at the side of Zarid's neck.

"Watch out for his fire," I warn.

Kai shakes his head. "He won't be able to use it."

Not believing him, I search for any sign of heat around us, but there are no flames anywhere. The floor isn't smoldering. There's no smoke in the air.

"Why?" Zarid voices the question before I can, and he sounds distressed. "How are you doing this?"

By now, he should've incinerated Kai, and from the way he's grimacing, I can tell he's trying to do just that.

"That whip..." Kai says gutturally, his words tinged with pain. "You infused it with Valonite. You ensured that I wouldn't be able to heal my wounds, that I would suffer until my dying moment." His tone gets lower, angrier. "Did you know that even the tiniest fragment of Valonite can inhibit fae power if it's touching your skin?"

Now I understand why Kai is so close to Zarid. By smashing their bodies together, he's using the Valonite inside his own cuts to suppress Zarid's power.

Kai's a genius.

Zarid is nothing without fire. He's relied on it for so long, he doesn't know how to resolve a conflict without it.

Tilting my head, I inquisitively study the man who's always seemed unconquerable.

He looks like absolute shit, and I get great satisfaction out of how wrecked he is.

His shirt is in tatters, barely hanging on. His hair is disheveled, and his crown is askew. Between the wounds Kai gave him, the burns from the hot blanket, and my assault, Zarid got his ass kicked.

He's completely defenseless, and I see him for who he really is.

A mean man. A leader who left behind a legacy of shame. A king who could've made his realm better, but he was more interested in serving himself than his own people.

He starts struggling to get away, flailing his arms, but Kai pushes the point of his blade against his neck harder, sinking into the slit that's already there.

"Ah, ah. I wouldn't do that," my brave warrior says. "I'm about one inch away from severing your spine."

"All right," Zarid relents with aggravation. "What do you want? Gold? Jewels? Take whatever you want. This whore? You can have her, too."

"I don't appreciate you speaking about the queen that way," Kai says through gritted teeth, his mouth right by Zarid's ear.

Exasperated, Zarid snarls, "I said we can make a deal. What else do you want from me?"

"Apologize."

"What?"

"Say you're sorry."

"Sorry," Zarid grumbles at Kai.

"Not to me," Kai clarifies. "To the lady."

Zarid just looks off to the side, and he's not the least sincere when he obeys, "I'm sorry."

"How about you mean it?" Pushing the blade in another inch, Kai adds, "And tell her she's not a whore while you're at it."

Zarid coughs because of the blade partially obstructing his esophagus, and blood leaks from his lips.

Finally, his eyes lift to mine, and he manages to sound halfway genuine as he rasps, "You're not a whore, and I'm sorry."

"That's better."

"I've done as you ask. Can we call a truce now?"

Kai's gaze bounces up to my face, and there's a question in his eyes. He wants me to decide what happens next.

We both know Zarid will die, but how? I'd love to draw this out and make him suffer. I think Kai would, too.

However, what I want more than anything is for this to be over.

I want Zarid gone, permanently.

With a quick nod of my head, I seal my abuser's fate. "Get rid of him."

Astonishment cloaks Zarid's face. "Wha—"

There's no hesitation on Kai's part when he runs the sword through Zarid's neck. The length of it comes out the left side of his throat, and he makes some choking sounds as his eyes bulge and his mouth opens and closes.

With a disturbing wet slurp, Kai jerks the sword backward, severing the king's spine.

Paralyzed, Zarid's body wobbles, but the job isn't done until he's beheaded completely.

Grabbing a fistful of Zarid's hair, Kai stands and swings his sword.

Then, my nightmare is no more.

Zarid's decapitated body teeters to the side, his limbs bent at weird angles when he sprawls out on the bloody floor.

His head is still dangling from Kai's grip, and the warrior drops to his knees as he thrusts it in my direction like a prize. "For your justice."

"And yours." Gently pushing it away, I look at Kai's face instead of Zarid's. "Toss it."

Kai dutifully flings the head. It joins the rest of the carnage in the hall, discarded and unremarkable, lost in a sea of others.

When Kai gets to his feet, he picks up his machete and puts it back on his belt where it belongs. Then he takes my hand with relief flowing from his eyes.

Triumph wells up inside me.

We did it.

We just won the first challenge.

Unfortunately, our reprieve doesn't last more than three seconds.

A bell starts ringing from somewhere outside the palace.

Definitely a sound I don't want to hear.

It's an alarm. Not just any alarm; *the* alarm, only used if the king is under attack.

I hate that it's so damn loud. The bell is meant to be heard for a fifty-mile radius to call upon Day Realm citizens who are farther away.

Suddenly, there's trembling under my feet, and a ruckus comes from the stairwell—hundreds of angry voices from a stampede of soldiers.

I'm not sure how many more men Kai can take on by himself, and we can't stick around to find out.

After a brief moment of eye contact to acknowledge this, we both sprint

for the stairs leading to the exit.

CHAPTER 20

Ro

“Are you holding up okay?” I send Kai a glance when we stumble outside into the brightness and heat, and now that we’re in full light, his wounds look even worse. Tissues that aren’t supposed to be exposed are visible in the gaping gashes.

“No,” he answers honestly, and I appreciate that he isn’t trying to be tough about it.

I don’t know how he’s still conscious, let alone running.

He’s lost a lot of blood.

Glancing behind us, I see a trail of red footprints and streaks on the cobblestones. Kai’s boots, my slippers, and the hem of my dress are painting the walkway.

How is Kai supposed to make it through two more rounds of Armand’s game in this condition? Soon, the adrenaline will wear off, and he might not even be able to stand.

However, voicing my concern won’t do either of us any good, so I stick to the problem that’s right in front of us. “So we just need to get to the maze and say the poem. Which challenge do you think this was?”

There’s a pause, and Kai is highly distressed when he says, “I don’t know. The pain... Not enough time. Too loud. Can’t let anything happen to you...”

He doesn’t have to explain that he’s having trouble thinking straight, and I cheer him on, “You’re marvelous. No one else can do what you did back there. I know it hurts, but just stay with me, okay? I need you.”

Blinking like he’s trying to clear his vision, he nods, but he’s not wrong about the noise. Between the bell and the shouting, there’s a lot of distraction.

Throwing a quick look over my shoulder, I gasp at the mob pouring from the palace.

We're being chased down.

Some commotion comes from our left, and my head swivels to a crowd of soldiers charging at us from the backside of the castle.

Unlike the royal guards, these guys aren't stuffy palace staff with fine clothing and limited weapons. No, they're the real deal. Soiled clothing. Dirty skin. Armed to the teeth.

There are too many to count, and they seem to multiply as they fan out on the lawn.

We're still a good couple hundred feet away from the maze when the front gate of the palace walls bursts open.

More warriors arrive from the town, pushing their way in to avenge their king. Emitting battle cries, they shove each other as if they're fighting for the lead. They all want to be the ones to get to us first. To have the honor of exacting justice.

Among those in the front is a guy with a blond mohawk and black paint lining his eyes. He points his sword at us, and the alarm stops ringing just in time for me to hear him yell, "They murdered the king!"

There's a chorus of, "Traitors!"

"What are we going to do about it?" someone else shouts, getting the men even more riled up.

"Kill them both," everyone chants over and over again, with a few suggestions on how to make it agonizing for us.

We keep running in the only direction we're not blocked—straight for the maze exit.

I suppress a fearful whimper when the ravenous roses come into view. They're still wriggling, reaching, and snapping their teeth. The opening is narrow and scary, but it's not an option to go around to the side where the entrance is because the soldiers are already there.

"Can you fly?" I ask Kai. "You could take us to the courtyard."

Letting out a pained grunt, he sluggishly releases his wings from his torn-up back. The gray leathery sheets are slashed and limp, hanging like ripped flags blowing in the breeze behind him.

I wince.

That's a no.

"What about you?" he asks, scanning me. "You probably wouldn't be strong enough to fly us both away, but you could go by yourself."

"I'm not leaving you. Besides, I can't fly because I have no wings. They

never developed.”

That’s been a source of shame for me for a long time. I’m not the only human who’s never grown wings in Valora, but I didn’t even get little nubs. My back always remained the same, as if my body was protesting being fae.

Brandishing his two-sided axe and his machete, Kai seems to get a second wind. “We’ll have to chop our way through the flowers. Stay behind me.”

At least this time, the roses don’t have the element of surprise. We know what to expect when we collide with the violent hedges.

Spinning his weapons in a constant circle, Kai hits the greenery like he’s wielding two electrical Weed Eaters.

Stems get severed. Leaves go flying. Flowers are chopped off.

It’s a temporary fix because they begin growing back immediately, but we’re making progress as we go through the tunnel.

One rose near the top strikes out and gets a mouthful of Kai’s hair. My dagger is still in my hand, and I quickly reach up and slice it away before it can take a chunk of his scalp. A few bite at his pants, but I think the leather is too thick for them to actually get their teeth through it.

Just as we’re almost out, a thorny vine snags the skirt of my dress. The gauzy fabric rips easily, hardly giving any resistance.

Miraculously, I emerge without a scratch, and lucky for us, the guards aren’t immune to the rose gauntlet either.

Their hesitation to confront the obstacle allows Kai and me to gain some distance between us and them, and we arrive at the courtyard in record time. However, our enemies aren’t far behind. Some are coming into the maze from the entrance, and I can’t describe how disturbing it is to hear thousands of people joyfully shouting about your demise.

“We have to decide something!” I yell over the unnerving roar.

“I’m thinking.” Kai’s breathing is labored, his face is tight with a constant grimace, and he’s trembling a little.

He sways on his feet, and he looks like he might pass out.

“Kai, I’m here.” I squeeze his thigh, which is one of the only places he isn’t injured. “I’m right here with you.”

Men start filling the courtyard, and soon, we’re completely caged in. Every path is blocked.

I glance around at the vengeful faces, hoping to see one that shows me some grace.

This is another nightmare I’ve had. Maybe not exactly like this, but some

version where I betrayed Zarid and all the citizens who loved me before turned on me after.

There's no mercy for a human queen.

Now that we're trapped, the voices die down, and it's strange to have such sudden silence. It's like there's a collective understanding that everyone needs to hush so they can hear our screams when we die.

Tugging Kai by his belt, I pull him until we're standing next to the gazebo, but I realize we have nowhere to go. I know how fucked we are, especially when Kai's ax and machete fly out of his grip as if someone physically yanked them away. The weapons land at the feet of a dark-haired, smirking soldier.

Telekinesis.

I forgot all these fae men have powers.

Pyros. Naturopaths. Some might be wizards. Who knows what else.

They could kill us with fire, deadly weather, and other forces without even touching us.

There's a rustling sound, and then vines start growing from the hedges around the perimeter of the courtyard. Coming from all directions, they snake along the ground, darting between the soldiers' feet as they make their way toward Kai and me.

With a large amount of effort, Kai lifts his sword from its sheath and weakly attempts to hack at the ropes.

Crouching, I join in, sawing the vines with my dagger, but it's no use. There are too many of them. Every time one gets cut, there are five more to take its place.

I watch helplessly as several vines wind around Kai's ankles. Up and up, they encase his legs and wrap his torso. His sword gets tangled up, too, disarming him.

Expecting the ropes to come for me as well, I search for my own restraints, but they're avoiding me. Giving me a wide berth, they're keeping a three-foot area of space around me.

Oh, the nerve of them. Going past me like I'm not a threat. And okay, maybe I'm not, but still. It's insulting.

Fuck this challenge. I want to leave, and all I have to do is figure out which one it is.

I think I can rule out a test of the heart. Yes, emotions were involved when it comes to reliving our trauma, but Kai and I didn't defeat Zarid with

our feelings.

We *physically* ended him by being *mentally* strategic. So it's a toss-up between those two.

I wish Kai could help me decide, but a vine wraps around his mouth, acting as a gag.

At the beginning of the game, when I'd asked Armand about the hypothetical scenario where I would have to announce the challenge, I didn't actually think it was going to happen.

But it's all up to me now.

Suddenly, firm hands grab my upper arms from behind, and two soldiers drag me backward while the crowd unanimously chants, "Kill the queen! Kill the queen!"

A muffled protest comes from Kai as he struggles against the vines that now have him pinned to the ground. He's growling, snarling, and bucking like an animal caught in a net. Biting down and working his jaw, he's attempting to saw through the vine with his teeth.

Someone kicks the back of my knees while pushing down on my shoulders, just like Kai did to Zarid.

Making me kneel.

Execution style.

I land hard, and pain shoots through my legs as the gravel digs into my skin through the dress.

Seconds. That's all I have left. Out of my peripheral vision, I spy the wide blade of a beheading ax.

It raises, but before it swings, I loudly declare, "Challenge number one is done. The physical test is fought and won."

It's a guess.

A fifty-fifty chance.

CHAPTER 21

Ro

Poof.

Immediately, the soldiers and the vines turn to dust. They dissipate with some soft crackling sounds, and the brown powdery debris blows away with a gust of wind.

Some of the chalky stuff hits my face, and I briefly close my eyes. When I open them, the greenery is gone, and the colorlessness of the Lost Land has returned. The cobblestones are cracked and there's gritty sand everywhere. The sky is gray instead of blue.

I never thought I'd be glad to see the Lost Land again, but that means we succeeded so it might as well be rainbows and butterflies and all the beautiful things.

I'd whoop for joy if I wasn't so weak from my adrenaline taking a sudden dive.

Breathing hard, I slump to the side to sit on my rump. I brace my hands on the ground, but my elbows give out, and I allow myself this momentary collapse.

I need to lie down while I get over the fact that I was one second away from getting my head lopped off.

"I'm sorry, Sunny." Kai coughs as if his throat is dry. "I'm so sorry. I hesitated, and I failed you."

"Are you serious?" I balk, sitting up. "The last thing you did is fail. We're a team. And what you went through..."

When I look at Kai, I trail off because I'm shocked by the lack of blood on him, and I squint as if I'm not seeing things correctly.

His skin is tan, not red, and his wounds are no longer open. They're not gaping and fresh. They're old.

Scars.

Glancing down at myself, I note how my dress is mostly yellow. I'm dirty and there's a stain here and there, but it's not soaked in blood like it was before.

It's like the whipping, Zarid's attack, the soldiers... None of it happened.

Or, rather, it happened a long, long time ago.

In the past.

Oh, thank the suns.

"You're okay." Crawling over to Kai, I ignore the way the little rocks on the ground dig into my hands and knees because I don't care about a few extra scratches right now.

I can't remember the last time I was this happy. I'm just so glad to see Kai uninjured, and I'm overjoyed at the fact that he won't have to continue this game while being in excruciating pain.

My smile is wide as I lay a hand on one of the big marks on his stomach. Then I cup his face and run my thumb over the raised skin on his cheek. "Does it hurt anymore?"

"Hurt?" Seeming baffled by the drastic changes to his body, Kai sits back on his haunches and flexes his fingers. "No, not at all."

"You're healed." I'm positively giddy, but Kai doesn't share my enthusiasm.

"Not healed," he says gruffly. "Just back to normal."

As he scans himself, his frowns go through a variety of forms. Shock, exhaustion, and acceptance rapidly flash on his face before his expression defaults to his usual grumpiness.

I get it. This is a lot. The aftermath of going through the whipping a second time must be hard for him. It's something he never should've had to endure again.

When he looks at his left arm, we both zero in on the bite he received from the flower. It's a bit inflamed and scabby.

"Interesting," I comment. "That's still there."

Flattening his lips, Kai lifts my messy braid away from my neck and glares. "You got cut by Zarid's knife."

Now that he mentions it, I do feel a sting, and my hand goes to the shallow slice I didn't realize I'd gotten.

"It's not bad," I tell him, and I'm being honest. The bleeding has stopped, and it's crusted over.

"Are you injured elsewhere?" Kai asks with worry.

Half-shrugging, I reassure him, “Nothing too terrible.”

There’s a minor burn on my left palm because of the hot door frame, and Kai gently cradles my hand in his as he inspects it.

Other signs that I got knocked around are present—some soreness on my wrist where Zarid grabbed me, pain in my hip from when I was pushed to the floor, and an ache in my knees because of the hard landing out here.

Kai bitterly states, “It seems the injuries we sustained in real time will remain with us.”

Attempting to be lighthearted, I smile. “Seriously, if this is the only damage we’re leaving with, I’d say we’re lucky.”

I touch his arm in a comforting gesture.

He doesn’t shake me off immediately, but he gives me a friendly pat, and then he scoots away.

When he gets to his feet, he holds out a hand to help me up. I slide my fingers against his, but as soon as I’m standing, he lets go.

He picks up his weapons. The ax and the machete go back to their rightful places on his belt, and he grips his trusty sword.

There’s a distance between us as he glances around.

I don’t just mean a physical distance. It’s the way he won’t look at me, how quiet he’s being, and how unhappy he seems.

My grin fades.

I’m confused. Shouldn’t we be celebrating? I feel like we should be embracing and kissing, not moping.

Maybe Kai’s still upset about our squabble in the stairwell. We never really hashed it out.

“Are you mad?” I ask hesitantly.

“What?” His mouth remains turned down as he finally meets my eyes. “Of course not. Why would you think that?”

“Because you *look* mad.”

“This is just the way I look all the time.” He tries to sound upbeat, but it’s forced. “Take no offense. Queen Quinn says I have the ‘resting bitch face.’”

He totally does have RBF, but in the last challenge, he was positive, affectionate, and open.

I’ve seen him happy. And sexy. And charming.

The things we did and what he said to me... He bared his heart. He told me his secrets, shared his past. He said I was the exception to his every rule.

Now he’s acting like we didn’t have a bunch of orgasms and become best

friends along the way.

He's almost... awkward. I've never had a one-night stand, but I imagine this is what it would be like if you're stuck with someone you regret sleeping with.

But I'm not just a random hookup.

What happened between us was meaningful.

At least, it was to me.

"I'm betting our next journey awaits somewhere outside of the maze," Kai suggests, using that business-like tone I dislike so much. "I vote we leave through the entrance this time. Hopefully there will be no violent roses." When I don't move right away, he insists, "Do not fret. I'll do better to prevent harm to you in the future."

Is that what this weirdness is about? Is he pissed at himself because he thinks he didn't protect me?

"Kai, you went above and beyond for me," I console him as I join his side. "You know that, right?"

He turns his head toward one of the walkways so I can't read his expression. "Yes."

"Do you believe me when I tell you it's enough? More than enough?"

"Yes."

His short replies are maddening, so I decide to ask a more elaborate question. "How do you feel about winning the first challenge?"

"Victorious," he answers flatly.

So this is where we are. After everything, all he'll give me is one-word answers and the cold shoulder.

I want to pester him about it, ask him what the hell is going on, but I'm afraid of the response I'll get.

If I push him for more, he'll probably do that thing people do when they speak to a queen.

The impersonal politeness would be infuriating coming from him. I don't want sugarcoated words. I want something real.

I thought that's what Kai and I had—a genuine connection.

When he walks forward, he holds out his arm, but it's not an invitation for me to touch him. He's simply motioning to the spot beside him where he can protect me the best.

As we begin our trek out of the maze in silence, I stare at him, waiting to see that warmth in his eyes. Some sign of tenderness in the determined gaze

trained on our mission ahead.
Instead, it's just icy steel.
My heart wilts.

CHAPTER 22

Kai

Armand is all about breaking someone's spirit, and that's how I feel.

Broken.

I knew my scars would reappear. I knew it would happen sooner rather than later. I was even prepared for it to destroy me, but I guess I overestimated my ability to handle it.

In hindsight, it was foolish of me to completely submit to the illusion of my perfection. When I suggested that Ro and I enjoy ourselves, I wasn't thinking of myself. It was for Ro's benefit. Consequences be damned, I was going to show her a good time.

I succeeded, but in the process, I lost vital pieces of myself to her.

My heart. My sanity. My self-control.

I'm not ready to go back to reality. Not after what Ro and I did in that bathroom.

Not after finding out what it's like to impress a beautiful queen. To have her gaze at me with such lust while I had my face buried in her pussy. To watch her eyes shine with admiration every time she looks at me.

But she'll never see me that way again—handsome, aesthetically pleasing.

I've never dealt with this kind of disappointment before. Until Ro, I didn't know what it's like to want a woman to be mine in every sense of the word, and I'm struggling with the fact that I can't be what she needs or deserves.

The rational part of me is saying, *it was fun while it lasted and just be glad it happened at all.*

The other part—the one that's crazed by these feelings—wants to beg Ro to settle for me.

However, I won't put that on her. The last thing I want is her pity, and I

can't breathe when I think about what it would be like to listen to her awkwardly explain why she isn't interested in me anymore.

Focusing on our surroundings, I scan the desert-like landscape and the brownish-gray clouds.

When we exited the maze several minutes ago, I fully expected to find another version of the Day Realm outside of it, but there was nothing but sand dunes, occasional dead trees, and no indication of where we're supposed to go.

Glancing over my shoulder, I look for the maze in the distance where we left it. It should be there, but it's not. It's like we've been dropped in the middle of a desert.

Ro has fallen behind, and I feel bad when I see how hard she's trying to keep up with me. Her legs are working fast, and with every quick step she takes, some sand is kicked by her slippers.

I slow down.

My speed isn't intentional. I'm not trying to get away from her. I just have a lot of pent-up emotion, and it's been fueling me.

"Can you just tell me what I did wrong?" Ro questions a few feet from my back.

My mutilated, disgusting back.

"You've done everything right," I state once she's beside me. "You saved our asses, and I won't forget it. I'm indebted to you, and I'm very proud of you. So very proud, Ro."

She deserves my sincere gratitude. More than once, she's put her neck out for me, and I feel like such a prick for not thanking her more profusely.

"Ro?" she says sadly. "What happened to Sunny?"

My Sunny.

If she wants me to call her by the nickname, I will, even if it hurts me every time I do. And it does hurt. Because it's ours. Mine and hers. No one else calls her that.

I've been avoiding looking directly at her face, but I can't resist any longer.

When our eyes connect, my stomach twists because of the pain I see in her brown pools.

I think she's mourning the loss of our short-lived bliss, too, and I have to remember that I'm not the only one grieving something amazing.

Wanting to make it easier for her, I nostalgically murmur, "Sunny."

She perks up, her lips lifting in a small smile as she looks at me expectantly. “Yes, Kai?”

I deliver the next assertion as gently as I can. “Going forward, I think it’s in your best interest if we don’t make room for distractions. We mustn’t make mistakes.”

Her expression falls. “Is that what we did before? When we were... together... it was a mistake?”

“No, not for you,” I reply swiftly. Everything is coming out wrong, and I try to amend, “You’re not at fault. Don’t blame yourself for anything that has occurred. In fact, blame me. I’ve been selfish.”

“Selfish how? I think you were pretty *giving*.” The way she says it, it’s obvious what she’s referring to, and *fuck*.

The reminder is like a shot of whiskey, filling me with warmth everywhere, including my cock.

I can still taste Ro. Her sweetness lingers on my tongue.

The truth is, I enjoyed licking her pussy more than she liked me doing it. It might’ve looked like I was doing sexual favors for her, but it was just as much for me, if not more so.

I was greedy. “I shouldn’t have taken liberties with you.”

“Taken liberties?” Ro repeats incredulously, her temper rising. “Listen up.” She points her finger at me, and even though I’m about to get a scolding, I find the little digit she’s wagging in my direction adorable. “I know what it’s like to have my consent robbed from me.”

My mood darkens because that’s a devastating reality I can’t erase. “I know that.”

“Well, what we did? That was *my* choice.” With passion, she taps her chest. “*Mine*. You’re not allowed to take that away from me.”

Well, she’s firmly put me in my place.

Because of our encounter, Ro got her bodily autonomy back. I’m glad for that. I gave her something more than just physical pleasure, and I don’t regret it.

Even with the heartbreak I’m enduring now, I’d do it again.

“You’re right,” I concede. “You’re absolutely right. I suppose what I’m getting at is, we still have two challenges to get through, and there’s no point in dwelling on the past.”

“The past,” she responds, monotone. “Of course. That’s what the challenge was about. So I guess we can just move on from it.”

In my peripheral vision, she crosses her arms, furrows her eyebrows, and flattens her lips.

I'm not the best at reading women. I simply don't have the experience to guide me when it comes to the female mind, but I can see I've pissed her off.

But why? I told her she was right and I released her from any obligation to me. Isn't that what every woman would want to hear in this situation?

Our hike continues, and it's tedious. We don't speak for many minutes as our feet sink into the sand with every step.

Normally, I'm not much of a talker, especially when I'm on a mission, but our brooding silence is too much to bear.

I miss hearing Ro's voice, even after just a short time without it.

"Where do you think we're supposed to go?" I ask under the guise of discussing our plan, which is a safe, neutral subject.

"I don't think it'll take long to find out," Ro theorizes, still seeming a little frosty.

"Why is that?"

"Well, this is boring." She waves a hand at our ugly surroundings. "And if we're bored, so is Armand. Now, if we were to—"

Abruptly cutting herself off, she closes her mouth before the rest of the sentence comes out.

"What?" I press. "If we were to what? If you have a suggestion, I want to hear it."

Blushing, she drops her gaze to the ground. "If we were to get *distracted* as we did before... Armand would either watch us or interrupt us. But since we're not doing anything fun or interesting, he'll steer us to the action."

I'm not sure if it's coincidental timing or Armand's doing, but her prediction conjures up a change.

In the distance, through a fleeting cloud of dust, there's an outline of a structure—the tiptop of something. It's tall and thin, like a spire or a steeple.

"Look." I raise my sword toward the horizon. "A building."

Ro squints. "Is that a castle?"

"I can't tell from this far away."

"Then let's hurry." She picks up her speed, moving into a jog.

"We don't have to rush." While I match her pace, I study her slender frame.

Her dress is hanging on her instead of fitting snugly as it did before. Just like I regained my scars, her body went back to a state of starvation. I'm

worried about conserving her energy.

“You’re just afraid to race me,” she quips, quickening her stride.

“Afraid? Afraid of leaving you in the dust maybe.” I can’t help teasing her.

She harumphs. “We’ll see about that.”

Breaking out into a run, she gets ahead of me. With her short legs, she has to take twice the number of steps I do, but she’s surprisingly fast.

I catch up with her. She goes faster.

Within moments, we’re sprinting like two children with a high stakes bet.

I could win. Easily.

But I let Ro gain a good ten feet on me—not too far away that I can’t protect her, but enough distance between us that she knows she’s beating me.

When she glances back to see how behind I am, I’m rewarded with her triumphant laugh. Despite my agitation, my foul attitude dissipates from the lovely sound.

It’s wonderful to see her like this.

Carefree. Fun.

She’s holding up the bottom of her dress so she’s not inhibited by the fabric, and the skirt swishes around her thighs. Her arms are pumping, and some hair comes loose from her braid. The wild strands fly behind her, whipping in the breeze.

I love these fleeting, wondrously happy moments with her. There’s something magical about finding joy in each other’s company, even when we have every reason to be too terrified to have fun.

Unfortunately, Ro’s stamina is lacking, and we haven’t gotten more than a quarter mile before she slows down.

With ragged huffs, she declares, “I’m a little out of shape. You’re going to win.”

“We passed the finish line somewhere back there.” I hitch a thumb over my shoulder, accepting my loss.

When Ro turns around and starts walking backward, she’s wearing that grin I love, but her happy expression quickly morphs to one of shock. Her lips form an ‘O’ as her jaw goes slack.

“What?” I ask, spinning in a full circle to make sure there isn’t anything following us.

“You,” Ro breathes out. “You were smiling for a second.”

“I was?” I touch my face, which has returned to my normal frown.

“Don’t do that,” she softly commands, halting as she puts herself in front of me.

“Do what?”

“Stop smiling.”

Gazing at the sand, I admit, “My mouth is crooked because of my scar.”

“Hence, the ‘resting bitch face’ you mentioned?”

I resume a sluggish stroll beside her because it’s easier to talk about this while we’re not facing each other. “It’s off-putting. I try not to impose by making anyone uncomfortable with it.”

“Kai, you shouldn’t avoid smiling because you think it would bother someone. And if they are bothered by it, they’re assholes. And you shouldn’t care about what assholes think anyway. A person is worth so much more than what they look like.”

She’s full of conviction, and I believe she believes all that.

Perhaps in the Earth realm, this is the idyllic opinion to have—a person’s value isn’t placed on their outward appearance—but I can’t imagine such a world where that sort of compassion exists, and it definitely doesn’t in Valora.

Among the fae, perfection isn’t just the norm, it’s expected.

A particularly strong gust of wind blows, and some of the dust clouding my view of the horizon clears.

A solid granite wall isn’t far off. Houses loom behind it, and a large arched opening leads to a street.

I recognize the city.

“It’s Sterling,” I mutter with surprise.

“The capital of Dawn and Dusk?” Ro cocks her head curiously. “You’re sure?”

“Yes.” I gesture to the pointy top of the building I saw earlier. “That’s the belltower of the temple.”

“A temple?” Ro questions skeptically. “I don’t know much about Sterling, other than the fact that it’s where honored warriors go to retire, but what’s the purpose of a religious building in a world where religion is openly mocked?”

“Most people pay homage to dead ancestors or martyrs from the past.”

She chuckles wryly. “Of course. I should’ve known the fae would worship themselves.”

I nod. “That’s how it is ninety-nine percent of the time, however, a few

people appeal to fate. They ask it to give them their soul mate, a long life, or good fortune.”

“Do you think that works for them?”

“No,” I admit. “I think fate can’t be swayed, but if someone believes it can, it doesn’t hurt to ask.”

“It does hurt, though,” Ro contradicts forlornly. “That’s the problem with prayer—you get your hopes up. You can put your whole heart into your request, truly thinking it will make a difference, and when it doesn’t it’s crushing.”

“You sound like you’re well-acquainted with this experience. Are you religious?”

She sends me a tentative side-eye. “If I were to say yes, would you laugh at me?”

“I don’t laugh, remember?” I whisper, giving her a wink.

Her lips twitch with amusement before she releases a conflicted sigh. “I had a Catholic upbringing. I used to believe in God.”

“Used to? You don’t anymore?”

“No. Maybe. I’m not sure what I believe. I just know that when Zarid heard me praying, I was berated and punished. My prayers became silent after that. In a few years, they became less frequent. Then at one point they just... stopped. I figured if there was a God, he couldn’t see me or hear me outside of the human realm.” Though she’s trying to speak with a monotone to hide her pain, her grief is too strong to stifle.

“You felt abandoned.”

“Yeah.” She hikes a shoulder. “And I was mad at God. So fucking mad. I had loved Him all my life, and He allowed horrible things to happen. Maybe Zarid was right to think I was silly for believing a powerful force might be looking out for me. Because obviously, I was wrong.”

Her devastation weighs heavily on me as if it’s mine.

She thinks her faith is gone, but there are some things you can’t steal from a person. You can’t take their identity, and sometimes belief in a higher power can be a defining feature of who someone is.

“Are you still angry with this god?” I ask. “It sounds like you are.”

After pondering my question for a second, she responds, “I guess I am. Yeah. I’m furious.”

“Then you still believe.”

Her stunned gaze swings my way. “What?”

“You can’t be angry with someone who doesn’t exist. I can be upset with fate, but the way I feel about it doesn’t make it disappear.”

Speechless, Ro’s mouth opens and closes a few times while she has an epiphany. Finally, she says, “I never thought of it that way.”

“Who’s to say your god isn’t real?” I contemplate. “I don’t understand much about religion, but I know my world and your homeland are filled with all kinds of unexplainable mysteries.”

Ro’s eyes become misty, and I can tell she’s trying not to cry, but it’s not the sad kind. Her body language changes, going from tense to relaxed.

Peaceful.

“I still believe,” she says quietly. Happily. “I do. Thank you for that perspective, Kai.”

“You’re welcome. I’m sorry something so special was kept from you for such a long time.” Before I can stop it, an impulsive promise leaves my mouth when I tell her, “Once we’re done in the Lost Land, I’ll bring you to Sterling. The real Sterling. You can come to the temple and pray for as long as you want.”

Ro looks at me with surprise. “Really? You’d want to go with me?”

“I mean,” I backtrack. “That is, if you want me to. No one would dare stop you if I’m around. I would escort you.”

“Escort? Like a bodyguard?”

“Exactly.”

Pursing her lips, she shakes her head. “I don’t want hired protection.”

“I wouldn’t charge you. I’d do it for free.”

“That’s a very generous offer, but if I were to travel, it would be with a friend or a family member. Someone I would have fun with.”

“Oh. I see.”

Her refusal stings, but then she tacks on, “I’d love for you to come with me, but not if you’re on the job. It should be a vacation, not a work trip.”

I can feel myself frowning to a major degree. “If I come with you as a citizen and not a warrior, people will think we’re together.”

A confused wrinkle appears on the bridge of her nose. “We would be together.”

“No, *together*.” The way I enunciate the word leaves no room for speculation that I’m referring to a romantic coupling.

And that it’s not a good idea.

Not for her.

She'd see why when people whisper and gossip. When she has to endure their judgmental stares and their curiosity about why a woman such as her would be with someone like me.

We're approaching the archway that leads into the city now, so our conversation will have to continue another time.

Stopping just inches from the line that separates us from Sterling, we exchange wary glances. We have no idea what awaits us on the other side, but we can assume this is where we'll find challenge number two.

Giving each other silent nods of solidarity, we go forward, stepping into the city.

Immediately, the wind is noticeably lessened. It doesn't blow through our hair or sprinkle us with dirt.

Sterling must be under the protection of one of the enchanted bubbles because the dust isn't as invasive on this side of the wall. Sure, every surface is covered in a layer of filth, but sparkling materials shine through in some places on the buildings.

"Are those homes made from jewels?" Ro asks as she studies the glints of amethysts, rubies, and emeralds in the residential area around us.

"There's no place more beautiful than this, and there's a reason for that," I start with a bit of history. "Before Sterling was a sanctuary city, it was a neutral meeting place for royals and their entourages. I imagine many unpleasant negotiations happened here, so the city was designed to be extraordinarily gorgeous."

"To offset the fact that so many people had to be face-to-face with someone they loathe," Ro correctly finishes for me, and I nod as she hesitantly scrutinizes the long street ahead. "I guess the only way for us to go is straight. I've seen maps of the city, but I don't know my way around."

As we walk, I inform her, "This road leads to a roundabout with a fountain in the town square, but we'll have to go at least a half a mile to get there. We won't see any side streets for a while." I motion to the closely built houses on either side of us. "There are alleys between the homes, but they're narrow, and many of them are gated off."

"What's behind the houses?"

"In real Valora, extensive gardens."

"We're trapped on this road," she concludes. "So, it's sort of like being back in the maze."

"You could put it like that," I say, feeling a little claustrophobic.

The rows of mini mansions on either side of us block us in because they don't have front yards. Butting up against the sidewalk, the flat exteriors of the buildings crowd us.

"Let's go faster," I suggest, and Ro joins me in a brisk jog.

On high alert, my eyes dance from side to side, scanning for movement. I search each shadow and every darkened window.

I utilize my sensitive hearing, too. Listening for something other than our own footsteps and breathing, I slightly turn my head, angling my ears.

By the time we've gotten past five homes, my instinct for danger is blaring.

There's a smell in the air.

It's not the normal mustiness of the Lost Land. There's something else.

Something rotten.

Wind whistles as it blows on the outside of the city, but somewhere mixed in with the noise, I hear a howl.

My fingers tighten around my sword. When I lift it, Ro is startled by the defensive action.

"What's wrong?" she murmurs, unaware, because it's easy to write off the haunting wail as a blustery sound effect of the breeze.

"I heard something," I reply, being vague on purpose because I don't want to frighten her.

I'm pretty sure there's a predator in our midst. If it's what I suspect, as humans would say, we're in deep shit.

A second later, there's a low growl to my right.

Catching Ro's wrist, I halt. "Don't move."

She obeys, not even questioning why.

Another growl comes, louder, closer, and impossible to miss. The sound draws our attention to a shadowed alley between two houses. In the darkness, a pair of yellow glowing eyes peers at us through a broken gate hanging off its hinges.

Gasping, Ro glues herself to my backside while peeking around my arm. She's touching me in so many places. With her upper body pressed against me and her hands grasping the sides of my waist, the physical contact makes different parts of my system awaken.

I welcome the flood of endorphins. I let my body react to her and to my own fear. I want to be as hyped up as possible because I'm going to need all the adrenaline I can acquire.

That pair of eyes multiplies, becoming four, then six, then a dozen.

Dread falls heavy in my gut because I know for certain that my suspicion is correct.

“Fuck,” I rasp through gritted teeth. “It’s a pack.”

“A pack of what?” Ro hisses with a quiver.

Dark figures come toward us with stilted movements, and I catch a glimpse of sharp teeth dripping with saliva. “Lycans.”

CHAPTER 23

Kai

“Be very still,” I command quietly, observing how slow and methodical the lycans are as they come toward us. “Do not run. Quick movements will activate their prey drive.”

“Lycans?” Ro gulps, winding her arms around my middle and squeezing like I’m an anchor keeping her in place. “I thought they were extinct. Someone told me they were hunted and killed long ago.”

“In Valora, yes, but this is the Lost Land. They could exist here. Or Armand could be creating them, but whether they’re real or not doesn’t matter. We learned that with the flower attack. I don’t want to frighten you, but they can hurt us. They could kill us. What’s worse is...”

“What’s worse?” Ro asks, trembling.

It’s only fair to let her know what we’re dealing with. “They’re contagious. They can turn others into what they are with a bite or a scratch. We absolutely cannot let them get close enough to touch us, and don’t write them off as dumb animals. They might be feral, desperate, and a bit insane, but once upon a time, they were people.”

The lycans haven’t emerged yet, and I quickly weigh my options.

Getting away on foot won’t work. Lycans are hunters. They crave the chase, and with four legs to propel them instead of two, I’m betting they’re faster than me.

So I’m going to have to fly.

But where to?

We could go back to the desert.

Or we could go farther into the city.

I’m assuming leaving Sterling isn’t an option. We were led here for a reason. If we retreat to the sandy abyss, we’ll be prolonging the game.

Furthermore, we’d have a better chance at besting the monsters where

there are places to hide. Luckily, I'm very familiar with some of the buildings in the city, and I know the perfect place for us to hunker down and prepare a battle plan.

"Sunny, you need to step away from me for a second," I say just above a whisper so I don't startle her or the lycans, but when she doesn't let go, I'm wondering if she heard me.

Her shaking has become violent, and her breath is coming out with fast, warm puffs on my skin as if she can't get enough air. I can feel how stiff she's become, and I realize she's frozen up.

Shit. This happened to her in Armand's throne room. At the time, I wasn't sure what was going on. I thought perhaps she was unwell and suffering from some physical health condition, but now I recognize it for what it is.

Panic.

I'm not an expert when it comes to the wellness of the mind, but I've seen many seasoned warriors shut down. Logically, they know they shouldn't, but it's as if their body decides it for them.

If Ro were a colleague of mine, I'd do something jarring to snap her out of it. Yell. Shake. Slap.

In my experience, that works.

But it would be impossible to treat her that way. I'm simply not capable of it.

Though, the alternative is watching her get ripped limb from limb, and that's unfathomable, too.

"I have to let my wings out," I explain with an edge of urgency. "You're in the way. I'll end up knocking you over if I release them, and if you fall, the lycans won't hesitate to pounce."

"I can't let you go. I can't, I can't. I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Ro blubbers. "I'm sorry I'm like this."

The lycans finally leave the alley, moving into the gray light.

This is the first time I've ever actually seen them. I've slaughtered a few in the Shadowlands, but in the pitch-black cavern, I couldn't tell how disgusting they are.

They're mangy, missing large patches of brown hair. Some of them look sick. Green mucus drips from their noses down into their mouths, and brown crust lines their eyelids.

With top-heavy bodies, their shoulders are broad and their backends are

skinny. Their arms are long, and their legs are short, so when they're on all fours, it almost looks like they're walking upright. A furry tail drags behind them.

Wild eyes glare at us. Long snouts with snarling lips showcase their sharp teeth, and I'm sure their large jaws could snap a bone.

At least fifteen of them are out on the pavement now.

Seeing an opportunity to surround us, they spread out, forming a line along the walkway before strategically placing themselves in a circle in the road.

Thankfully, they're keeping a good twenty feet of distance as they assess us.

They're calculating the threat, weighing the risk of getting closer. Quiet grunts resound from them, and I realize they're communicating.

Placing my left palm over Ro's locked fingers on my stomach, I caress her knuckles. She's reacted positively to my touch before, and I use that to help her.

"Focus on me. On this." As if we're not in imminent danger, I keep my instructions soft and unhurried. "Breathe and just feel me."

In response, her fingers flex against my scars, and some tension leaves her rigid arms as if the texture is actually comforting to her. And maybe it is.

After all, a worn, scratched-up shield is still a shield.

"Here's what I'm going to do," I continue. "I'll disconnect your fingers, and you can hold onto my hand instead of your own. Then I just need you to step to the side. Can you do that?"

Thank the stars, she nods, her cheek rubbing up and down on my skin.

As soon as her hands break apart, I lace my digits with hers. She squeezes me, and I clasp her just as tightly.

Doing as I said, she shuffles about a foot to the right, giving me just enough room to release my wings.

Being careful not to let them unfold too fast, I gradually allow the slits over my shoulder blades to open. My skin is drier than usual from the air of the Lost Land, and my scars stretch uncomfortably as the leathery flaps appear.

Just like the rest of my upper body, my wings are scarred, too. They're not pretty, but they're fully functional.

Ro doesn't react negatively to them.

I can't say the same for the lycans, though.

Their grunts become more frequent, and their tone is higher. Almost like they're... unsure. Maybe a little confused.

Suddenly, I realize why they haven't attacked us yet.

It's me. My disfigurement.

They've never seen a fae like me—someone forever damaged—and they're just as disgusted with me as I am with them.

Sometimes my ugliness works in my favor, and I'm thankful for it in this moment. It's bought us a little time from a vicious onslaught.

However, I notice the moment the lycans make the decision to disregard the fear of the unknown and just come at us already. Several of them give a bolstering huff, like warriors who are about to go into battle.

Spinning Ro like we're dancing, I loop my arm around her back. With my left hand still connected to her right, she ends up restrained by her own limb that's smashed between us. She's wrapped up, and that's not a bad thing. That means she can't move, and I've got her right where I need her to be.

Flapping my wings once, I use enough force to get us ten feet off the ground. Ro gives a little shriek, but she puts her trust in me, shutting her eyes and clinging to my neck with her free arm.

Realizing their hesitation has resulted in a loss, the lycans let out a few angry howls as they lunge to the spot where we were just standing. They crash into each other, then they jump into the air as they try to reach us.

It's actually quite shocking how high they can get. One of them nearly grabs my boot when I'm level with the top of the two-story roofs around us, but they're too late.

We got away. For now.

As we rise above the houses, I see another pack appearing from an alley up the street.

Those tricky fuckers had backup in case we decided to run. Flying was definitely the right call.

Finally snapping out of her panic, Ro squirms and kicks clumsily. I put my sword away and firmly support her back while letting her trapped arm go. Still, she wiggles, and her eyes are wide as she looks down.

Her fear is bewildering to me. She might not have wings of her own, but it's hard for me to believe she hasn't flown before.

"Don't tell me you've never done this." I focus on her face, which has lost some of its color.

Grimacing sheepishly, she admits, "Not in a very long time. When

Zander was a teenager, he took me for a few rides when he was in griffin form, but I only agreed to it because I was trying to get him to embrace his power. I thought it would lift his spirits if he could share his ability with me. You know, show it off a little. But on the inside, I was freaking out the entire time. I didn't even open my eyes."

"You're a good mother," I praise, impressed all over again at her selflessness when it comes to her son.

"You'd be surprised how much courage a parent can muster up for their child."

I wouldn't know. I've never thought about having kids. It's one of those subjects I've always been completely neutral about.

However, I do know what it's like to tap into bravery I didn't realize I had on account of someone else. Since meeting Ro, I've become well-acquainted with the resolve to sacrifice myself.

"Well, it's no mystery why you didn't want to stay in Valora," I tease. "You didn't get to experience one of the best parts of being fae—flight. Hold onto my neck and wind your legs around my waist. I'm going to show you what you've been missing."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

There's reluctance on her part, but she knows I won't drop her while she figures out how to make herself secure. Once she's latched, it makes flying easier.

"Good," I say. "Now, you have to promise me something."

"What?"

"Don't close your eyes. Watch the world around you."

Flapping my wings, I go above the dusty clouds and start with a trick that's easy. I go in a circle, spiraling until I've created a little cyclone in the sky.

Ro gapes at the wall of clouds as we spin, and I'm relieved when awe overtakes her apprehension.

Once she seems used to the current move, I switch it up.

I dive.

Ro lets out a surprised yelp when I drop, then I ascend again. I do a few more ups and downs. To finish the ride, I go in a straight horizontal line, but I spin my body like a screw. It makes Ro cling to me even harder.

I slow and straighten, spreading my wings to catch the wind so I can

hover.

We start a gentle descent. We're still up high, and we can't see anything through the cloud cover.

That's the best part about flying. It's not the thrill I love the most, but how it makes me feel so far removed from the troubles on the ground.

"What do you think?" I ask. "Was it fun or have I just made you want to never fly again?"

Ro laughs a little. "Fun. Kind of like a roller coaster. That's a human thing. It's like this big structure with—"

"I know what it is." I can't help grinning because it's cute that she was about to go into a long-winded explanation during a time of crisis.

When the smile lifts the right side of my face, I don't try to stop it.

I let Ro see it.

If I'm willing to die for her, then I should be able to exhibit my biggest insecurity.

When she grins back without a shred of dismay, something akin to relief unwinds my tension.

I can be myself with her. My real, whole self.

I've never felt this way with someone. My fellow warriors accept me for who I am, but I've never let them completely know me. I've worn a stoic façade because I'm comfortable with them thinking of me as the tough man with the resting bitch face.

I didn't realize how lonely that's been until now. To constantly have my guard up... it's exhausting.

But now I've found a sanctuary in Ro. In just a short time, I've gained a best friend.

A best friend I need to stay platonic with.

I must figure out a way to be okay with that, but she just makes my cock so damn hard. We just escaped a dangerous situation—a scenario that isn't sexy in the least—and all my dick is concerned about is the fact that Ro is flush against me.

Day Realm dresses, these damn wispy things.

There isn't much separating her pussy and the bare skin on my lower stomach, and I think about how close we were to fucking earlier. How good it felt to have my tip submerged in her wet heat. How badly I wanted to plunge my cock into her snug channel over and over again.

I clear my throat. "By now, the lycans have lost sight of us for a while.

It's safe to go back to the ground."

What I'm not saying is, I need to get Ro away from me before my erection literally rips through my pants to get to her.

Soaring down, I head to the center of the city.

I land on a marble sidewalk outside the destination I've had in mind, and I give Ro's shoulder a tap to let her know she can let go.

Unlinking her ankles, she puts her feet on the ground, but she stays close.

"This is the City Hall." I turn toward the structure with a long veranda lined by six tall columns holding up a balcony on the third floor. "It has the most rooms out of any other building in Sterling, which gives us an advantage. We can take refuge here until the lycans come for us."

"*Until they come for us?*" Ro emphasizes. "How do you know they will? We didn't leave a trail on the ground."

I sigh because she's not going to like my plan. "Lycans are extremely good trackers, and once they become fixated on a target, they get obsessed. They can pick up scents from miles away. They will hunt us down. It's a certainty."

Ro's gawking so dramatically that it's almost comical. "And then what?"

"I'll be ready for them," I reply, avoiding specifics on purpose. "Let's get inside before it's too late."

CHAPTER 24

Ro

As we walk up the stairs to the City Hall, I get a whiff of Kai's cinnamon scent. It's coming from him, but I smell it on myself, too. We've had a lot of physical contact, and it's rubbed off on me.

I like that a lot. Too much.

I have to stop swooning over Kai.

I'm not this person. This pathetic love-struck fool.

It was ridiculous to think we could be together in the first place. Because what would we do? Date?

That's not the fae way. It's all or nothing with these people. You're either casually fucking or in a serious, life-long relationship. There's no in-between.

If it's the latter, commitment isn't taken lightly because binding yourself to someone for up to thirty thousand years is a big decision.

Of course Kai doesn't want to be tied down. If he did, he could've found someone. Instead, he offered up his solitary servitude to Kirian, and I'm not delusional enough to think I'm so awesome that I'd be able to persuade him to leave his career.

And he can't have both. Warriors don't take wives for a reason—they're gone too often, and they're in constant danger. It's not fair to a spouse.

The only time they don't have a choice is if they find their fated mate. In that case, they have to leave the military because if they get killed in action, their fated mate will suffer a slow and painful death.

As mystical and magical as that is, I don't think I'd want to be in that scenario. Because that's a shitty obligation.

Be with me or else you die.

No, thanks.

A lot of people think being soul mates is incredibly romantic, but if I ever end up with someone, I want that person to be with me because it's what they

want more than anything, not because fate forces them to.

With a grunt, Kai yanks at the double doors of the City Hall. The metal groans, jammed up from all the grimy debris that's filled the cracks, but it dislodges on his second try.

Dust rains down and billows out from the darkness of our temporary shelter.

Swatting at the air, Kai gives it a couple seconds to clear.

As I'm waiting, I look at the town square behind us, expecting to see the monsters stalking us.

No sign of the lycans yet.

In the middle of a roundabout road, there's a huge dry fountain, some gazebos, and several statues. Four different streets lead to the circle, and each building lining them has its own unique architectural style. Cookie cutter houses don't exist here.

Putting his hand at the small of my back, Kai gently guides me into the City Hall.

Once he shuts the door, I cough a little from the heavy, stagnant air.

"It's very musty," I croak out.

"You need to drink something." Kai hands me the waterskin.

I shake the floppy container, noting it's probably one third of the way full. We need to make it last, so I only take a small sip before giving it back.

The cool liquid feels good in my dry mouth, but a few seconds after I've swallowed it, my thirst persists.

Kai notices my wince and says, "Once we get to a better location, we'll get you a proper snack."

Nodding, I look around as my eyes adjust to the darkness. The foyer we're in is more of a greeting area, kind of like a lobby. Wide and long, it displays broken benches at ten-foot intervals along the walls.

Above the seats, there are enormous empty picture frames.

I go up to one of the crooked rectangles and rub my finger over it. Dust coats my fingertip, and beneath the layer of filth, the saggy, dripping gold appears partially melted. Blackened bits of the burnt-away canvas are in the crevices of the frame.

"What happened?" I ask, and Kai's questioning glance prompts me to clarify, "The Lost Land. How did it come to be? How could a place as vibrant as Valora just... die? It's like a scorching fire torched the entire world."

Kai shrugs. "It's a mystery I'm not sure we'll ever have the answer to, but

it isn't that shocking, is it? The history of Valora is full of so much conflict, sometimes I wonder how the faeries didn't kill each other off a long time ago. And perhaps they did in this universe. With all the feuds and power clashes, all it would take is a few rogue wizards getting carried away, and catastrophe would ensue." Striding over to the last picture in the lobby, Kai puts his hand through the frame and flattens his palm on the wall. "This painting was my favorite."

"What did it look like?" I sidle up beside him to stare at the blank space.

"It was a country cottage in the Day Realm. It resembled the home I grew up in."

"Do you miss it very much? Would you want to return there someday once your service is done?"

"Actually, I hope to retire in Sterling."

"That seems right for you," I say, because I could imagine him here, thriving with the luxury and serenity he's earned ten times over. "And what will you do during your retirement? Sip champagne while lounging on the shore of Issika Lake?"

"Definitely not," Kai answers with a scoff, like the idea of being idle is a funny joke. "I don't care what I'm doing as long as I'm contributing. All the jobs in Sterling are volunteer only. The mayor, the event coordinators, even the street cleaners—they choose a job that keeps the city functioning. Since I'm so close with King Kirian, I could be a representative of The Night Realm."

"Sounds peaceful. You won't have to fight anymore."

A naughty grin lifts the right side of Kai's mouth, and his lopsided smile is ridiculously cute and sexy at the same time. "Don't assume there's no violence here. Is it safe? Yes. But with a city full of warriors—men who spent their entire lives with a weapon in their hand... Do you really think they're going to be able to give up that kind of action? Here, fighting is a sport. There's a small arena where weekly tournaments take place. It's purely for entertainment value. No one gravely injures their opponent, but there's enough bloodshed to satisfy our craving for it without any actual danger."

"Clever." I have to admit, I do like the mental picture of Kai in some gladiator-type situation where no one dies, but I get to see him kick some serious ass. "Would you let me come to one of the shows?"

"You can attend as many as you'd like."

There's no inflection in his response, and I can't tell if he's saying yes

because as a former queen, no one could keep me out of the event. Or if he actually wants me there.

Pivoting away, he walks out of the lobby into a large, open, round area with a high ceiling. It's a little brighter because there's a dome of dirty skylights.

He points up at the crystal chandelier. "In Valora, this building is so grand. The City Hall is where the royals stay when they're visiting." Like a good tour guide, he motions to a curved staircase. "There are suites on the second and third levels, and the entire fourth floor is occupied by a library." He gestures to some double doors by the bottom of the staircase, then across the way to an identical set. "There's a ballroom for parties and a conference room to discuss business." Walking forward, he heads toward a swinging door. "A kitchen is just through here."

I follow him into the room, and it's huge. A stove with eight burners is on the right, and a six-foot kitchen sink is to the left. On the wall straight ahead, there's an ice box three times as big as usual. In the middle of the room sits an island for food prep. Above that, some rusted pots and pans hang from corroded hooks.

"They do catering for the entire city in here," Kai goes on. "When the conference room isn't being used for official business, it's a free restaurant. All residents and guests of Sterling are welcome to it."

"That's quite the perk. I'll be sure to check it out when I get the chance."

Kai's gaze turns warm. "You said 'when.'"

Shy, I smile and shrug. "Yeah, I guess I did. *When.*"

"And you spoke of watching me fight. Does that mean you've decided to return to Valora for sure?"

I nod because I can't imagine living a world away from him. Even if we're not together in the romantic sense, I don't want to be separated by such harsh lines.

Kai's grin appears again, and a moment passes between us. For a second, it's like we're back in the first challenge. There's an openness and raw affection.

Then Kai turns away. Searching some cabinets and rifling through drawers, he starts collecting dishes.

"What are you doing?" I ask, hovering closely.

"I don't think our respite will last long." He drops a cup into his sack. "When the lycans arrive, we need to be at full strength. We'll have lunch

while we wait.”

“What’s the plan after that?”

Hesitating, he pauses with a fork in his hand, and it’s almost like he doesn’t want to tell me the full truth. “We can escape out a window and fly to another location.”

“I don’t mean to sound skeptical, but we’re just going to hop around the city? How will that help if they’re just going to keep chasing us?”

“It could make them lose interest if we lead them on long enough.”

“But what if defeating them is the challenge?”

“Then evading them will be impossible, and it’ll become obvious that we have no choice but to face them.”

Soon, Kai’s gathered everything he wants from the kitchen.

On the way out, he gives the fridge and pantry a quick check, but unlike the Day Realm palace in the last challenge, there’s nothing to eat or drink.

Tipping his head toward an exit at the back of the room, Kai silently directs me to go with him. We walk into a tower of sorts, and I gape at the vast and expanse above us.

“What is this place?” My words echo off the cloudy glass walls boxing us in. “It looks like an elevator shaft.”

“You’re close. It’s a flight shaft.”

“A flight shaft,” I repeat, curious.

Kai tilts his head. “You’ve never heard of it?”

“No.”

“Notice the excessive width. It’s big enough for someone to spread their wings and fly up to the other floors instead of taking the stairs.”

“I thought it was considered rude to fly indoors.”

“In the palaces, yes, it is uncouth. And it’s discouraged in houses, just because there isn’t enough room. But the rules are different in Sterling. Most buildings with three or more levels have a flight shaft. This one is unique because the honorary suite on the third floor can’t be accessed any other way. It’s what keeps the special room so private.”

“Is that where we’re going? The suite?”

He shakes his head. “The library.”

Pointing out the obvious, I say, “Wouldn’t it make sense for us to go to the room where the lycans can’t get to us? Then there would be no risk of a confrontation.”

Wearing an unsettled frown, Kai scratches his facial hair and guiltily

glances down.

Okay, he's definitely keeping something from me.

"What?" I prod, putting a hand on my hip.

"I want them to find us," he admits. "Well, not us. Me. I want them to be able to get to me."

My head jerks back. "Why?"

"I need to pick a few of them off. They'll be way more discouraged if they start losing members of their pack."

Crossing my arms, I remind him, "You said we couldn't let them get close enough to scratch or bite us."

"And I won't let them."

"But with your strategy, we're basically bait."

"No, *I'm* bait. You're not going to be in any danger."

"How do you figure?"

Instead of answering me, Kai extends his arms. "Climb on. It's time for your first flight shaft experience."

As I move toward him, I observe the way he's flexing his fists. There's a tenseness in his shoulders and an eager glint in his eyes, and I notice it for what it is—barely restrained excitement.

Bloodlust.

He wants violence. He's craving it, and he can't wait to have a run in with the lycans.

After killing dozens of guards just an hour ago, you'd think he'd be satisfied, but Kai's not a regular guy. He's an adrenaline junkie, and I keep being reminded of that fact far too often for my liking.

CHAPTER 25

Kai

“You’re not going to eat?” Ro’s chastising tone makes it very clear that she’s not okay with my decision to refuse lunch.

I only collected one of each dish for a reason—I won’t be joining her. “I’m not hungry.”

“You said we’d need our strength.” Ro just loves to throw my own words back at me.

To be honest, I secretly love her disapproval because it means she cares on some level. “My strength is fine.”

“There’s enough food for us both in your sack.”

“For today,” I agree. “But what about tomorrow?”

Not having a great rebuttal, she mutters, “We might be in a different challenge by then.”

“Or we might not. The fact is, we don’t know what the future holds, and I’ll take care of you every chance I get. Now eat.”

“I feel bad that you’re just standing here watching me have all this delicious food.”

‘Delicious food’ is a generous description of the spread in front of her. There’s half a roll, a small hunk of cheese, and an apple. It’s all very bland, though I suppose it probably seems like a feast to someone who’s starving.

It’s not a chore to watch her eat. Quite the opposite, I love it, which is why I should stop.

“I’m going to listen at the door.” Pacing over to the wood with peeling white paint, I press my ear to the rough surface.

I’m antsy for some action.

Maybe I should’ve left some evidence for the lycans to find. Some kind of bread crumb trail, so to speak, and I need them to get here so I can kill something. It’s the only way for me to expel my inner frustration—sexual

frustration.

If I can't fuck, fighting is a halfway decent substitution. It'll help me clear my head, and I must regain control of my thoughts before we have to announce the next challenge.

Because I almost lost it for us last time.

I'm actually glad I was gagged by that vine because if I'd had the ability to speak, I would've gotten it wrong.

I would've said it was a test of the heart because of how fast I fell for Ro.

My eyes wander back to the queen.

She's so elegant. Years of conditioning in a royal setting have influenced her, whether she realizes it or not, and she's far more graceful than any average human. The way she sits with her back straight. How she silently sips her water from the teacup. The way she dabs at the corners of her mouth with her napkin after every juicy bite of the apple.

Just as she's whittled the fruit down to the core, some thuds reverberate through the building. Then there's a louder bang.

The lycans just got through the entrance, and seconds later, I hear faint scratching sounds—claws on the marble floor in the foyer as they scamper to the stairs.

They'll be up on the fourth floor within a couple minutes.

"They're here," I whisper, making a beeline for Ro while putting a hushing finger up to my lips.

With alertness, she stands from the table.

I decide to leave the scraps of her lunch behind. I don't collect the dishes, and I toss the apple core toward the door. It slides across the floor, drawing a juicy trail in the dust. Hopefully, the morsel will distract the beasts and cause a fight amongst the pack.

The more chaos, the better. I want the lycans to be absolutely belligerent with rage, confusion, and hunger.

Grabbing Ro's hand, I pull her away from the table, and we head for the back of the library.

The floorplan is like a T, and several rows of bookcases fill the offshoots to the right and to the left as we near the rear. Those stacks will work well for my battle plan. I can weave between them and use them as blockades.

We're a few feet away from the balcony doors when I come to an abrupt stop. Ro halts, too, and she sees what I see.

There's a dagger sticking out of the wood at eye level, stabbed through a

rolled-up scroll. The hilt of the weapon is shiny and dust-free, with intricate designs in the gold plating it, so I know it was planted here recently.

“It’s a note for us,” Ro says, though I’ve gathered as much.

I’m only hesitating because it could be a trick. However, I don’t have the luxury of caution. Snarls and growls are echoing from the hallway. Any second, the pack could burst into the library.

After quickly pulling the dagger out, I let it clatter to the floor, then I read from the scroll.

“*My dear subjects.*” My annoyed eyes meet Ro’s worried ones before I continue, “*Do me a favor and kill these pests. The city has been overrun by lycans for a long time, and I would very much appreciate it if they could be exterminated.*” I scoff. “He talks as if these monsters are simply a bug infestation I can stomp out with my feet.”

Ro fidgets nervously. “So the lycans are the next challenge?”

I unroll the paper more. “*This is not the next challenge, but if you defeat the pack, I’ll give you peace for the rest of today and all of tonight. A much-needed rest for both of you.*”

I hold in a string of profanities.

Armand is such a sneaky fucker. He’s using me to get rid of one of his problems, and the reward he’s dangling in front of me is too tempting to reject.

I won’t say no to an opportunity to give Ro a break from the constant threats. If I accomplish this feat, for a little while, she’ll be able to relax.

“What a prick!” Ro exclaims angrily. “We’re not doing any favors for that asshole.”

When I don’t share her opinion right away, she notes my conflicted silence.

“You’re not actually going to do it, right?” Feisty, she plants a hand on her hip and ogles me like she can’t even believe I’m considering it.

“I could go with my original plan,” I reply. “We could jump around the city and evade the lycans as I kill a few here and there, all while hoping we stumble across our next challenge so we can get away from here for good. Or... I could earn us a day of freedom, and the lycans won’t be an obstacle for us any longer.”

A loud thump from the other side of the door makes Ro jump. Soft, eerie scratches follow, along with some playful taps.

The creatures are taunting us. They could come in if they wanted, but

they enjoy this part of the pursuit—cornering their prey before they strike.

Visibly mustering her courage, Ro takes a deep breath and says, “Then let me fight with you.”

When she delves into her pocket to retrieve her dagger, I throw open the balcony door. “Absolutely not.”

“You can’t take all of them on by yourself.”

“Yes, I can.” Forcefully leading her out of the library, I end up accidentally groping her ass a little.

She’s got a really great ass.

So supple. Each cheek is more than a handful. I want to squeeze it while she’s riding me. I want to feel the flesh bulge through each of my fingers like clay.

Shaking my head, I mentally scold myself for having such thoughts at a time like this.

Right now my biggest concern is making sure every lycan in this building dies.

Looking affronted at the way I’m pushing her around, Ro drags her feet. “What do you expect me to do? Stand out here and watch you get torn apart?”

“First of all, I won’t get torn apart. Second, you’re going to be in the private suite below us. You’ll be safe until I’m done.”

“Stuck, you mean. I’ll be trapped there.”

Cutting off any additional arguments—because I’m certain she’s got more to say—I hook an arm around her waist, anchor her to my body, and leap into the air.

Spreading my wings, I let the wind work for me as we float down a level. There’s a smaller balcony under the one branching from the library, and it has just enough room for two people.

The double doors to the suite aren’t locked. Thankfully.

I wouldn’t have wanted to break a window and draw the lycans’ attention elsewhere. I need them to stay in the library where they’ll be so busy sniffing me out, they won’t realize I’ve outsmarted their mangy hides.

Nudging the door open as quietly as I can, I go inside the bedroom. From the dilapidated state of it, Ro’s time in here won’t be fun, but she’ll be protected.

Above us, the lycans have fully invaded the library. There’s clattering. Glass breaks. Some scuffles, growls, and vicious snarls come next.

They just knocked over the table, and my plan to get them to turn on each other over a bit of food is working. A few of them might even kill one another and do my job for me.

“I can help you,” Ro declares. “I know how to use a knife. You saw me stab Zarid.”

It’s not that I don’t think she can defend herself. I’ve witnessed her courage multiple times.

But I’ve also seen her freeze up.

“How’s your panic condition?” I ask.

Shame causes her gaze to flit away. “Better. I’m really sorry about that. I don’t know why it happens when it does, but I won’t let it happen again. *I won’t. I won’t.*”

“It’s not cowardly to react to your fear,” I tell her with understanding. “It’s natural.”

“I want to be brave for you.”

Taking her hand, I squeeze it, and I’m completely sincere when I say, “You are. I’m not doubting you. It’s me. When I’m worried about you, I experience a similar type of freezing. You saw it in the courtyard. I couldn’t speak up when I needed to.”

“That was different. You were in so much pain.”

I shake my head. “I’d like to blame the pain, but my physical discomfort wasn’t the main reason I was unable to act. The thought of losing you is debilitating. It makes me so crazy I can’t think, and it’s worse now than it was before.”

Confused, she narrows her eyes. “It’s worse? It doesn’t seem worse. You’ve been very professional since the start of the second challenge.”

My stone-faced exterior is cracking. Yes, I’ve been pretty good at suppressing my affection, but it’s like trying to plug a leaking beer barrel that’s been shot by a dozen arrows.

Only my heart is the barrel, and I simply don’t have enough hands to keep the holes in check.

Ro and I are on the cusp of the conversation I’ve been avoiding. The one where I’m going to profess my love for her, and she’s going to let me down as gently as she can because she’s kind.

“You’re my purpose,” I say. “You know that.”

“Because of the mission?”

“Yes.” A half-truth.

“Is that all it is?” Ro asks straightforwardly.

A roar interrupts us, and I’ve never been more thankful for a monster’s poor timing.

“I’ll return to you.” Backing away, I step outside. “Close these doors and lock them. Make sure the other one is locked, too. The lycans can’t get to you, but it’s just an extra precaution that will make me feel better.”

“Be careful.” Ro white knuckles the doors, slowly shutting them.

Spreading my wings, I drop over the banister of the balcony. Instead of flying upward, I dive for the ground, and the exhilarating free fall puts me in the right head space for what I’m about to do.

I’ll go through the building the way I came in and sneak up on the lycans from behind.

Hopefully, I can make this quick, and when it’s over, Ro will be so happy to get our break that she’ll forget what we were talking about.

CHAPTER 26

Ro

I wish Kai hadn't dashed away so quickly. I understand why he had to go, but all I needed was a few more seconds to tell him how I feel.

My throat is tight. Not like it is during a panic attack—like it's clogged with the words I didn't get to say. I'm afraid I might choke on the *I love you* if I don't get it out.

It's ridiculous to think I could fall for someone so fast, but my time with Kai has been anything but normal. All these life-altering events have been crunched into a short period, and we've had to trust and protect each other. We've had to lean on one another for emotional support and strength.

And the way Kai was just talking makes me think there's a chance my feelings aren't unrequited after all.

Maybe he won't reject me.

I really hope that's the case because I need him.

I *need* him.

There's no denying that. I'm fooling myself if I think I can just be another one of the many damsels he's saved.

I don't know what our future would look like, but I don't care as long as he's with me.

Because if I have to go on without him... I'll be a mad queen.

Let's be honest here. My sanity is hanging by a thread, and Kai's the string tethering me to it.

The idea of not being with him makes me physically ill. I'm nauseous and itchy. My chest hurts.

Every second I'm away from him feels like a minute. Every minute, an hour.

Some thumps from above get my attention, but I can't tell what's going on. This room has really good sound insulation, and I'm having trouble

tracking all the muffled noises.

I'm tempted to peek my head out into the landing that leads to the flight shaft. Surely out there I'd be able to hear better, but Kai told me to stay inside, so I do.

Smashing the side of my face against the thick wood of the door, I close my eyes and listen.

There are echoes of Kai's grunts, animalistic screeches, and lots of bumps and bangs.

Something very heavy falls right over my head, shaking the chandelier and making plaster rain down from the ceiling. Had to be a bookcase. A body wouldn't make that kind of impact.

After another rumble, Kai yells something unintelligible.

That could've been a shout of pain. If he gets scratched or bitten, he won't be coming back as the same person. He might not be coming back at all.

It's too devastating to consider. I can't afford to be pessimistic. I need to stay positive or else I risk disintegrating into another epic meltdown, and I've already promised myself I wouldn't do that.

Along with several stomps, Kai's voice reverberates through the flight shaft, and I can actually make out some words. "Aha! Take that, you snott-nosed swine. I'll..."

The rest of the sentence is garbled, but his tone surprises me.

He's jovial.

That crazy man is having fun.

Of course he is.

This is his play time, and I need to stop worrying. Standing around and analyzing every sound certainly isn't doing me any favors.

Moving away from the door, I turn in a slow circle, studying the suite to distract myself.

In the center of the wall to my right, there's a bedframe made of crystal. The mattress got destroyed long ago. However, there is a low platform of charred wood.

I mosey over to a round table against the adjacent wall. Two overturned metal chairs lay on the floor, and I set them upright. Then I head past a standing wardrobe with the cabinet doors hanging off the hinges as I make my way to the attached bathroom.

The elegance of the tub stuns me so much I have to stop to admire it. It's

more like a small swimming pool. In the middle of the room, it's elevated, surrounded by stairs on all sides and framed by four columns.

When I climb the steps and look inside, I realize it's at least three feet deep. There are waterfall showerheads on both ends. The metal is rusty, but I can assume they were gleaming and gorgeous at one time. It would be wonderful to stand under the hot cascades. To feel the smooth marble beneath my toes while wading in the water.

As I turn toward a vanity with a fractured mirror, an eerie sensation makes the hair on the back of my neck stand.

My internal alarm is going off, and it only takes a second for me to realize why.

It's quiet.

Completely silent.

The fight is over.

Rushing back into the bedroom, I go to the balcony doors first. Pressing my nose against the glass, I fog it up with my breath, but I don't see Kai anywhere outside.

When I run to the other door, I put my ear to the wood again.

I hear nothing. Not a scuffle or a squeak, but I maintain my steadfast confidence in Kai.

Soon, he's going to arrive, covered in blood and high from the fight.

I wait.

And wait.

Minutes go by.

"What's taking so long?" I whisper at the ceiling, knowing I won't get an answer.

I pace.

Check the doors again.

Pace some more.

After what I estimate is about ten minutes, doubt starts to creep in. Kai's just a floor up, and he should've been back by now.

Unless he lost the fight. Death is the only thing that could keep him away.

As more time passes, my thoughts plunge to the darkest rock bottom I've ever encountered.

Unwanted images enter my mind. Kai, injured. Bleeding. Struggling as he clings to survival while the lycans feast on his innards. They lap up his blood and chew at his neck until the light eventually goes out in his empty stare.

A gag rises in my throat and tears blur my vision.

Kai might really be gone.

Going into this game, I'd known there was a high probability one of us wouldn't make it out alive, but it was supposed to be me.

"It was supposed to be *me*," I whimper with anguish.

They say your life flashes before your eyes when you die, but what about when someone else dies? Someone you can't live without?

A quick sequence of memories plays out in my mind.

Kai finding me in Armand's throne room. His grumpy face. My instant attraction to him. The wrath and determination in his eyes when he agreed to the overlord's proposal.

The ecstasy we experienced in the bathroom after we showered. The heat in his gaze right before we almost had sex. The way he forced Zarid to his knees, making my abuser apologize for all his wrongdoings.

Seeing Kai smile. Flying with him over Sterling. His insistence that I eat while he goes hungry.

He sacrificed everything for me.

Everything.

I'm so devastated I can barely stand, and I brace myself against the footboard of the bed while I lose it.

I cry the ugliest cry anyone's ever ugly cried. My heart spasms, and I struggle to make my lungs work. Choppy inhale. Ragged exhale. Pull in a breath, sob it out.

I'm grieving the loss of so much all at once.

The innocent girl I once was. The freedom and choices that were taken from me as Zarid's wife. My family, both Earth-side and in Valora.

And Kai.

I weep for him the most.

Bang, bang, bang.

The sudden noise behind me startles me so much I almost fall over. Ungracefully, I swivel toward the balcony doors.

Through the cloudy panes, I see Kai's outline.

He's here, and most importantly, he's whole. He has two arms, two legs, and his head. There's red all over him. I don't know if the blood belongs to him or the lycans, but I'm just so happy to see him that I scurry over to the door.

After flipping the lock, I yank it open, and vault myself at Kai. I throw

myself at him with so much force, I end up latching onto him like a starfish.

Chuckling, he stumbles back. "Hey there, Sunny."

"You're okay, you're okay," I repeat. "You're okay, right?"

Instead of answering me, he lightly scolds, "You shouldn't get so close to me without making sure I haven't been infected first."

Good advice, but I'm not willing to separate from him long enough to look him over. "Did any of them hurt you?"

"Well, no," he replies. "There were a few close calls, but I avoided it."

"See? Then it's fine."

He gently strokes my hair. "Why are you crying?"

"I thought you weren't coming back," I mumble by his neck.

"I told you I would." He walks forward into the room, carrying me.

"You just took a long time."

"I apologize for that. I wanted to make sure I didn't let any lycans escape. I had to chase one down the street. He tried to hide from me, but I took him out a few blocks away."

"Oh." Sniffling, I blink away my tears as I cling to him.

Kai rotates to shut the balcony door, then he pats my shoulder in the way you do with a friend when a hug is over. When my arms remain around his neck and my ankles stay locked behind his back, those pats turn into little pushes. With his hands on both of my shoulders, he's trying to pry me off.

It's difficult, but I manage to let him go. I slide off his body and step away.

He grimaces as he looks me up and down. "I got you all dirty."

I don't give the lycan blood on me a glance. "That's okay."

An uncomfortable silence ensues, and I know this is my opening.

Drawing in some air and squaring my shoulders, I get ready to profess my love, probably in a nonsensical ramble with too many words.

But at that very moment, the room starts to change.

Everything gets bright because the chandelier and the wall sconces illuminate. The dust and dirt start melting away. The floor, which I'd assumed was a neutral-colored tile, is actually extremely colorful. Little hexagonal shapes beneath my feet turn to cobalt blue, lavender, red, orange, and pearl. They form a geometrical design, like sunrays all leading to the center of the room.

A mural appears on the ceiling. It's a painting of the most beautiful sky with fluffy, peachy clouds, rainbows and stars, day and night, and dawn and

dusk. It's the best of all the realms. It shouldn't look right, meshed together like that, but it does.

Quiet creaking comes from the standing wardrobe as the cabinet doors right themselves. The hinges repair, and the exterior is restored to its original shiny dark wood.

Next, a mattress and soft white bedding materialize out of nowhere. There's a pile of pillows at the head of the bed, and a note appears on one of them. Just a folded piece of paper.

I go over to it and pick it up, careful not to touch the pristine white silk with my dirty fingers.

Sending Kai a wary glance, I open the note and flatly recite the short sentences. "*Many thanks. Have fun. Best regards, your overlord.*"

Kai lets out an agitated noise. "I loathe that bastard."

Nodding, I'm in full agreement with his opinion, but that bastard followed through on the reward.

And apparently, the reward includes snacks.

On the two-person table, there's a white pearlescent teapot with steam escaping the spout. A pair of cups, saucers, silver spoons, and a bowl of sugar cubes accompanies it. There's also a white wicker picnic basket.

The scent of baked goods makes it to my nose.

"Do you smell that?" I ask, aggressively sniffing the air as I approach the basket.

When I peek inside, ham, fruit, biscuits, and various little jars of different jams are nestled on a bed of periwinkle satin napkins.

It's practically a feast.

"Look at these clean clothes," Kai says behind me.

He's in front of the open wardrobe where there are outfits hanging, including a lavender dress for me, and leather pants and a dark-blue tank top for him.

Kai shuts the doors and frowns at how he smudged the golden handles with blood. "I'll need to clean up before I partake in any of this."

When he starts for the bathroom, I jump toward him. "Wait."

He stops. "Yes?"

Clearing my throat, I muster up the courage to croak, "There's something we need to discuss."

Apprehension causes Kai's scar to deepen as he furrows his eyebrows. "Now?"

“Now.” Forcing a neutral expression, I try not to let it show on my face how petrified I am. “It’s about us—how I’d like our relationship to be going forward.”

Suddenly, Kai’s the one who looks scared.

Shaking his head and backing away, he simply states, “I understand. No explanation is needed, Your Majesty. If you’ll excuse me...”

He disappears into the bathroom and shuts the door, leaving our conversation abruptly.

Again.

Before, with the lycans, he had a reason to cut me off, but this time it’s just rude.

When I hear the water turn on, anger floats in like a red haze.

It’s one thing to be uninterested in me. It’s another to completely disregard me when I have something to say.

Kai’s always had the utmost respect for me, and I’ve come to depend on his willingness to listen. To hear me.

This isn’t like him. He doesn’t run from unpleasant situations. He’s had to deal with a lot worse than the likes of me.

On the other hand, maybe a pathetic, codependent woman is his hard limit.

Well, we’re going to iron this shit out whether he likes it or not.

No more dodging. The guessing games are going to stop.

Bursting into the bathroom, I unabashedly invade his privacy. He’s standing in the middle of the bathtub, naked. Underneath a hot spray, he’s soaping himself up and scrubbing away the dirt and lycan blood.

His backside is my view, and his insanely muscular ass draws my attention right away. It’d be easy to let myself get distracted by the stomach-fluttering sight, but it’s nothing I haven’t seen before.

Looking over his shoulder, he cuts me a side glance. He doesn’t ask why I’m in here, but he doesn’t tell me to get out either.

Neutral. So fucking neutral. The indifference is worse than anything.

I put my hands on my hips. “It’s funny, you know?”

“What’s funny?”

“I didn’t peg you for a coward.”

My implication that he lacks bravery hits a nerve, and his gaze narrows with irritation as he continues washing himself. With his rear still facing me, he roughly scrubs his beard.

Annoyance is evident in his body language, and I like it. I want to get under his skin. Anything is better than apathy.

“You’re going to have to tell me what you’re referring to,” he deadpans. “I’m not a mind reader.”

“Finally! A request for communication.”

“And I’m listening. State your grievances, my queen, and I will atone.”

I’m all flustered now, and I don’t know where to start. “In the last challenge, you were different.”

“I know.”

“And then you changed.”

“I know,” Kai repeats with distress as he drops his cool façade. He rotates toward me so fast, water flies off him in a circle. “You think I like being this way?” Wildly gesturing, he indicates the scars on his torso. “This is just who I am. I wish I could look better for you. By the stars, I wish it so badly it hurts but it simply cannot be.”

Realization sinks in. He and I are on completely different pages.

“You think I’m talking about your appearance?” I ask quietly.

“Yes?” His voice goes up at the end as if the answer is obvious.

In an instant, I see his cold attitude for what it is.

He isn’t uninterested in me.

He’s been quietly brooding. Sad. Insecure.

And I’ve been too worried about my own heartbreak to see his.

“Kai—”

“Everything about me is hideous,” he interrupts me. “My skin, my smile.”

“You have a great smile,” I contradict.

His eyes are downcast with defeat, and his shoulders slump. “Come on, Ro. I’m not a handsome man, and I don’t need for you to pretend I am.”

“Pretend?”

I’m almost at a loss for words. No one has ever outright accused me of being superficial before. That’s one of the reasons I don’t fit in with the fae. I simply don’t have it in me to be vain or shallow.

I thought Kai knew that, but clearly, he doesn’t.

Admittedly, I’m insulted, but in his defense, I was so eager to soak up his compliments and endless reassurance that I forgot to give him mine.

I haven’t told him that I like the way he looks. Just the opposite, I’ve been careful with my words.

I kept my feelings to myself because I wasn’t bold enough to expose

them.

“This is my fault,” I say softly. “I’m so sorry.”

“Do not apologize. You’ve done nothing wrong—”

I hold my palm out to stop him before he can tell me how perfect I am again. “If you think you’re not good enough for me, or anyone else for that matter, I’m to blame because I didn’t tell you that you are. I didn’t tell you I’ve admired you since the moment we met in Armand’s throne room. I’ve never reacted to a man with such attraction. It was immediate and intense, and my feelings for you grew during the first challenge. Not because your scars were gone, but because you were kind, and safe, and so *giving*. You reeled me in by giving me everything I needed, when and how I needed it, and I’m truly sorry for not doing the same.”

Vulnerability and hope swims in Kai’s eyes. He gazes at me as if I’m holding the suns and stars in my hands, and I’m offering them all to him.

But there’s still some doubt and wariness.

He thinks it’s too good to be true, so I just need to keep speaking with transparency until he’s convinced.

“When I say I like your smile, I mean the sight of it gives me this feeling of euphoria. It’s as if it physically tickles my heart. And when I touch your scars, there is no part of me that wants to recoil. I’m not disgusted by you. I’m enamored. I’m impressed. I’m infatuated. I’m... in love. I’ve fallen in love with you, Kai.”

His cock is growing. It’s going from half-mast to sticking straight out. That’s a good sign. At least one part of his body is reacting the way I’d like, but he’s too quiet. Standing in the downpour, he’s totally still and silent while the water washes away the rest of the lycan blood.

“Well.” Frazzled by how unresponsive he is, I lift my arms and drop them again with a shrug. “That’s the point I’ve been trying to make. Do with it what you will. If you don’t return my feelings, then I’ll try to respect that, but don’t avoid me because you think you’re doing me a favor.”

“You love me?” he finally rasps, his chest expanding as his breath hitches. “You love me as I am now?”

“I just said I did. I do. You think I’m lying?”

“No. I—I’m just used to—”

“Fuck what you’re used to!” The passionate exclamation explodes from me.

Rage over how he’s been treated makes my cheeks hot. I want to punch

anyone who's ever made him think he isn't worthy of love. I imagine he's received countless stares and shitty comments from the snotty fae nobles, and even though he tries to act unaffected, they've damaged his self-esteem.

"Fuck every person who's ever looked at you like you're less," I continue.

Pulling the sleeves of my dress off my shoulders, I shimmy out of the gown and let it slip down my body. The material pools around my ankles, and the steamy air kisses my bare skin.

Kai groans quietly when he zeroes in on my breasts, and I like the way his lips part as he gawks at me.

My underwear is next, and I kick off my shoes. Nude, I go up the tub steps and lower myself into the hot bath.

Wading over to Kai, I put myself under the waterfall with him. Dirt rinses from my hair and skin as I wrap a bold hand around his cock, which is now fully hard and throbbing with his pulse.

"Better yet... Fuck *me*."

CHAPTER 27

Ro

I can see the exact second Kai finally believes me. Tension eases on his face. His nostrils flare. His frown changes from a thin line to a relaxed pout.

His self-loathing dissolves, and it blows out of this room like dust in the wind, away from this building, gone for good.

Something shifts between us as we hold eye contact.

A veil comes down, and we're more connected than we've ever been because there's no fear or secrets separating us.

Still gripping his length, I whisper, "I'll always want you, Kai. All versions of you, in any place, under any circumstances."

Closing his eyes for a second, he breathes in deep as if he's inhaling my words.

Then he cradles my face and bends down to lightly bump our foreheads together. "Sunny. My Sunny. I'm yours. I'm yours if you want me. I'm yours even if you don't. I've belonged to you since the second we met, and that's never going to change." He runs a finger over my collarbone, tracing the line to my shoulder. "But I need you to understand what you're getting into with me."

I feel a bit drunk from happiness. "Why does that sound like a warning?"

"Because it is. I don't want to scare you, but the love I feel for you is so overwhelming, I'm frightened by it. I've never been possessive of a woman until you, and I'm being honest when I say I want to own you. *Own you*," he emphasizes gruffly. "You've been trapped before, and the fucked-up part of it is that I can see why someone would want to hold onto you so tightly. If you allow me to immerse myself in what I feel for you, I won't let you out of my sight because I'll be afraid you'll disappear. I'll follow you everywhere. I'll be your constant shadow. I'll shirk my duties and lie in bed with you all day. At night, I'll watch you sleep. Any nightmares you have, I'll chase them back

to hell, and every waking moment will be filled with so much pleasure, you'll never wish another minute away."

My heart thumps overtime. Coming from anyone else, this would majorly creep me out, but I've never wanted anything more, as long as it's Kai.

"I wouldn't feel trapped with you," I tell him. "I'd feel protected. Cherished. I've been lost for as long as I can remember, but then you found me. *You found me*, Kai." Placing my palm over his chest, I feel his heart thundering as much as mine. "This is where I belong. With you."

"You won't regret it. I won't let you down. Ever."

"I know." I'm still holding onto his cock with my other hand, and I give it a stroke. "Now, can we just shut up already so you can show me what it's like to be fucked by the man I love?"

Smirking, Kai bends down, and I think he's going to kiss me, but he stops short. "I want something from you first."

"Anything."

"I want to say the mate vow."

Shocked, I pause. "But that's for fated pairs."

"Fate brought us together," he points out, "and that's good enough for me. It shows me we're meant to be, so I'm going to do this right. Before I take your body, I want to give you my soul."

"You can't give me what you don't have. The Lost Land stole your soul," I remind him. "Mine is gone, too."

"The vow might carry over once we leave this stars forsaken place and get our souls back."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then we can just say it again."

Bringing both hands up to his neck, I caress his jawline with my thumbs. "We'll be contractually bound to each other for the rest of our lives. That's a long time. You're sure that's what you want?"

"No, it's not what I want," Kai disagrees, making my stomach twist for a second before he clarifies, "Only eternity would please me."

I'm elated, but a little bittersweet sadness creeps in. "According to fae legend, only soul mates get to remain linked beyond death. You know that."

"What does your god say about it?"

Pursing my lips, I try to recall scriptures I haven't thought about in centuries. "There's the concept of heaven. No one knows what it's like for certain, but in theory, all your loved ones are there in the afterlife. A husband

and wife would definitely get to be together because it wouldn't be heaven otherwise."

"Then I'll be your husband and you'll be my wife, and that's where we'll go."

I raise my eyebrows. "Are you saying you'll worship God with me?"

"I'll worship you while you worship your god. It's almost the same thing."

Amused, I smile. "Such a fae-like response."

"Just being honest. Be mine forever, Sunny."

As if I could refuse him.

This is more than I'd hoped for. More than I ever thought possible. I didn't expect to get an on-the-spot marriage, but every part of me wants to say yes.

And not that this is a major influence on my decision, but my unforgettable mortality is loitering around in the back of my mind.

I have to live for today because today might be all we have.

Nodding, I gulp down the emotion swelling in my throat. "All right, then. Recite it."

Kai doesn't hesitate. "From dawn 'til dusk, from dusk 'til dawn, I'll never love another."

When the last syllable leaves his mouth, he blows out the most satisfied sigh. And he smiles. A beautiful, unrestrained, adorably crooked smile.

Hearing the words and seeing his subsequent joy causes a physical reaction in me. My pulse becomes erratic, like my heart is jumping with excitement. It's knocking around in my chest with such gusto, I'm having trouble breathing.

Gasping a little, I deliver my part of the promise next. "From dawn 'til dusk, from dusk 'til dawn, I'll never love another."

As soon as I've said it, I understand why Kai seems so ecstatic.

There's a deep contentment inside me. It's new, and I don't even have a word for it. This type of happiness can't be described or named. It can only be experienced.

I'm lighter.

I feel young, energized, and really, really horny.

The vow isn't completed without sex. We're well aware of that fact.

Kai's cock is aware, too.

I didn't think it could get bigger, but it's more engorged than I've ever

seen it. The long shaft is stuck between us, and our height difference is so staggering, it's poking the middle of my breasts.

In the next second, Kai scoops me up, then his lips are on mine as I wind my legs around his waist. Putting each of his hands under my thighs, he anchors me to him by grabbing my butt.

A moment later, my back is pressed against one of the columns, and there's sudden pressure at my entrance.

I look down. Kai's erection has effortlessly found its way to where it needs to be. Now all he has to do is push it in.

As he gropes my backside, he says, "I'm worried I might lose control because of how badly I want you. I might be too rough."

"Just be you," I encourage. "Don't hold back. I just want you."

Kai kisses me. Hard. At the same time, he drives his cock into me.

I cry out into his mouth from the forceful intrusion, but it doesn't hurt. It's been so long since I had sex, I thought full penetration would be painful, especially with his size. Instead, bliss ignites every part of my body when he pulls out and does it again.

It helps that I'm so slick down there. The smooth glide allows him to work his way in, and the stretching sensation is so fucking satisfying. The emptiness that's been plaguing me ever since I met him is finally being filled.

He pulls out. Pushes back in. Again and again.

Each time, he sinks farther and farther.

Disconnecting from our kiss, I glance down with heavy-lidded eyes. Fascinated, I watch his cock disappear inside me inch by inch.

When he bottoms out, he goes still.

"It fits," he huffs with surprise. "Thank the stars, it fits."

All I can do is let out a little whimper in response, and I squirm, trying to get some friction.

He stops me with a firm squeeze to my ass. "Wait. Don't want to hurt you."

I get it. He's letting my body adjust, but being patient isn't easy for either of us.

Kai's trembling with the effort it takes to keep himself from moving. We're both moaning and panting, and in the meantime, we make out to make up for the lack of motion.

Nipping at my mouth, he nibbles my top lip, then the bottom. Next, his tongue sweeps between them, unhurried and thorough.

I meet him stroke for stroke, and he's the best kisser. Even when his mouth is barely brushing mine, it makes me so damn hot. With languid pecks, he rubs our lips together with a feathery softness.

All my muscles loosen more because of how tender he is, and my insides relax to accommodate him.

I'm a gentle lover.

That's what he'd claimed, and he was right.

With Kai, sex isn't scary. No bad memories come back to haunt me. I'm not triggered.

I'm whole.

It's funny how being owned by someone could make me feel more like myself than I ever have before, but it makes sense because Kai's a Healer.

He might not have access to his power right now, but he doesn't need it. Just by being himself, he's liberating me from the trauma that's been holding me hostage.

It makes me emotional, and I can't keep the tears at bay.

When Kai kisses the corner of my mouth, he tastes the salt from the hot streams running down my face.

Tilting his head with confusion, his body stiffens, and he starts to pull his face away from mine. "You're crying."

"It's not bad, I promise." Before he can get too far, I grasp the sides of his head with both hands. "Don't stop."

"Why do you cry?"

I can't explain it. "Let me show you. I'll show you what you do to me."

I pointedly rub my thumb over the thick scar on his cheek, and it startles him that I'm putting a spotlight on this particular mark. Immediately, his eyes become wary because he doesn't understand what I'm doing.

I draw him to me and kiss the textured skin.

He bucks a little, but I repeat it. Again and again, I cover the length up to his eyebrow, loving the part of him that he finds grotesque.

By the time I get back down to his cheek, I'm the one tasting tears.

Kai's eyes are shut tightly. There's a strained crease between his brows, and his nostrils are flaring as he takes quick inhales. He's trying desperately not to cry, but twin rivers roll down his face anyway.

"Hey." I place my hand on his bristly beard. "Look at me."

When he does, his shimmering eyes are like lasers straight to my heart.

I hurt for him, but I welcome the ache. I meet him where his pain is,

hoping if I join him there, I can heal him the same way he does me.

“You’re so gorgeous,” I insist with raw honesty. “Every part of you is handsome, and flawless, and *mine*. You think you’re the possessive one? I’m fiercely obsessed with you. Seriously, it might become a problem.”

He grins as two straggling tears trail through his facial hair. “I changed my mind about you touching me whenever you want.”

I scrunch my nose. “What?”

“I want more—touch me as much as you can. Put your hands on me all the time. At every opportunity, feel me.”

“I’ll do that,” I promise, and I follow through when I pet his neck.

Like a cat, he leans into my hand, and the growl rumbling in his chest sounds kind of like a purr.

Turned on by the extra affection, Kai starts rolling his hips against mine.

It’s the opposite of rough, punishing thrusts, and my mouth pops open because I’m surprised by how good it feels.

The glide. The fullness.

I’ve never known what it’s like to have someone move inside me this way, and I didn’t expect to like it this much.

I don’t just *like* it.

I *love* it.

As if I’m a virgin discovering sex for the first time, I register all the wonderful, foreign sensations. The way Kai’s torso is wedged between my thighs. The hot flexing of his ass under my linked ankles behind his back. The kisses he’s planting on the side of my neck.

Latching onto my pulse point, he sucks. Tingles burst all over me.

I let out a hoarse sound.

“Good?” Kai’s breath is hot against my skin, and he licks the spot.

I start sweating and shaking. “So good.”

“Tell me if it’s too much.”

Ever so slowly, he withdraws until his cock is almost out of me. When his tip is about to slip from my body, he pushes it back in. All the way. He massages my entire channel before stretching my cervix.

He does it over and over.

Leisurely. Calculated.

The sensation of being penetrated with such sluggish speed... I feel everything. His veins. His silky skin. When the ridges around his head make it to my entrance, they stimulate nerve endings I didn’t know I had, and every

time he's fully buried, his ball sac bumps against my asshole.

However, as good as this feels, I need more. Want it faster, harder.

"Kai?" I pant.

"Yes?" My warrior continues his torturous pumping.

"Is this your idea of too much?"

He grins down at me.

He's teasing. Deliberately working me up.

"I'm being romantic," he claims. "At least for the first time."

He talks like we have a sex marathon ahead of us. Maybe we do. Judging by how enthusiastic he was when he ate me out, I can probably assume he plans to give me multiple orgasms.

But I can't help worrying we'll get interrupted again at the worst time. Armand said he'd give us peace, but I have no reason to trust him, so I'm in a bit of a hurry to complete our coupling before anything bad can happen.

"What's going on?" Kai asks, reading my anxiety.

"I don't know what lies ahead in our future," I reply without filtering the truth. "When I promised you my heart and soul for the rest of my life, I meant it, but the problem is, that could be just hours. So I want you to fuck me like it's *not* our first time."

Kai's motions falter until coming to a complete stop. "What I'm hearing is, you want me to fuck you like it's the *last* time."

When he phrases it like that, it sounds tragic, but I whisper, "Yes."

Clenching his jaw, he gruffly claims, "I can fix this."

"Fix what?"

Instead of answering my question, he steps away from the column while keeping me right where I am with an arm hooked around my waist. Supporting my bottom with his other hand, his cock stays lodged inside me as he climbs out of the tub.

"What are we doing?" I ask, holding onto him.

The showerheads are still running, but Kai marches us back to the suite, leaving the glorious bathroom behind as we drip water all over the place. "It's my fault you're worried about the future."

I make a noise of frustration. "No, it's not. You know I do this."

"Well, it's my job to fuck you so good you forget about everything but right now. I can make my cock your entire world. It'll be your sun, your stars, your air. While I'm inside you, you'll barely be able to remember your own name."

I can't help it—I laugh at his arrogant declaration. “Are you for real?”

“Absolutely. But I guarantee you this—there *will* be a next time.”

I'm still giggling, but my humor is cut off when we get to the end of the bed. Kai drops me to the mattress, and I'm at the exact right height for him to remain standing while still fucking me.

Without missing a beat, he grips my hips. I barely have a second to take a breath before he's slamming into me with so much force that all the air leaves my lungs.

Reaching behind his back, he unlocks my ankles before lifting my legs up until they're vertical. Then he rests my heels against his shoulders.

Bending over me, Kai keeps my legs where they are while bracing his hands on my shoulders. He's almost folding me in half while getting the leverage he needs to fuck me with vigor.

His deep plunging draws primal cries from my throat.

Gasping and groaning, I squeeze fistfuls of the blanket while his cock hits a highly sensitive area at the end of my channel. Every time he bottoms out, it adds to a strange pressure building up. It's not the same as when I have an orgasm, but it's similar in the way that I feel like something big is coming.

The intensity grows and grows.

All of a sudden, something inside me releases, and I gush around Kai's cock.

Embarrassed, I squeak, because did I just pee on him?

Approving, Kai moans and gazes down at the shiny wetness coating his length.

“That's it, my queen,” he encourages. “Give me more of that.”

More of what? It's not like I can do it on command. I don't even understand what happened.

He keeps up his steady rhythm, and he pushes against that nerve-filled part of me a few more times.

Bewilderment and pleasure clash together when another rush of warm liquid leaks out. “H-how are you doing this? What is that?”

“That...” Kai pumps hard, nudging the area. “... is your G-spot. And you're squirting on me.”

“Oh.” I bite my lip, not sure if I should be humiliated or proud.

Always knowing how to make me comfortable and confident, Kai compliments, “That's my perfect queen. My beautiful wife, drenching my cock. You have no idea how happy it makes me to see your body respond this

way. It makes it easier for you to take me.”

“But it’s so... messy.” A puddle is forming beneath me. I can feel the wetness soaking into the silk comforter and expanding.

“That’s great.”

“Why is that great?”

“Because we’re fucking up Armand’s pristine room.” Kai oozes satisfaction. “Remember when I came all over his floor in the Day Realm palace? Well, after we’re done with this place, it’ll be like that, but on more surfaces.”

I’m amused at the way he talks like we’re going to trash this place as if we’re a couple of rock stars in a fancy hotel suite after a big-hair-band concert.

Continuing his pounding, one of Kai’s hands wanders to my breast. He massages the flesh in a circular motion, using his palm to stimulate my nipple before giving it a pinch.

Choking out a broken whimper, I arch my back.

And he’s right. Kai’s confidence about making his dick my everything isn’t misplaced. I don’t want to think about anything but him.

I give him my body, my mind, and my heart. I trust him so completely that I relinquish every part of myself to him.

He’s the center of my universe, and all my worries melt away.

Love surrounds us like a bubble. A safe, serene bubble where there is no Armand. The Lost Land doesn’t exist. The problems of my past or my future aren’t even a whisper in my mind.

With the way Kai’s banging into me, I’m scooting up on the mattress. Despite his efforts to keep me at the end of the bed, we’re just going at it too hard to stay in one place.

Climbing up with me, he lets my legs slide off his shoulders, but he doesn’t allow them to drop all the way. Putting his hands on either side of me, he keeps my knees notched by his elbows.

I’m spread open wider in this position, and now that my legs aren’t between us, there’s nothing preventing us from making out. Lowering his head, Kai kisses me sensually. His tongue probes my mouth in time with the rocking of his hips, and I match his passion.

Running my hands up his arms, I get to his shoulders, his neck, and his upper back. His skin is beautiful to me, and I show him that with my touch.

Although he doesn’t thank me with words again, I sense his gratefulness

while I caress parts of him that have gone neglected.

The next couple of minutes are bliss.

Somehow, Kai manages to be gentle, even when he's being rough. He's powerful and harsh, yet coordinated and smooth.

Just like when he fights, there's a gracefulness in the way he moves. His body rolls. He's aware of what he's doing. His actions are intentional and strategic.

I can be strategic, too.

Trailing my fingers from his neck up to his ears, I lightly grip the tips and rub.

I've always wondered what it would be like to touch the most erogenous zone on a fae, and I find out when Kai's entire body jerks. He barks out a low rumble, and his hips speed up like he can't help himself. His breathing becomes labored, his kisses get clumsy, and he murmurs a few dirty words in the Old Fae language.

It's flattering that I can make this strong warrior's composure crumble.

When I switch to light circles on his lobes, he grits out, "Fuck, Sunny. I'm gonna come if you keep doing that."

"That's the goal," I quip.

"Smart ass. Let's see how funny you think you are when I do this." Letting go of one of my legs, Kai frees his arm so he can bring a thumb to my clit.

I realize what he's doing. He wants me to come first.

I'm totally okay with that.

Heat blasts through me, and I whine as my orgasm starts to rev up. My inner walls spasm, and I'm sure Kai can feel it because every time there's a flutter, he grunts.

He flicks my clit faster, and right as I explode, I utter his name.

"Say it again," Kai growls against my throat.

Unable to think about anything other than the clenching, I form an incoherent, inquisitive mumble.

"My name," he specifies. "Say it while you tighten around my cock."

"Kai," I obey, chanting like it's an incantation. "Kai, Kai, Kai."

"Perfect," he praises. "Never forget who makes you feel this good."

Writhing, my fists hit the mattress as the relentless contractions rack my body. My moans turn to sobs because the orgasm is still going, and the pleasure is almost too much for me to handle.

Instead of tapering off, it's just getting stronger. I've never experienced anything like this. I actually can't see for a second. Spots bloom in my vision, and I suck in a bunch of air before releasing it with a scream.

Linking our fingers, Kai pins my hands by my head, giving me something to squeeze. And I need that. I need something to hold onto while I ride this out.

Then it's Kai's turn. Driving in as far as he can, he shouts as his cock jerks and warmth fills me.

Even though I just came, feeling him burst inside me triggers a second orgasm right on the tail of the first. As we get off together, my inner walls clamp down repeatedly, milking him until he's finished.

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck*." Kai halfway collapses, holding himself up just enough so he doesn't crush me with his weight.

Stillness comes over the room as we catch our breath.

Bracketing me in with his elbows, Kai rests his forehead against mine. Then he kisses me slowly. He starts with my lips, but he doesn't stay there. He peppers my entire face, planting his lips on my nose, my forehead, and my cheeks.

After a minute, he lifts his head to gaze down at me with awe.

"You've really done it now," he scolds playfully as he finger-combs some of the damp hair away from my temple and tucks it behind my ear.

"Done what?" A bit loopy, a silly grin pulls at my mouth.

"Made me happy." His response is serious, and I reach up to caress his face—the side with the scar.

"No more resting bitch face?"

He laughs a little. "Are you kidding? The resting bitch face is what fuels my reputation as a badass. I can't lose that. Only you get this side of me. Only you, Sunny."

Smiling, I wiggle, reveling in the feeling of him still inside me.

I'm extra slippery from my own wetness and his, and the slide of his softening cock in my sore channel is nice. Really nice.

"Keep going," I request, sort of kidding.

Obliging, Kai starts moving again. "Yes, my queen."

To my shock, his erection grows, and the fullness comes back.

My eyes are wide as I ask, "We're really doing it again already?"

He sends me a naughty grin. "Told you there'd be a next time."

CHAPTER 28

Kai

Ro catches me staring at her as we descend the stairs of the City Hall, and when we lock eyes, a bright pink blush colors her face. She grins and snuggles into me.

I love how easy she is to read.

I don't have to guess what she's thinking because my mind is on the same track—all the dirty things we did in the past day are front and center in our memories.

Just as I promised, there were multiple next times.

We fucked in so many different positions. I took Ro from behind, with her ass in the air, her face pressed to the bed, and her hair wrapped in my fist. Then I sat on one of the chairs at the dining table, patting my lap to invite her to get on top. She did, and she rode me until she came all over me with that juicy gush. After that, I pressed her up against the window, leaving a huge smudge in the shape of her sweaty backside. During the last time, we were sprawled out on our sides, spooning on the bed, and I slowly made love to her because we were too exhausted to do much else.

She fell asleep with my cock still inside her.

Long after I slipped out, I stayed awake. I knew our temporary break was dwindling, and I wanted to spend the time we had left replaying everything, especially how vocal she was when I had her on her hands and knees. How she squealed and screamed and begged for more. Sometimes she cussed in Portuguese—that's my favorite.

Eventually, I had to wake Ro to eat. I hate to give Armand credit for anything, but he didn't skimp on the sustenance. Even though the picnic basket had been sitting there for hours, the meat and biscuits were warm. Also, the tea was piping hot as if it had just been poured from a kettle on the stove. The dishes must've been enchanted, and it made the experience

surprisingly enjoyable.

But it came to an end all too soon.

Right as we finished eating, the room changed back. The grandeur disappeared, the bed vanished, and the lights went out.

It was a bit depressing going back to the dusty gray surroundings, but there was a gift left for us—clothes.

Inside the wardrobe, behind the broken doors, I spied the lavender of Ro's new dress, and I'm glad we're able to continue our mission in clean outfits.

Dare I say, we look downright civilized.

Ro and I are walking away from the City Hall much differently than when we first came to it. Not only are we clean, but now we're a committed couple. One unit.

Husband and wife.

I can't believe Ro is mine. Everything about this beautiful woman is mesmerizing to me.

Her hair is tied back in a loose ponytail, and thanks to her insistence, my own is braided neatly along my scalp. Her lips are puffy from all the kissing we did. The dress fits her well, giving her a nice amount of cleavage with how it's pushing her breasts up.

I've made note of the fact that the gown has long sleeves. That's a typical style for the Night Realm or the Dream Realm because of the cooler climates, and I wonder if it's a clue about where we're headed next.

There's no telling, and I'm wary about making assumptions. Armand is too unpredictable. For all I know, he's trying to throw us off.

Slipping her hand beneath my dark blue tank top, Ro lovingly caresses my stomach. As she rubs back and forth on my abdomen, we both let out a content sigh.

However, Ro's sigh turns into a gasp, and she staggers to a stop when she sees the lycan arm on the pavement just twenty feet ahead. The hairy limb is lying there with sinew and bone sticking out of the place where it was hacked off. Down the block, there's a trail of dried blood leading away from the body part.

I sheepishly grimace. "Sorry, I should've cleaned that up. I just wanted to get back to you as soon as possible."

Repulsed, Ro winces but says, "I understand."

"I feel the need to warn you there's more evidence of the slaughter in this

direction. A hand. Part of a leg. And then the head and body. He was the strongest in the pack, and he put up quite the struggle.”

“Do we have to go this way?” Ro motions to the trail of carnage. “Where are we even going?”

“The temple,” I reply. “Before we seek out the next challenge, I thought you might want to see it, even if it is in ruins. Once we turn this corner, it’s a short walk away.”

“Oh.” She perks up, seeming to forget about the gory mess now that she has something to look forward to. “I’d like that.”

We continue on, letting the tall belltower peeking above rooftops lead us.

In just a few minutes, we’ve made it to the temple without incident.

As we approach it, Ro observes, “It’s more rustic than I thought it’d be. The shape of it reminds me of a one-room schoolhouse in the old-fashioned times of the Earth realm. Very cottage-slash-church chic.”

“Don’t let the humble craftsmanship fool you. See this?” I wipe a path in the dust on the oval window on the door, revealing sparkling colors. “This isn’t stained glass. It’s all giant gems that have been melded together. Rubies, emeralds, sapphires, amethysts. And it’s true that the structure appears unpretentious, but an artist sculpted the building from matter taken from the floor of Issika Lake. Iridescent scales can be seen in some places because it was a mermaid cemetery.”

“They dug up dead mermaids to build this?” Ro sounds appalled. “Isn’t that sacred ground?”

I shrug. “The mermaids are not known for their compassion toward each other or anyone else. They’re the ones who traded the clay. That’s how they gained control of the canal leading to the Endless Sea.”

“Oh. Morbid.”

“I’m sorry if the dark history taints your opinion of the building, but it really is beautiful inside.” I reach for the handle to show her, but when I’m a few inches away from the shiny silver, I pause.

I frown.

That frown morphs into a scowl.

“What’s wrong?” Ro glances around, paranoid.

“The knob. There’s hardly any dust on it, which means it’s been used recently.”

“The lycans?” Ro guesses. “Maybe when they were searching for us, they came here.”

Tipping my head back and forth, I half-heartedly concur, “Perhaps.”

But I don’t really think that’s the case.

The lycans would’ve been following our smell, and we weren’t anywhere near the temple. They would’ve had no reason to go inside, and the one I was chasing never made it this far.

Pulling out my sword, I put my arm in front of Ro as I tug at the door. It opens easily, and no dirt puffs out because it’s not clogged up with debris.

For certain, someone’s been in here, and my skin prickles as I come to a realization: We’re probably encountering the second challenge.

Silently, Ro and I make eye contact, and the concern on her face mirrors mine “I’ll go in first.”

Nodding, she gets behind me and slips her fingers into the waistband of my pants. It’s an intimate action where she’s skin-on-skin with some of the worst scars on my lower back, but she’s not singling out the textured stripes. She’s just doing what I asked her to do—she’s touching me as often as possible, and it feels incredibly right to me.

We enter the building with the tiniest steps, glancing from left to right. Right to left.

Once the door is closed, it’s dim but not too dark for me to make an additional shocking assessment. “It’s so... clean.”

The white marble floors are scrubbed of any filth, and they’re actually gleaming. Cathedral ceilings come to a high point overhead, and there’s no dust on the wooden support beams. The oval windows at intervals on the walls are coated with layers of dirt on the outside, but in here the jewels are shining.

The candles are the most obvious clue that this space has been used. All the wall sconces have half-burnt sticks with wax pooled around the bottoms.

“This place has been kept up by someone,” I say, ruling out the lycans as the intruders.

“Armand?” Ro suggests the possibility. “Maybe it’s another illusion?”

Staying quiet, I just work my jaw with irritation because I’m uncertain, and I hate not knowing.

Ro and I slowly shuffle down the main aisle.

On either side of us, there are rows of benches facing an altar. As we get closer to the raised stage-like platform, I see a long table.

Suddenly, Ro grasps my hand and squeezes it so tightly, I’m afraid she might injure her own knuckles. Her pulse is fast—I feel it through the veins

in her palm.

“What’s going on?” I ask, noting the way she’s staring at the scene ahead with horror on her face.

I look forward, searching for obvious dangers, when Ro finally whispers, “Frosted glass.”

“The glass table?” I’m very confused at her reaction.

Shaking her head, she swallows so hard I can hear it. “No. That’s not a table. It’s a casket, and I recognize it. Zay—” Her breath hitches with a sob. “Zaylee’s in there.”

CHAPTER 29

Ro

“Are you certain?” Kai doesn’t want it to be true, but I know it is.

“Yes.” When I look closely, the dark outline of a body inside the casket is impossible to miss. “This is what Armand showed me when he said I could see my family as they are now.”

Several vases of glass flowers surround the vessel. They’re not roses. The petals are pointy, like lilies, and they’re the same color as the casket. A semi-opaque grayish white.

As I gaze at the setup that resembles a funeral, grief punches me in the gut. Nausea swims in my stomach. My heart is both heavy with devastation and light with panicked fluttering.

I’m woozy.

Gripping Kai for support, I sway on my feet. “Don’t you see what that means? We’re in the present. The first challenge was in the past, but this is *now*. This is happening. It’s real.”

When Kai realizes I’m making sense, he closes his eyes for a second as if it pains him. “Past, present, and future. It’s likely Armand would follow a pattern. He probably takes great pleasure in watching the contestants of his game figure it out and experience the consequent dread.”

“I have to see Zaylee.” I take a step forward, but Kai grabs my arm to stop me.

“Let me be the one to check it out, okay?”

“No.”

“It’s only going to hurt you.”

True, but I owe Zaylee this—my attention, my mourning. Because what did her life amount to if I’m not even willing to look at her one more time?

“Maybe this challenge isn’t about your strength.” My voice wavers because I’m trying not to cry. “Maybe it’s about mine. Armand never said we

wouldn't each be tested.”

Stepping in close, Kai places a quick kiss of comfort on my lips. “We’ll go together, then. You’re not alone.”

Grateful to have him by my side, I hug his waist as we eat up the distance between us and the casket.

After I climb the three stairs, I hover over the glass top and bravely peer inside at the beautiful face of my innocent granddaughter.

“It’s her,” I confirm, giving into the tears that want to come.

Two big drops fall from my face onto the glass.

Kai rubs my back, and his voice is filled with sympathy when he says, “Oh, Sunny. This is an immeasurable loss. I’m so sorry.”

I’m the one who should be sorry.

Because I failed Zaylee. I don’t know what I could’ve done differently to save her, but if I’d known the answer, I would’ve done it. I would’ve done anything.

I’m not very good at standing up for myself, but when it comes to innocent and vulnerable members of my family, my protective side kicks in.

Zaylee deserved to live, and the world needed her in it. She wasn’t just the future of a kingdom. She was a person.

She mattered. Just like Kai said when we first entered the maze, everyone makes a difference just by existing, and now the positive impact Zaylee could’ve had on Valora is no longer a possibility.

Then there’s Zander and Maelyn. How am I supposed to tell them their daughter is gone? The death of a child is something no one recovers from, and I hurt for them.

I’m sad for myself, too. I wanted to know Zaylee. There’s so much I could’ve taught her. I bet there’s a lot I could’ve learned from her as well.

One of the worst parts is not knowing what led her to this fate. I have no idea how she died or if she suffered in the end.

Feeling like I should say something meaningful and final, I try to recall prayers from the bible, but I can’t. It’s been too long, so I just say some words that sound good. “Rest in peace, my sweet granddaughter. Your journey is done, and there will be no more pain for you. I promise to honor your memory somehow.”

When I turn away, Kai has his arms spread, ready to receive me and my sorrow.

I melt into him, and he pets my hair and plants kisses on my head while

whispering, "I'm here. I'm here."

Sobbing against his chest, I let myself feel the incredible pain without trying to dull it or push it away, but I'm interrupted when Kai starts excitedly patting my shoulder.

"Wait. Look." His happy tone is very out of place in a moment like this. "Princess Zaylee's chest rises. She's breathing."

"What?"

"She's alive."

Spinning back to the casket, I flatten my hands on top of it and peer closely with my nose smushed against the surface.

As I watch Zaylee intently, there's movement I didn't notice before. Her lungs are expanding. Her eyelids are twitching, like she's dreaming. Her skin is pale, but her lips and cheeks are a healthy pink.

Zaylee isn't dead... she's asleep.

"Zaylee!" I yell, slapping the glass so hard my fingers sting. "Wake up. Hey! Zaylee!"

There's no reaction from her, so I start punching the solid surface, but all that does is send a zinging ache through my knuckles.

Laying his hand over mine, Kai discourages me from injuring myself. "I don't think she can hear you. Maybe it's soundproof."

"Of course. Soundproof." Prodding along the top edge, I try to find a way to open it. "There must be a latch somewhere."

While I'm searching for a crack I can't find, Kai stands back and observes my actions with an expression that's half skepticism, half sympathy.

"What?" I ask, motioning for him to join me in my endeavor. "Why aren't you helping? We have to get her out."

"Sunny," he starts carefully, "I understand you want to free her, but what are you going to do with her after that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, she's asleep. She might be under a spell, and there's a chance we won't be able to wake her. Am I to carry her through the rest of our journey?"

Still feeling around for a lid, my lips thin with irritation over the fact that Kai has a point.

He just poked a giant hole in my plan.

And okay, I don't really have a plan. A plan would require a next step, which I haven't considered.

"Are you suggesting we leave her here?" I ask incredulously, halting to

face Kai. “Since when do you back down from a mission?”

“With all due respect, she isn’t my mission. You are.”

“But she’s my family. She’s your family, now, too.”

Nodding, Kai hears me, but he’s in warrior mode. “Think of all the risks first. If I’m carrying her—which I don’t mind doing, by the way—my arms will be occupied. The problem there is that I won’t be able to use my sword, and that will prohibit me from protecting you or her. Plus, we don’t know what taking her out of this vessel will do to her. Will it harm her? Inside this container, she’s been preserved, protected from the elements and filth. She looks as well as one could in this shithole, and that leads me to believe magic is involved. Somehow, someone has kept her alive and clean. She’s been cared for.”

Damn it. Why does he have to be so rational?

I recognize I’m not thinking clearly because my emotions are in the way, and I try to view the situation from an outside perspective.

Whoever put Zaylee in here, they’ve done a lot of work with her and with the temple. I know from personal experience that keeping a space free of dust in the Lost Land is a constant job, even when you’re in one of the enchanted bubbles.

There isn’t one speck of dirt on Zaylee. Her hands are clasped over her stomach as if someone posed them that way, and there isn’t any grime under her fingernails. Her hair is brushed, shiny, and straight. The black strands fan out on the pillow under her head and spill over her shoulders.

In a dress made of tan suede, she’s adequately covered, though the sewing skill of the outfit leaves a lot to be desired. Poorly done needlework lines the seams at the neck and the arm holes of the sleeveless top.

Did she make this dress herself? She and I aren’t acquainted well enough for me to know if she’s good with a needle and thread.

The fit is also wrong, like she’s grown out of it. The hem at the bottom is a little high, a few inches above her ankles. Under the cinched waist, the curves of her hips flare out. Above it, the top is stretched over her chest.

“Her body has obvious signs of... maturing,” I say, choosing my words carefully because I’m not sure how to say her breasts look bigger without making it awkward. “That indicates she’s been here for a while. Long enough to become an adult. I’d say she’s at least twenty-one.”

Respectfully keeping his gaze above her neckline, Kai adds, “Yes. Her face has lost the roundness it had when she was younger.” He frowns with

confusion. “But how could she age so quickly? You and Zaylee arrived at the same time, and you weren’t Armand’s captive for years, right? There’s no way.”

“Definitely not. Time could pass differently in other regions,” I deduce. “The Lost Land is senseless like that.”

Distraught, I stare at my granddaughter. Although she’s in good shape, she’s been here for far too long. Who knows how many years she’s spent locked up and unconscious? It could be more than five years. Ten. Twenty?

It’s not fair to her, and I come to the conclusion that abandoning her isn’t an option. I can’t walk away from her, even if it’s risky.

“We have to take her with us,” I state with gumption. “It’s so awful, thinking of her here, alone, her life passing her by.”

“If that’s what you want, then that’s what we’ll do,” Kai concedes easily.

I know he’s not giving in because he thinks it’s a good idea. He’s simply granting me what I wish.

Because he loves me.

And I love him for it. However, while I appreciate his willingness to disregard his instincts and training for me, I want to convince him that this is the right call.

Attempting to justify jeopardizing our quest, I suggest, “Freeing Zaylee might be the test. After all...” I knock on the glass. “It’s going to take some miracle to get this thing open. There must be a trick to it because the outside is completely smooth. There are no cracks. No hinges. It’s like it was built around her and sealed up. How is that possible?”

“About as impossible as these lilies.”

Kai picks up one of the flowers from a vase. Spinning the stem in his fingers, he scrutinizes the ultra-thin petals before trying to break one off. With how delicate it is, he should be able to snap it, but it stays whole.

“Whatever material this is made of, it’s unfamiliar to me. Brute force might be the only way.” Putting the flower back where it belongs, Kai brandishes a weapon I haven’t seen him use yet. He unhooks a small mallet from his belt, goes to the bottom of the casket near Zaylee’s feet, and raises it. “Give me space. Shards may fly.”

After I’ve stationed myself at the bottom of the steps, Kai brings the mallet down. Hard. I wince when it makes contact, expecting to hear the ear-splitting sound of shattering glass.

Instead, it’s just a quiet plink.

Rising on my tiptoes, I study the casket and the perplexed expression on Kai's face. The mallet didn't even make a dent.

Kai tries again.

Same thing.

"What the fuck?" he mutters.

Soon, he's hitting the glass like a miner desperately digging for treasure. He violently slams his tool against the surface, getting more and more agitated when his efforts produce no results.

He's so intent on his task, he doesn't notice when the door to the temple opens.

In my peripheral vision, there's movement.

I turn my head.

Just before the door closes and cloaks the entrance in shadows, I glimpse the outline of a masculine figure holding a spear up. His arm is back and the sharp point is poised to be thrown right at us.

CHAPTER 30

Ro

“Kai!” I shout.

My warning gives him just enough time to duck and avoid getting impaled through the eye. The spear sails over his head and lodges into the wall behind the casket.

Immediately, Kai’s wings bust out. He switches the mallet to his left hand and removes his sword with his right. Flapping his wings, he flies over me, lands in the center aisle, and assumes a fighting stance as he prepares to take on our intruder.

I can’t see the man very well because he’s hiding in the shadows, but I hear him tut. “I don’t know who you are or why you’re here, but you’re trespassing, and that means I have to end you.”

Kai chuckles darkly. “Why don’t you come closer, and we can see which one of us dies?”

“I don’t need to come any closer.”

Suddenly, the head of Kai’s mallet starts to... melt?

“What—?” Kai tips the tool so the oozing metal doesn’t get on his skin.

The wet heap slips off the handle and plops to the floor like a wasted ice cream cone. Next, the wood splits apart with a series of snaps. Letting out a shout of alarm, Kai drops the ruined rod, too.

When he shakes his hand, a few long splinters are sticking out of his flesh. The sharp, jagged pieces are embedded, and some blood runs from the wounds.

Lifting his hand toward his face, he intends to pull them out with his teeth because he refuses to let go of his sword.

I rush to his side to help him.

When I grab his wrist, he rotates his body so he’s in front of me and barks, “What are you doing? Get away.”

His grumping no longer hurts my feelings. Because the root of his foul mood isn't dislike or indifference.

It's love and worry.

"Hush," I shoot back, fussing over him as I tug the spikes out. "I'm not going to let you take on this asshole one-handed."

"Did you just call me an asshole?" the guy inquires, but I still can't see him because now there's a big ass warrior in my way.

"I certainly did."

"Sunny," Kai lightly scolds. "Don't move his wrath to you. I don't understand his power. I've never seen anything like it."

"Your man is wise. Listen to him."

For some reason, I'm not intimidated by this guy. I'm just so insanely *pissed off*, and my anger is overshadowing my fear.

Who the hell does he think he is, barging in here and throwing shit?

Disregarding the advice of both men, I quip, "You know what? I'm tired. I'm tired of being scared. Tired of feeling like I have to be careful not to say the wrong thing to some psycho with a fragile ego. Fuck you, whoever you are." As I remove the last splinter from Kai's palm, I tack on, "Add coward to your title. Because only a cowardly asshole would attack someone first and ask questions later. But I'm not even surprised. That kind of ruthlessness is just spot on for one of Armand's men."

"Armand?" the man parrots with distaste. "I don't belong to that madman."

"Well, your tactics are much the same as his." I poke my head around Kai. "As I said—cowardly."

"It's not cowardly to protect my territory at all costs." He finally moves into the dim light, and I glare at the man who casually leans against one of the benches at the back.

I'm surprised by his appearance.

He's so different from the other men in the Lost Land. Similarities are there—his hair is black, he has light eyes, and his skin is pale. But that's about all they have in common.

Unlike Armand's scrawny slaves, he's very muscular. And his hair... there's lots of it. The dark strands are messy, several inches long, and sticking up wildly. A chunk of it is falling over his forehead in between his eyes, but he doesn't seem bothered by it. There's dark stubble on his face, and I bet if he let it grow, he'd have a full beard in no time.

I analyze his clothing.

Instead of a ratty uniform, he's wearing a loincloth made of an animal hide. His boots are sturdy, yet soft. The leather is laced up with rope, and fur is sticking out of the top at mid-calf.

I recognize that fur. His outfit is made from lycans.

No, he's not one of Armand's minions.

He's worse.

"Barbarian," Kai spits the word like an insult.

The man grins, though his smile has no warmth, and he has sharpened fangs where his incisors are. "Some call us that. We prefer to be referred to as 'the free.'"

"You took Zaylee," I accuse forcefully as I step around Kai to face this bastard.

Kai grabs my arm, but I resist when he tries to tug me behind him again.

Sneering at the barbarian like the scum he is, I let a few scathing expletives explode. The nasty words are in Portuguese so he won't know what I'm saying, but my burning hatred is clear.

I expect a fit of rage from him, but he just seems intrigued.

He stares at me for a few beats, then the hardness in his eyes softens. "You look just like her."

He's referring to Zaylee, and I correct, "No, she looks like *me*."

I'm staking my claim on her. He can trap her in a glass case and call the temple his territory, but that doesn't make her his property.

"You're the grandmother who was given to the Overlord of the West," the barbarian drawls without an ounce of hostility. In fact, his tone is almost friendly. "Zaylee will be happy to hear you're healthy enough to insult me with such voracity. She's been very worried about you."

"She's talked about me?" I ask, wary of how quickly his aggression has disappeared.

Aloof, he responds, "We've talked about many subjects."

"How?" I gesture to the sealed container in the background. "She can't hear anything, and she won't wake up. Is the container enchanted?"

"It's what's inside it with her that keeps her asleep. Under her pillow, there's a pouch filled with a magical substance."

"The blackout powder," Kai says, like he's familiar with the stuff.

"A diluted version of it. The presence of the powder in such a small space causes the body to go into a state of dormancy. As long as the vessel is

sealed, Zaylee will slumber, but she wakes within minutes of opening it.”

Hope blooms inside me because Zaylee can wake up after all. She’ll be alert when she joins Kai and me. She might even be able to help us in the game with her fire power.

“Now, if you’ll excuse us,” the guy flippantly quips as if we’re imposing. “Zaylee and I have plans.”

I scoff. “Plans?”

He nods. “It’s time for our visit.”

Oh, I don’t like this. The entire setup has red flags all over it.

Scrutinizing him, I try to read his intentions.

Obviously, he’s formed an attachment to Zaylee. But is the root of his fondness based on friendship? Or is he like a dog that doesn’t want to give up his bone?

Or is it what I fear most—obsession?

His impatient gaze keeps floating to the casket. He’s annoyed because Kai and I are standing between him and his precious box full of princess, and his interest is a little too intense for my taste.

“And what do you do to Zaylee during these visits?” My voice is low and threatening, and it’s obvious that I’m alluding to any violation that might’ve occurred. “If you’ve touched her—”

“I would never mistreat her that way.” Seeming genuinely offended, his face screws up. “I feed her, and make sure she’s well. She stretches her legs and gets some exercise. Sometimes we play games.”

He basically just described a puppy.

My eyes must be bulging out of my skull. “She’s not a pet.”

“I’m well aware of that.” Pushing away from his spot, he walks toward us.

Worried his sword might be destroyed next, Kai grips the handle so tight his knuckles pop. I imagine he doesn’t want to lose his trusty weapon. That blade has probably been with him through hundreds of years and countless battles.

Fortunately, it stays intact. For now, at least.

Once the barbarian stops a few feet away from us, I notice his lack of supplies. He has no bag, no belt of weapons. He carries nothing.

“So where’s the food you intend to give her?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Normally, I’d bring fresh game.” He spreads his empty hands and gives Kai an accusing glance. “But it seems all the animals I usually hunt have

been killed.”

“The lycans, you mean.” My stomach roils. “You eat those revolting creatures?”

“Only the healthy ones. It’s either that, or I bring goods I’ve raided from Vaeront’s treaty deliveries. If I can’t provide either of those, I nourish Zaylee myself.”

“Nourish Zaylee yourself...” I repeat. This conversation is getting worse and worse. “With your *blood*?”

“Sometimes. As you know, food is scarce and it’s not always an option. Today I can only give her my own essence.”

Suppressing a gag, I press my palm to my churning abdomen. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“It’s not as awful as it sounds. You should try it sometime.”

“Ew, no.” I look at him as if he’s poison.

“I didn’t mean with me,” he whispers, leaning his head to Kai suggestively.

Heat rushes to my face at the implication Kai and I should drink from each other. That would be wrong and uncivilized. Wouldn’t it?

Shockingly, the thought of doing that with Kai is much less repulsive than it should be.

Shaking my head, I stay on topic. “Have you bitten Zaylee?”

“No,” the man answers with a heavy sigh. “Much to her dismay.”

“*Her* dismay?”

“Since you’ve never participated in the practice of blood sharing, you wouldn’t understand how addictive it can be. Zaylee isn’t forced to feed from me. She asks to do it.” A hint of pride comes through when he declares, “And she’s begged me to drink from her in return, but I’ve denied her every time.”

“Liar.” I refuse to accept what he’s saying. “All lies.”

He briefly lifts his arms in a surrendering gesture. “Listen, now that I can see we’re all friends here—”

“We are not your friends,” I refute with vigor.

“Well, we’re not enemies.”

“Like hell we aren’t. You’ve imprisoned my granddaughter!” My shout echoes off the cathedral ceilings, and my temper boils hotter than it has in a long time.

I want to punch this guy’s smarmy face.

I think I’ll do just that.

Without contemplating the retaliatory response I might receive, I march toward him with my fist ready.

Unfortunately, Kai intervenes. I don't even get three steps before his arm is snaking around my front and pulling me back against him.

"What are you doing?" I wiggle in his hold. "This is Zaylee's captor. Let me go."

"Sunny, don't get me wrong, you have every right to be upset, but we want to be in a position to negotiate, and this man might not be very cooperative if we maim him."

Part of me wants to be angry with Kai for being so calm right now, but I see what he's doing. If Zaylee's ability to be free depends on a barbarian's agreement to release her, I need to play nice.

Which is really fucking hard to do.

"I just want to slap him around a little," I complain indignantly.

Snickering, the man strides by us lazily like I didn't just almost attack him. "Zaylee has done worse to me. Don't assume I haven't been punished for my actions—I have."

"What did she do?" Still in Kai's embrace, I shuffle around to keep the guy in my sights as he climbs the stairs.

"My hair used to be very long, and I was proud of it. Considering how difficult it is to grow hair in this universe, I was quite perturbed to lose it."

"She burnt it off?" I assume.

"Every single bit of it."

"Good."

Grinning like he's not bitter about Zaylee's retribution, he stops at the head of the box. He lays a hand on it, and I don't miss the possessive action.

"I don't even know your name," I say cordially, grappling with the need to be amiable and my desire to claw this guy's eyes out.

"You'll have to excuse me." He bows slightly. "I'm not used to introducing myself to new people. I'm Madden, one of the leaders of my tribe. As I said before, any friend of Zaylee's is a friend of mine. You might not feel that way about me, and that's fine. You can try to hurt me, though I guarantee you won't be successful, so I suggest refraining from needlessly exhausting yourself."

Such an arrogant jerk. "Why did you abduct Zaylee in the first place?"

"I didn't," Madden replies. "My brother Hiram did. He saw an opportunity when he spotted her wandering in The Unknown. He thought we

could ransom her to one of the overlords, but his decision was spontaneous and impulsive, and he didn't realize Zaylee was just sixteen until he got back to our camp where the dust storm was settled. Hiram and I might be bad men, but we don't exploit children. It's our one rule."

"How noble of you," I drawl sarcastically, unable to keep the snide comment to myself.

Faeries normally don't pick up on facetiousness, especially dark fae who've been banished from society for half a million years.

However, Madden does. He must've learned it from Zaylee, and one side of his mouth twitches with humor before he continues, "I never had intentions to let her be a slave, which is why I've hidden her here. I went against my tribe and defied my own brother to protect her."

As I look around at the space, I begin to see the temple differently. It might not be a prison. Maybe it's a fortress.

Still, I have so many questions. "Are you telling me she's never been harmed?"

"Not even a little."

"How long has she been here?"

"Rough estimate? About five years."

Well, that's not as bad as twenty, but it's not great either. Zaylee's missed an entire phase of growing up. A crucial one, when she should've been skipping about her home without a care in the world, figuring out which clothes she likes best, and daydreaming about love interests. Reading, drawing, dancing, gazing at the sky. Teenage stuff.

"What kind of repercussions would this dormancy have on the physical and mental development of a child?" I ask.

"I admit that I wasn't sure how it would affect her in the beginning, but from what I've observed, I can state with certainty that Zaylee's growth has not been hindered in any way, and that includes her wisdom."

"So you experimented on her? That's fucked up."

Unaffected by my ire, Madden defends his actions. "You don't understand what it's like out there in The Unknown. Some of the men in my tribe have no morals at all, and Zaylee could've been violated or traded, regardless of her age. I've shielded her from unthinkable unpleasantness."

He's right. I hate to admit it, but if it weren't for Madden, the past several years of Zaylee's life could've been a lot worse than spending most of it sleeping.

“Well, how do you get this thing open?” I wave my hand at the case, hoping Madden will show us with a demonstration that will free Zaylee.

“As you’ve witnessed, I have a rare form of telekinesis,” he touts with conceit. “Some call me a Sculptor. I can mold materials. I can destroy them, or I can turn them into something else entirely. Watch and see.”

Instead of making an example of the casket, he gazes at the floor and homes in on the melted mallet. When I look down at it, the wood and metal start to move in reverse.

Disturbed by the sight, Kai steps back, dragging me with him as strange sounds come from the materials. There’s some wet slurping and snapping while they fuse together and reshape into what they once were.

Within seconds, the tool has been restored. It’s in one piece as if it were never dismantled to begin with.

“Go ahead,” Madden says to Kai. “Pick it up. It’s not perfect. There are flaws when I don’t have enough time to fix things, but it should be functional.”

Kai’s suspicious glare pings from Madden to the mallet, and he quickly bends to retrieve his weapon.

Reluctantly impressed, he turns it in his hand. “It’s like healing, but for objects.”

Tipping his head toward the glass case, Madden explains, “This vessel was a collection of glass—vases, mirrors, windows—but I’ve changed the molecular structure of it so much that it only responds to me. It’s indestructible.”

That explains why Kai couldn’t break it.

“Well, Madden.” Kai squares his shoulders with an assertive air. “Your obligation to the princess has come to an end. We’re here, and we can take her off your hands.”

Raising my chin like the queen I am, I diplomatically intone, “Yes, Princess Zaylee will be leaving with us today. We’re indebted to you for the care you’ve provided for her, and I’ll do my best to find a way to compensate you for the favor once we’ve returned to Valora. I hereby officially release you from your duty. Thank you.”

“No.” Madden’s swift refusal douses my excitement.

“No?” I parrot incredulously.

“No, you cannot take her,” he clarifies.

“Why not?”

“I’m not letting Zaylee go with someone who’s owned by Armand.” He flicks a finger at the necklace Kai’s wearing. “That collar tells me everything I need to know. Whatever quest you’re on, it’s not a safe one. I’d never forgive myself if something happened to Zaylee because I was no longer watching her.”

Flustered, I sputter. “That’s not your burden to bear.”

“She’s not a burden to me.” Madden gazes into the casket with a look I know too well.

It’s the same way Kai looks at me.

Shit. Fuck. Damn.

We’re not competing with admiration or respect. This isn’t a case of someone developing a friendship over time.

We’re looking at the worst-case scenario.

Madden’s obsessed with Zaylee.

CHAPTER 31

Ro

“You want to keep her for yourself,” I sling the accusation.

Nostrils flaring, Madden says, “I’ll let her go when someone who isn’t tangled with Armand or Vaeront comes to rescue her.”

“Even if it’s Pippin?” I challenge. “He’s out there searching for her right now.”

Immediately, anger shrouds Madden’s face at the familiar name. Obviously, Zaylee’s mentioned her former crush, and I’d say somebody’s jealous.

“Not him,” Madden growls. “He didn’t protect her before. Why should I think he’d be able to do it now?”

“So we’re not good enough,” I conclude flatly. “And the warrior tasked with her retrieval isn’t either. Tell me, then—who’s worthy of saving her?” When he doesn’t answer, I cross my arms and say what he won’t. “No one, that’s who. No one but you.”

“I’ve done a fine job so far.”

“Right.” I laugh humorlessly. “Because storing Zaylee in a box is super fun for her. I bet she’s thrilled about it.”

Instead of admitting what he’s done isn’t ideal, he doubles down. “What’s important is that she’s still alive to have any feelings at all.”

“Are you saying she’s glad you put her in a coma?”

Madden gestures to the messy locks on his head. “As you can see, she hasn’t burnt my hair off for a while, so I’m taking that as a sign that she’s content with her situation.”

“You really think she’s happy about waking up to find that her body and her mind are older, yet she has no memories or experiences to go along with her aging? It doesn’t bother her that she’s missed out on the last years of her childhood? She’s never asked to go home? She’s never begged you not to put

her back in that casket?”

“It’s not a casket,” he states, but my interrogation has put a chink in his armor.

There’s a flash of guilt on his face. The show of transparent shame only lasts for a second, but the fact that it’s there tells me I’m getting through to him.

Something I need to remember about Madden is that he’s not a man of honor. He’s a barbarian in a lawless land. He doesn’t care about my feelings, so I need to appeal to his affection for Zaylee. He might be immune to my pleas, but he isn’t to hers.

“There’s no disputing the good you’ve done,” I tell him sincerely. “But while Zaylee might be alive, this isn’t *living*. There are better things waiting for her. People who miss her dearly. If you love her, let her go home.”

At the word ‘love’ Madden has a physical reaction. His eye twitches, his nose wrinkles, and his teeth grind audibly.

Silence fills the next few seconds while he’s deep in thought. Like he’s trying to remember the definition of a concept he’s long forgotten.

“Love doesn’t exist in the Lost Land,” he rasps, conflicted. “Nothing good can grow here.”

“You’re wrong. Love can’t be snuffed out, even in a hell like this. I’ve seen it with Armand and Yugo. As much as I hate to say it, their dark hearts have twisted together and formed something oddly special. They’re a perfect match, and I’ve experienced the same companionship with Kai.”

“It’s true,” Kai backs me up as he takes my hand. “It sounds ridiculous, but we fell in love here.”

“Our love has changed me,” I add passionately. “Made me better. Braver. Do you feel that way when you’re with Zaylee? Like you’re a better version of yourself?”

Madden fidgets uncomfortably before roughly confessing, “Yes.”

“When you love someone, you put what’s best for them above your own desires. You want their happiness more than anything, and if it means being away from them or sacrificing yourself for them, so be it. Zaylee should be with her family. Picture her with color all around her. With light and laughter. Don’t you want that for her?”

Madden’s breathing gets faster. He’s never been forced to face the reality of parting from Zaylee. Maybe he didn’t think it would ever happen, but the time has come.

Clearly upset, he rakes a hand through his wild strands, displaying more vulnerability than I thought possible from someone like him. “I don’t know who I am without her. I was young when I was banished to the Lost Land. Just twenty-two. I’d barely lived, and it wasn’t my choice to join the dark fae. I was tricked into my servitude by Vaeront, as many of us were.”

“Then you know what it’s like to be taken against your will. Don’t do that to Zaylee. I think the best way to sort this out is to have her choose. Please, Madden. Will you do that? Let her out, let her see me, and give her the decision to stay with you or go with us. If she picks you, I’ll respect it, and I’ll leave knowing she got what she wanted. That’s fair. Be fair to her.”

My proposal is a trap. Because I’m a hundred percent confident Zaylee will want to go with me. No way in hell will she choose to stay with a barbarian.

“She’s the only good thing I can remember in my entire existence.” Seconds tick by while Madden stares longingly at Zaylee. His fingers flex. He anxiously shuffles his feet.

Deep sadness fills his icy eyes. It actually changes their color. They morph into a dark purple, and he blinks as he tenderly runs his hand over the glass.

“All right,” he relents with a broken whisper. “Give me some space while I open the lid.”

Smiling from ear to ear, I look at Kai. He’s grinning back, cautious but optimistic.

As Madden stands next to the box, he holds his palm out toward it. His face is pinched with concentration, and a thin crack begins to form along the top edge like an invisible laser is cutting it open. The line is so incredibly straight, you’d never know it was made with the mind of a man and not a machine.

I’ve never witnessed a power like his. Many fae can force objects into motion with telekinesis, wielding them like weapons. They can use them to do their bidding.

But Madden *is* the force. The elements are at his mercy. They don’t just move for him. They change at his will.

I wonder how far his ability goes and what his limits are.

What else could he build? A house? A castle?

Does he use his magic to keep this place clean? Is it just a matter of sucking all the dust into a ball and chucking it outside? Because, convenient.

Suddenly, the ground shakes, and an ominous rumble resounds through the temple.

Protective as always, Kai circles me with his arm and pulls me in close while lifting his sword.

With a quick backward swipe of his hand, Madden reseals the case and scowls over his shoulder. “You both need to leave. Right now.”

“What?” I gasp, my heart sinking. “No.”

“This is Armand’s work.” Paranoid, Madden’s gaze bounces up and around.

“Well, be quick about it then,” I insist. “Let her out of there while you can.”

“Don’t you see?” Madden radiates anger while also appearing a bit sorry for me. “Armand isn’t going to allow it. He was never going to let you have her.”

Another quake rocks the building, stronger and longer than the last.

“How do I know it’s not *you* doing this?” I stab a finger at him.

“Because I would never intentionally put Zaylee in danger, and a roof caving in on her is certainly not safe. Armand is going to level this entire building if you don’t get out.”

As if speaking the prediction makes it come to fruition, the wooden beams along the ceiling groan as the floor trembles under our feet again.

“Sunny, I’m sorry, but we must go.” Kai picks me up, getting my toes a couple inches off the floor so he can carry me toward the exit.

“But—but Zaylee.” I kick and squirm as he walks down the aisle away from my granddaughter, but it’s no use fighting him.

If Kai wants to move me, he can. He will.

I resort to begging. “Kai, please. Please, don’t do this.” I pet his face, his beard, and his neck. I’m desperate, and I’m hoping my touch will convince him to stay. “Wait just a few more seconds.”

When his eyes lock with mine, he’s sad but resolute. “Madden’s right. Armand is interfering. The timing is too impeccable to be a coincidence.”

“Why would he lead me to Zaylee just to make me abandon her?”

The answer is in my question.

Armand reunited me with my granddaughter for the sole purpose of forcing me to walk away from her.

I was right when I said Zaylee is part of the second challenge, but the test isn’t about figuring out how to rescue her—it’s about the heartbreak I have to

endure because I can't.

It's sadistic and totally on par with Armand's methods.

My chest hurts, and I put my hand over the aching spot. "The heart. The test—"

"I know," Kai says with sadness. "I'm sorry this burden has been put on you."

Tremors continue to rack the building, and the windows shatter. Glass blows inward, and Kai and I narrowly miss being scratched up by it all on our way to the door.

When we're ten feet away from the exit, a loud snap echoes around us like thunder.

Over Kai's shoulder, I look back at the altar, and a split is forming along the wall behind it. The dark line travels up and up, zigzagging this way and that. Once it reaches the highest point of the ceiling, the main support beam above us breaks in the middle, and the heavy wooden halves fall to the pews.

A bunch of the benches get smashed. Debris flies in all directions, and crumbling stone falls.

Through the gaping hole in the roof, the tall belltower looms. It starts to tilt because it has no foundation anymore, and it's going to collapse onto the temple.

Onto us.

It's too late.

We're not going to escape in time.

Kai gets to the door and puts me down to yank at it, but it's jammed from the damage to the structural integrity of the building.

Wide-eyed, I watch the falling belltower. We're trapped in here, and we'll be flattened like pancakes in less than two seconds. We're both going to die, and it's my fault for refusing to leave sooner.

However, right before the tower makes impact... it stops. The ominous rumbling continues, but the steeple is suspended horizontally in the air above the roof.

I glance at Madden. He's still by Zaylee's case, but his hands are up as if he's holding something heavy, and his face is red with strain.

He's the only reason we haven't been crushed.

He saved us.

The door opens with an ear-splitting whine, but it's not because of Kai. It's Madden's doing.

“Get out!” he shouts. “This won’t stop until you’re gone.”

Ushering me through the door, Kai digs into his sack and he produces what’s left of our rations. An apple. A bit of cheese. Some dried meat.

He sets them on the ground and tells Madden, “For Zaylee.”

Before I have a chance to say goodbye, Kai releases his wings, grabs me, and flaps hard to get us into the sky.

On autopilot, I wrap myself around him, but every cell in my body wants to protest.

This isn’t right.

Zaylee should be with us now. She was *right there*.

As we get higher, the destroyed temple becomes smaller in my view, and I choke out, “I can’t believe I just had to make that choice.”

“It wasn’t a choice,” Kai comforts me. “It was either stay and die or leave and survive. We did what we had to do.”

The truth doesn’t make this any easier because the end result is still the last thing I ever wanted. “What will I tell Zaylee someday? How will I explain to her that I didn’t save her from the Lost Land when I had the chance? How can I justify leaving her with that awful barbarian?”

“He wasn’t that bad,” Kai remarks.

I gape at him. “Are you serious?”

“Surprisingly, I am. I can’t believe I’m actually saying this, but I trust him to take care of her.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“You weren’t scared of him,” Kai replies, like that explains everything.

“Yeah, because I had to stand up for Zaylee.”

He shakes his head. “No. You have instincts, and something in your gut told you he wasn’t someone to be frightened of.”

“Well, we don’t know him. We only talked to him for a few minutes.”

“And in that short time, he convinced me that he’s fully invested in Zaylee’s protection. Do you doubt that he’d literally move mountains for her?”

Well. Okay. I think he would.

In theory, Madden probably could move mountains. He’s already built Zaylee an impenetrable shrine.

“He’s still on my shit list,” I grump spitefully.

“Whatever this ‘list of shit’ is, he’ll be on mine as well.”

If I weren’t utterly devastated, I’d smile at the fact that Kai doesn’t

understand the human term.

We fly over the arch leading into the city.

In the distance, I can already see that Madden is repairing the temple. The belltower has straightened out, and the hole in the ceiling is being filled.

I wish someone could do something about the void inside me. It's a painful darkness, drenched guilt and longing, and I don't know if that will ever go away. A piece of me has been irreparably shattered with this challenge.

"I can't recite the poem." My words come out choppy as I try not to sob. "I can't say those stupid fucking words because if I do, it'll just drive the point home that I've abandoned my own flesh and blood."

"You won't have to." Gently gripping my chin, Kai emanates tenderness from his eyes. "I owe you one anyway. I'll do it when we get to the maze, okay?"

Nodding, I rest my head on his shoulder as he literally carries me and my grief.

To some, it might seem like this challenge was easy. We didn't get badly injured. There was no fight to the death, and it's not hard to guess which test this is.

But that doesn't make it better for me.

I'm not proud. I'm not relieved. There's no sense of victory.

I'm just sad, and that's how Armand wants it.

It does make me wonder, though... if I feel this bad now, how much worse will it get in round three?

If I know anything about Armand, he's going to save the best for last.

CHAPTER 32

Kai

I should be happy about winning the second challenge, but I can't when the woman I love is devastated.

As we stand in the broken courtyard of this fucked up maze, Ro's shoulders are slumped. Her gaze is glued to the ground, and unshed tears shimmer in her eyes.

It makes my heart heavy to see her this way.

Cupping her beautiful face, I press a kiss to her forehead, letting my lips linger there. She grabs my wrists and clings to me like I'm her lifeline.

"Fly me away from here," she requests shakily. "Far away. I just want to go to a place that's safe, where Armand can't find us."

I'd give anything to grant Ro's wish for an escape. If I were able to, I would, but I don't get to decide such things.

We still have one more hurdle to jump, and then we'll be free.

After taking to the sky, a thick cloud of dust swarms us immediately. The particles are so dense, it's getting in my nose and mouth. I can't even open my eyes because this gritty crap burns.

Ro coughs.

"Hold your breath for a second," I order. "Use my shirt as a filter if you must inhale."

Flapping my wings hard, I do my best to get above the cloud as quickly as possible because I might be able to go without air for a long time, but Ro can't. Luckily, the dust starts to dissipate less than a minute later.

When I open my eyes, I expect to see more of the grayish sky of the Lost Land.

Instead, it's dark with white dots everywhere, and it takes me a second to realize I'm looking at stars. And there are three spotlights—moons—illuminating Ro and me with a silver cast.

Comfort comes over me as I suck in the fresh smell of a place I know well.

The Night Realm.

Wiping her face, Ro looks around, her eyes pinging from one side to the other as we soar over the countryside.

About a hundred feet below us, the dark green grass grabs her attention. It's a deeper color than the lawns in the Day Realm, and trees with white flowers line a road leading to the city in the distance.

Craning her neck, Ro looks in the direction we're headed and scans the horizon where windows and streets are lit with the warm glow of stardust lanterns.

"Delaveria," I inform her.

She's never been here before. Never seen this sky. Never felt the cool air on her skin.

She might've looked at paintings or maps, but to be here is quite different.

"It's beautiful," she says with awe.

Pride fills me as she admires my homeland. "Just wait until we get to the palace."

"I see it."

The grand focal point looms at the back of the city, framed by four spires with a tall belltower in the middle.

I'm assuming the palace is where we're supposed to go. It's the most important spot in the entire realm, so if we're going to find the next challenge, it'll be there.

I'm not sure what Armand is thinking, putting me in a location I've memorized like the back of my hand. If Delaveria were a maze, I could walk these streets with my eyes closed. I know every house, every landmark.

That puts me at an advantage. Doesn't it?

With only one challenge left, we know this is the test of the mind.

But how to beat it is still a mystery.

Once we get to the edge of civilization, the townspeople are milling about. Some are sweeping their stoops. Others are making their way to the market to get fresh-baked goods or produce for today's dinner. Children are playing, running circles around their parents.

With this much activity, I estimate it's late morning.

I zip over the rooftops of the cottage-like houses. They all have wooden

shingles and smoke coming out of their chimneys.

As we pass the bazaar, Ro observes the long lines of shoppers. “This illusion has a lot of detail. Armand has created so many different people of all ages and appearances, and the colors of the tents are so vibrant. The food has a ton of variety. There’s a bakery, a butcher, and someone selling fresh fish. There’s even a taco stand.”

I don’t respond because she’s right, and I’m confused.

A lot of detail, indeed.

Too much.

It’s disturbingly correct.

I actually recognize some of the citizens. These are real people who exist in the Night Realm as I know it.

Noticing my frown, Ro prods, “What? What’s wrong?”

“Something isn’t adding up.”

“Is it the normalcy? It’s weird to witness such a mundane day after what we’ve been through.”

“That’s not it. See that child?” I point at a lanky adolescent boy with black shoulder-length hair in dreadlocks. He’s congregating around a big fountain with some of his teenage friends. “I saved him when he was eight or so. Right after he’d learned to fly, he went too far away. He ended up stranded in the mountains because he’d exhausted himself on the way there and he couldn’t muster up the strength to get home. I had to fly the boy back to his family.”

“He looks to be about thirteen or fourteen now. When did you rescue him?”

“Recently, within the past year, which means we’re about five or six years in the future.” Thoughtful, I suck on my teeth. “But this is more than smoke and mirrors. Armand couldn’t make all this up because he doesn’t know these specific people, certain houses, and decorations. I mean, *everything* is right, down to each individual cobblestone. Plus, the layout isn’t backward. It’s not a mirror image of the Night Realm.”

“What are you saying? Do you think we’re actually here?”

I shake my head. “Impossible. Armand doesn’t have the power to transport us out of the Lost Land. I don’t know how he’s doing this.”

“Well, if you’re seeing acquaintances, people you love might be here, too.”

Ro’s optimistic comment fills me with euphoric joy.

I might be able to be with my fellow warriors again. Torius. King Kirian and Queen Quinn. Even if they are part of an illusion, I'm excited at the thought of seeing them.

As I study the residents of Delaveria, I note how healthy everyone is. It seems the kingdom is thriving in the future.

That wasn't the case when I left.

When I began my mission to find Ro, all of Valora was in crisis. The people were suffering, sacrificing, and literally starving because of the curse the dark fae had put on us. No one was untouched by it, King Kirian and Queen Quinn included. They were skipping meals so others could eat. They gave their rations to their own children, the children of the city, and their best warriors to keep us strong.

I was thankful for the sustenance, but I would've donated my daily dinner to someone else if I hadn't been ordered not to. King Kirian said I needed to be well enough to fight, to take on any task. And it's a good thing I was prepared because being in good shape has allowed me to rescue Ro.

We're getting closer to the castle.

Slowing down, I use caution as I approach a square structure that looks like a small fortress with its stone exterior and outlook towers.

"That's the barracks, and this is a no-fly zone," I tell Ro as I stay on the outskirts of the area. "Regular citizens aren't allowed within this space, and a warrior might try to shoot me down if he's new and he doesn't recognize me."

Fortunately, I know all these men. I've served with them for many decades. Some, for centuries.

Like a child on the first day of school, I can't stop a grin from lifting the good half of my face as I wave at my friends on our way by.

"Aw," Ro says with a smile. "You missed them."

"It's impossible not to when you've lived with them for as long as I have."

Ro swivels her head to peer at the fortress in our rearview better. "You lived in the barracks?"

"Yes."

"It doesn't look very cozy."

"Warriors don't need much. Sharp weapons. A place to train. Meals to keep us strong."

"Don't you have a room in the palace? You're one of Kirian's special

men.”

“I am, but Keryth was still king when I joined the Night Realm, and I had to work to prove my worth. Once King Keryth abdicated the throne, King Kirian formed his own entourage. I was glad to be chosen, but I was already comfortable with my living quarters. I’ve stayed at the royal guest suites on occasion, but the barracks feel like home, so that’s where I sleep most of the time.”

Twisting her lips, Ro is perplexed. “You don’t expect me to stay there, too, right?”

A laugh bursts from me at the thought of her on the plain cot with me, her pretty dress standing out against the drab stone walls and her beauty pulling the attention of every warrior in sight. “No. You and I are going to make our own home.”

She beams at me. “Where?”

“Your choice. Think on it. We’ll live wherever you want.”

Our pleasant conversation doesn’t get the opportunity to continue because of the bustling activity in the courtyard right outside the palace walls.

The crowds are thicker than usual, and there’s happy chatter and laughing. Children are running up and down the streets with party horns.

Several girls are at the Maypole. They’re singing, skipping around in circles with the long ribbons in their hands.

“The royal birthday song,” I say, making sense of the commotion.

“I wonder whose big day it is,” Ro muses.

Concentrating hard, I try to think of who might have such a celebration. By now, King Kirian’s children are grown, so it’s probably not for them.

Typically, adult faeries don’t do much for their birthdays because we live so long that it would be redundant to honor the day of our birth every year up to thirty thousand times.

Giving a nod of acknowledgement to the group of guards outside the wall, I don’t bother landing on the bridge to walk through the gate. I use my warrior privileges and fly right over them to soar down to the walkway leading to the palace entrance.

Linking Ro’s fingers with mine, I smile proudly and kiss the back of her hand. I can’t wait to tell everyone she’s mine. Side by side, we walk toward the double doors.

“Alosi,” I greet the main guard with a jovial tone.

He looks so much better than the last time I saw him because he’s not

wasting away. He's filled out and muscular with a healthy hue to his tan skin.

Unfortunately, he's not very alert. He's just staring off into space as if he didn't hear me.

"Alosi?" I say again, swiping my arm through the air with wide motions. "Hello?"

He doesn't react.

Concerned, I stand in front of my friends who give me zero acknowledgement. All five of them are stoic and still with spears in hand.

One of them finally moves, but it's just to turn his head to the side to whisper something about the gate opening for incoming guests.

A family of four arrives. Two parents with two teenage daughters. The girls are excitedly talking about the party and how lucky they are to have gotten an invite.

Pivoting to fully face them, I keep Ro close while the guests head our way. I expect them to walk around us... but they don't.

"Hey—" I start to warn, because they're going to bump into us.

Instead of making physical contact, they pass through our bodies as if we're just cloud mist.

Ro gasps. I clench my teeth.

I don't feel it when their bodies merge with mine, but that's the unnerving part.

Feeling nothing is somehow worse.

It's then that I notice my injuries from the previous challenges don't hurt.

Ro's having the same realization. She looks at her left hand with narrowed eyes. A burn was there before. Now, it's smooth, perfect skin.

"Are we invisible?" she whispers, and since she's pressed against me, I can feel her fast heartbeat as her fear increases.

"Something like that."

"What if... What if we're not just invisible? What if we're ghosts? Maybe in the future... we're dead."

"No," I respond automatically, not allowing it as a possibility. "This is just part of the challenge."

It has to be.

It makes sense that Armand wouldn't want us to talk to people because then they could help us.

The nobles are about to be let in. They've handed over their personal invites, and Alosi is opening the doors for them.

If we try to go through a solid barrier, will we be able to?

I glance at our feet. We're walking on the stone, so obviously, we can touch the ground. Stomping my boots, I try to generate some sound. I don't make any thuds as I would expect, which is strange.

Not wanting to take any chances that we might be locked out of the palace, I say, "Come on. We'll slip in behind the family."

Ro and I go forward, and after we've successfully made it inside, the staff members in the foyer greet the guests with trays of appetizers and glasses of wine.

The teenage girls partake in the refreshments, and right before they go into the ballroom, they're offered headbands with glittery bug-like antennas bobbing on springy extensions.

When the doors of the great hall open, there's a face painter with a line formed at their station. Behind them, a balloon artist is making a pink butterfly with quick, squeaky movements.

Very child-like.

Whoever is being celebrated today must be young.

Staying close to the nobles who are basically acting as our battering ram, Ro and I shuffle into a very packed ballroom.

In the middle of the huge space, the area that's usually open for dancing is occupied by an unbelievably long banquet table. There are probably enough chairs and place settings to accommodate at least two hundred people.

Along the wall to our right, there's another table that stretches all the way to the kitchen door at the back, and wrapped gifts are placed on it.

The nobles we followed pull a few small packages from their pockets and put them with the rest of the presents. Then they join the clusters of guests standing near the French doors that are open to the night, letting in air and giving them a view of the gardens.

I glance over my shoulder at the door we just came through. It's shut now. Just to experiment, I try to open it.

Confoundingly, I can grasp the knob, but my efforts to turn it do nothing. Running my flattened hand against the wooden surface, I lightly tap my fingers.

No sound is made.

I get the same results with the wall next to it. I can touch it, but I can't affect it in any way. Even pounding on it with my fist produces silence.

After getting a dagger from my belt, I drag the tip of it along the wall. Not even the faintest scratch is left behind.

Like my shadow, Ro hovers as I continue testing my boundaries.

A caterer glides by me with a tray of mini butterscotch pies.

When I try to pluck one up, my fingers go through the food like it's air.

Shifting my eyes to Ro, I make my conclusion. "It seems we can only touch inanimate objects, but we can't manipulate them. Anything that moves is off limits to us."

"Like ghosts," Ro says again, anxious.

"It's a unique obstacle," I spin it positively. "A trick. We've been up against worse."

Cheering draws our attention to the back of the room, and through some of the shifting guests, I catch a glimpse of Torius standing next to one of the thrones. His black hair, silver-green eyes, and tattooed face makes me homesick because he's so familiar.

Grabbing Ro's hand, I lead her in that direction. I stealthily weave around the people in the crowd, trying not to merge with anyone. It doesn't matter if we do. We could walk straight through the bodies if we wanted to, but it just seems too unnatural.

Once we're at the front, our view is unobstructed, and my eyes fall to the little girl sitting on the main throne.

Princess Danyetta and Torius have a daughter.

The proud parents are standing on either side of the princess, and she's the spitting image of her mother with her long brown hair and sweet face. She's excitedly swinging her dangling feet, making her green silk dress swish about her legs. On her head, she wears a sparkly paper crown with the number '5' sticking up.

Music comes from a string quartet that's playing a quiet, jaunty tune from the far-right corner.

When the song finishes up a few seconds later, King Kirian emerges from a small crowd with Queen Quinn at his side.

"Excuse me," he calls, and all the talking stops. With his mate on his arm, he steps over to Princess Danyetta, Torius, and the little girl. "Thank you for coming here to celebrate Princess Greenlee's birthday. It means a lot to us. Cake will be served first. After the presents are opened, there will be dancing. Please enjoy yourselves."

Princess Greenlee scrambles from the throne to run to her place at the

head of the table.

A second later, a cook comes out of the kitchen with a five-tier cake covered in white icing. It's decorated with fondant dragonflies, bees, and other insects. Lit candles flicker on top.

As everyone else takes their seats, I recognize other faces.

Prince Cassidy and Prince Caspian. The twin brothers were teenage boys when I last saw them. Now, they're grown men in their early twenties.

King Keryth and Queen Zella, King Kirian's parents, are in attendance as well. They sit by the twins.

Next, King Damon, Queen Whitley, and their children come in from outside on the patio, along with Astrid, the Dream Realm's royal witch.

Behind them, King Zander and Queen Maelyn are with their son Prince Maverick.

Ro whimpers at the sight of her loved ones. Squeezing my hand, she takes a step forward like she wants to go to them, but she stops because it would be futile.

"What a special kind of hell this is," she laments, "to be in the same room with people you desperately want to talk to, but they can't see or hear you."

I lightly scratch her back to soothe her, but I refrain from saying anything to reassure her because it feels like I would be invalidating her pain. She's still reeling from the previous challenge. Her emotional wounds are fresh, and I'm not going to tell her not to be sad.

"Zander looks so... so depressed." Ro stares at her son with helplessness, and she's right.

The Day king does seem downtrodden, more so than usual.

He often comes across as grumpy or dissatisfied because strong emotions can cause him to shift into his griffin form. Just like me, he's careful with his smiles.

But the frown on his face is different than what I'm used to when it comes to him.

He's tired. Tired of missing two very important members of his household. It must be difficult to attend merry events when he has no idea what has happened to his mother or daughter.

And King Zander isn't the only one who's been damaged by this. Prince Maverick, who I remember to be a cheerful kid, has become a serious young man. Queen Maelyn is between them with her arms looped through their elbows, like she's literally holding the family together.

However, there is one wonderful silver lining that can't be ignored—all the royals of the realms are here, and once every guest is seated, Ro sighs wistfully. “No wonder the young princess's birthday is such a grand event. It's not just about her turning another year older—this is a celebration of unity and peace.”

“You'll see it for real,” I promise her. “Someday soon, you'll get to be at parties such as this. We're almost done, Sunny.”

She gives me a smile that doesn't reach her eyes, but her trust in me is strong, and I can tell my encouragement has calmed her.

The musicians start to play the birthday song, and Princess Greenlee stands on her chair so she's tall enough to blow out her candles.

Everyone sings.

After the tune has ended and the flames have been successfully extinguished by one large puff, the crowd cheers.

At first, the clapping is so loud that it almost drowns out the thunder.

Almost.

Puzzled by the deep rumble, the guests look at each other before their eyes go to the windows. Tilting their heads, they search the night sky for signs of a storm.

There are some flashes like lightning, but from their bewilderment, I'm guessing bad weather isn't in the forecast.

Immediately, King Kirian and his father meet by one of the open doors to the patio and peer outside. Their whispered exchange is slightly tense.

They both have the same power to control nature, and that includes weather. If a storm were brewing, they'd feel it.

They'd also be able to stop it, which they would definitely do on a princess's birthday.

Queen Quinn and Queen Zella join them to ask what's going on, and although they're being exceptionally quiet, I'm at the right angle to read the king's lips.

Relaying the message to Ro, I murmur, “King Kirian said the moon is sparkling in some places and there's a crack of brighter light running through a portion of it.”

“Is that normal? I wouldn't know since I've never seen the Night Realm moons before today.”

Troubled, I reply, “Not at all.”

Suddenly, there's commotion from the foyer. On the other side of the

closed ballroom doors, there are a few bangs, followed by voices.

“This is a private event, sir,” Alosi states firmly. “You can’t come in here.”

“I must speak with the royals.” The claim is frantic.

“You’re not on the guest list.”

“Then send someone out to me. I’m the palace astronomer from the Dream Realm. This is an emergency, you striking idiots! Get King Damon at once.”

Hearing his name, King Damon gets up from the table and strides away from the gathering. Queen Whitley follows him. On his way to the door, he reaches behind him, confidently extending his hand without even looking, as if he knows his mate will link her fingers with his.

And she does.

There’s something about the connection between fated mates that’s touching, even for a hardened warrior like myself.

When I look at Ro, I can’t imagine feeling anything stronger for someone than I do for her. In a short amount of time, she’s become my heart, my soul, and she’s responsible for my greatest memories. She’s given me the best days of my life, and I can’t picture a future without her at my side.

Some nosy partygoers start to vacate their spots at the table to go eavesdrop, but King Kirian shuts it down. “Everyone stay where you are.”

His order doesn’t apply to Ro and me.

The door has been left slightly ajar, just enough to peek through the crack, and we creep forward until we have a view of the foyer.

I spy Oriantus, the astronomer. I’ve met the man a few times. He’s elderly, probably past twenty-thousand years, which means he’s wise, experienced, and doesn’t take crap from anyone.

Tall and thin, with long gray hair, he’s obviously frazzled because his beige button-up shirt is misaligned and halfway tucked into his black leather pants. His boots are untied, and the loot he carries with him—a bag of scrolls and a long case for his telescope—shakes from his own trembling.

“Oriantus,” King Damon greets his employee.

With the utmost respect, Oriantus bows and says, “My king, I apologize for intruding, but it couldn’t be avoided.”

King Damon is known for his charming arrogance and his devil-may-care attitude, but when he flips his blond hair away from his face, he’s serious and wary. “What’s going on?”

The astronomer doesn't mince words, and in one breath he exclaims, "I can hardly believe I'm saying this, but the sky is falling."

CHAPTER 33

Ro

“The sky is falling?” I bark out in tandem with at least twenty others who overheard the announcement.

Shock causes everyone to forget the order to remain seated, and chairs scrape loudly against the floor as many of the people get up to see what the hell this guy is talking about.

Unfortunately, that means a small stampede is coming our way, and unless Kai and I want to have a bunch of bodies pass through ours—no, thanks—we have to get out of the way.

Sliding to the side, we make room for the bunch gathering around the doorway, and we end up with our backs against a wall.

As people shush each other to hear the news, Damon interrogates his astronomer with a shock in his voice. “What do you mean? I’m going to need you to elaborate.”

Winded, Oriantus says, “There was so much cloud cover over the past week, I couldn’t see the sky.”

“Right. The blizzard. We got a lot of snowfall recently. And?”

“Today, once the storm cleared, I looked through my telescope for my monthly documentation of the stars, but I was seven days late. It’s not uncommon for me to miss a scheduled check because of inclement weather, but that means it’s been five weeks since my last sky mapping.”

“Get to the point.”

“Meteors are headed our way,” Oriantus finally announces.

Cries of fear ripple through the party, but no one wants to make too much noise because they don’t want to miss what’s being said.

There are several loud hushes as Damon asks, “How many?”

“At least a dozen.” Oriantus’ volume changes, ebbing and flowing as if he’s pacing back and forth. “I’m so sorry. If I’d seen this coming sooner, we

would've had more time to plan.”

“Plan for what?”

“Evacuation.”

“Surely it can't be that serious,” Damon scoffs with doubt. “We've had meteor showers before.”

“Not of this size. The rocks are cataclysmically large.”

Panic is multiplying among the mass of listeners. They wear pinched expressions and shift edgily among each other.

Pushing their way through the sea of suppressed hysterics, the rest of the royals join Damon and Whitley in the foyer.

All except for Danyetta, Torius, and Greenlee, who stay at the head of the table. The little girl's eyes are filled with tears as she watches her big moment get ruined. Her parents talk sweetly to her, but she's too young to understand that an event like this will take precedent over a birthday party.

Once Kirian is in the foyer, he immediately begins discussing what he recently witnessed with the astronomer. “We just heard a boom from outside. When my father and I looked at the sky, something strange was happening to the nearest moon, but we didn't see any meteors.”

Oriantus curses in the Old Fae language. “I was afraid of this. What you witnessed is the moon getting struck. The meteors are coming up behind it, so they've been hidden. This makes the situation so much worse because now, in addition to the space rocks, we'll have chunks of the moon falling as well.” Another thunder-like rumble rattles the chandeliers. “That's the sound of the moon being destroyed.”

There's more unrest among the people as they whisper their discontent about the repercussions this will have on the realm.

An optimist might say there are still two moons left, but realistically, it doesn't take much to throw off an ecosystem. The light is imperative for the crops that have adapted to thriving at night.

Kirian hurriedly asks, “When and where will these masses hit?”

“Since they've already reached the closest moon, I estimate the first wave will make impact within hours,” Oriantus answers, “and from their trajectory, I can tell they're headed for the Night Realm—to Delaveria, to be exact. The others behind them look like they'll land in the Dream Realm tomorrow. In between those, some will fall into the Endless Sea.”

“Is this an attack?” Zander inquires gruffly, his voice so lovely to me. “The dark fae's doing?”

“That, I can’t say for sure,” the astronomer responds. “I don’t know the cause. I just know it’s happening.”

“Astrid!” Damon yells for his witch.

The small woman, who’s been hanging back by the presents, sighs heavily as she approaches the crowd.

The fae step out of the way for her automatically, and whether it’s because they respect her or they’re scared of her, I’m not sure.

At four feet tall, her size isn’t intimidating, but she manages to make people uneasy anyway. I don’t know her, but she has quite the reputation for being extremely snarky. She often comes across as cold and arrogant because she’s got a shit ton of magic up her sleeve, and as a troll, it’s just in her nature to be aloof.

But now she’s humble with her head down. Her gray hair is pinned up in an elaborate style with braids, showing her frown and furrowed eyebrows. Toying with the pink satin and lace around her wrists, she gives away her nerves.

Once she’s with Damon, she says, “Your Majesty, if this were a nefarious event brought on by enemies, I would have seen it coming. I’ve felt off for the past couple days, but I didn’t know why, so Whitley and I did a spell specifically for the purpose of seeing what the dark fae are up to. We saw nothing like this.”

“We didn’t investigate further,” Whitley admits, sounding remorseful. “We should’ve tried harder to see the future.”

“It’s not your fault,” Damon assures his mate, but she makes a noise of distress.

“Yes, it is. Two weeks ago, I had a dream. A nightmare. It was a premonition, and the vision showed me a barren wasteland that used to be the Dream Realm. Everything was in ruins. There was ash and soot in the air. I couldn’t breathe, and there was this feeling of loss and hopelessness.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

“I didn’t want to worry you. I thought I was being shown the Lost Land. I assumed the dream was telling me we’d be there at some point, but that wasn’t a surprise. We’ve always known we might have to go to that universe to retrieve Ro and Zaylee.”

My heart twists.

Because I’m touched. Damon and Whitley don’t even know me, yet they’d be willing to travel to hell to save me.

“Do not take the blame, Your Majesty,” Oriantus says to his queen. “This is an unfortunate natural occurrence that no one could have predicted. Not even me.”

“Well, now that it’s almost here, what do you see, Astrid?” Damon asks. “We’ll survive this, won’t we?”

There’s an ominous pause. “Oriantus isn’t overreacting when he says we need to evacuate, and I trust Whitley’s vision. If we want to live, we need to leave.”

“Where are we to go?” Kirian’s voice is strained with stress.

“I’d suggest escaping to the Earth realm.”

“And live there permanently?” Aghast, Kirian’s unsatisfied sentiment is shared, judging by the sour faces of the nobles.

Choosing to adapt to a human body means giving up so much—magical powers, the ability to fly, and living thousands of years. That last one is the biggest sacrifice of all. Anyone who decides to spend the rest of their days earthside will have a normal human lifespan, with sickness and pain they wouldn’t have to endure here.

“It’s better than dying right now,” Astrid states bluntly. “The Day Realm is also an option because while the area will suffer some effects from the damage, the land won’t be destroyed. However, the suns might be blocked by ash for a while, and that could lead to crop failure and food shortage. King Zander, if you’re going to take refugees in, you must be aware that an influx of people will cause strife in your kingdom.”

“Anyone is welcome.” My son doesn’t hesitate to offer up his hospitality, and I’m so proud of him in this moment. “Our borders are open. We’ll make it work.”

“Hold on a second,” Damon cuts in. “You seriously expect us to abandon our kingdoms? Astrid, you know us better than that. We’re not running away.”

Kirian bands together with Damon. “I agree. There has to be a way we can stay.”

The little witch sighs again. “I thought you’d say something like that. All right, then. The other option is physical interference.”

“Physical interference?” Damon parrots.

“Fight. Treat the meteors like any other enemy.”

“She’s right.” Oriantus backs up Astrid’s suggestion. “If we were able to break them into smaller, less destructive pieces, we’d have a chance. Pyros

could fly up to intercept the meteors and blast them with fire. The rocks will already be cold from the high altitude, and the extreme heat could make them crack.”

“Who has fire power?” Kirian asks, starting the process of forming a solution.

Several of the nobles in the crowd shuffle forward. No questions asked, they volunteer as they go into the foyer.

Their courage is inspirational, and I feel silly huddling by this wall when I really want to see what’s happening on the other side of it.

“Fuck it,” I mutter.

Linking my fingers with Kai, I drag him with me as I march for the door. Passing through the people gives me the heebie-jeebies, but it doesn’t take long for us to be in the same space as our family and friends.

We get there just in time to watch Kirian’s mother stand beside the Pyros who’ve offered up their service.

As the former princess of the Day Realm—and Zarid’s sister—Zella came by her power honestly. Potent fire abilities run in her blood, and she’s probably one of the strongest people in this city. Maybe in the entire world.

“Zella, no.” Keryth grabs her hand and tries to tug her back to him, their arms extended between them. “I won’t allow it.”

“I’ll be fine,” she tells him with an amount of confidence she doesn’t seem to feel.

“Actually,” Oriantus pipes up, and the bad news just keeps coming from this guy, “anyone who decides to perform this task should consider it a suicide mission. With how fast the masses are traveling and how close the person will have to get to give it a full blast of fire, a collision is unavoidable. They’ll be killed by the impact, but their sacrifice will not be in vain if they succeed. It would be even better if we have a second line of defense closer to the ground to hit the smaller pieces again. The volunteers for that task would have a better chance at making it out alive, but it’s still very dangerous.”

Conflicted, pain and indecision swim in Zella’s eyes as she glances between Keryth and the volunteer group.

This is her home, and she wants to save it. She wants to pave the way for her children, her grandchildren, and all the generations to come, even if it means she won’t be here to see them.

I understand that, but she has Keryth to consider. If she dies, so does he.

I expect the nobles, four men and two women who originally came out, to

back away. If any of them are bonded to a fated mate, they'll need to rethink their decision, but no one even flinches. Clenching their jaws with steely resolve, they stay firmly planted where they are.

Keryth gently coaxes his wife back to him, circling her with his arms as if he can cage her in, but Zella's got a stubborn glint in her lavender eyes. I have a feeling this argument isn't over.

Still standing by the entrance with the other guards, Alosi squares his shoulders and bravely declares, "I'll be in the front line."

Kai's hand tightens around mine, but it's the only indication he gives that he's emotionally affected by his friend's sacrifice.

Kirian nods gratefully to Alosi before he faces the nobles. "Thank you. All who give their lives for the greater good will be honored. Monuments will be built to memorialize you forever."

Alosi gives a slight bow to his king. "I'll go to the barracks to recruit the other Pyros." As he's turning to the exit, he pauses. "It might not be my place to suggest this, but if you allow us to drink Glow..."

All three kings exchange quick glances and come to an unspoken agreement in an instant.

Zander responds, "Anyone willing to do this will have as much Glow as they need to get it done."

"And I'll provide the portals needed to evacuate," Prince Cassidy offers, earning an approving look from his father.

Since Kirian is the leader of this realm, he's the one to wrap up the meeting. "You're all dismissed. Go to your homes and pack your belongings if you want to evacuate. Be quick. Only take what's necessary. Spread the word to your neighbors about what's happening. They're probably frightened and confused by what they're seeing in the sky, but try to ease any panic. Soon, there will be portals stationed throughout the city, leading to both the Day Realm and the human realm. For those who plan to join our battle, report back here once you've said goodbye to your loved ones. Our kingdom will get through this."

As soon as he's done talking, people scatter.

It's a bit rough going as they leave the palace. Some release their wings before they've even gone through the exit, and they take flight when they're out, even though flying this close to the palace is forbidden for regular citizens.

So much for not panicking.

I get it, though. Some of these people have young kids. Some are fated pairs. Their survival is imperative for the well-being of someone else. Or maybe they just really don't want to die.

"Is this actually going to happen in the future?" I question with evident fear. "Is this real?"

"I don't know," Kai replies with a haunted look. "I don't want to believe it, but..."

He doesn't have to finish his sentence. Like he said when we first got here, there are too many credible details for this to be made up. Armand is talented, but he couldn't have constructed an entire city he hasn't seen in half a million years.

He couldn't have recreated the people we love so accurately.

Zander is spot on—his appearance, his mannerisms, his kindness, his courage.

Then there's Maverick. My grandson. I've never met him, but I have no doubt this is exactly what he looks like. Even if he weren't standing by Zander, I'd know they're related. He has the same dark hair and golden eyes. His skin is paler, closer to Maelyn's complexion, but his facial features and even the way he carries himself... he's so much like my son.

Near the stairs, Zander gathers his group around a bright portal that will take them back to the Day Realm. Maelyn and Maverick hop through it, along with a few of the soldiers they brought with them to the party.

Before Zander follows them, he turns to Kirian. "We'll recruit all the most powerful Pyros in the Day Realm and send them to you. We'll also set up registration tents on the south side of Hailene where we'll receive the refugees."

"Very good." Kirian gives his cousin a tight smile.

Damon, Whitley, their kids, and Astrid are the next ones to depart.

After throwing down a portal to the Dream Realm and ushering his entourage through it, Damon stops to say, "We'll have all the sprites from the Enchanted Forest spread the message of the current events throughout the lands. Every single person in Valora will be informed in time, even those in the countryside and on the coast. No one will be forgotten. I swear it."

At the guarantee, Kirian's shoulders droop with relief as he puts an arm around Quinn.

"Good luck," he tells Damon because the Dream Realm has its own battle to take on.

Fortunately for them, they've got an extra day to prepare and they're a smaller kingdom. They have time on their side and less people to move out, but they're also the realm with the fewest Pyros, so finding enough volunteers could be difficult.

After Damon's crew leaves, it's just the Night Realm royals left with Kai and me as unknown onlookers.

We watch helplessly as a devastated little girl is taken up to her room with a lone piece of cake. There won't be time to open all the presents. There will be no dancing.

This is the worst end to a party.

Torius hangs back on the bottom step, letting Danyetta and Greenlee get ahead before pivoting to Kirian. "We will be triumphant. We have to beat this because I refuse to let my family die."

Kirian meets Torius where he is and grips his best friend's shoulder. "Promise me something."

"Anything."

"Pack your bags. I want you, Danyetta, and Greenlee to go to the Earth realm."

Torius is so shocked by the order that he flinches. "What?"

"Just for a couple days. That'll give Valora two years of progress—letting the air clear and rebuilding what has been damaged."

"No," Torius protests.

"Take them, along with Caspian and Cassidy," Kirian goes on as if Torius didn't just refuse. "Get them out of here just in case."

"In case what?"

"We lose."

"Don't do that." Frustrated, Torius shakes his head. "Don't think that way."

"I'm considering all the possible outcomes. It's my job."

"Then let me do mine. Your chances of beating this are better with me, and you know it. What happens when the meteors land in the sea and cause a tsunami? Who's going to stop the wave from washing away all the towns on the shores? I'm the only person who can control water. You need me."

"Danyetta and Greenlee need you more."

"They need a home."

"They need to stay alive, and the only way I can make sure that happens is if you're all far away from here."

Torius scowls, and he's quite intimidating with the tattoos on his angry face. "I can't believe you're asking me to sit this one out."

"I'm not asking. I'm telling you." Then Kirian tacks on, "As your king."

"Oh, you're pulling that shit?"

"You bet your ass I am."

The two men glare at each other.

They must have an interesting relationship. To be best friends, to grow up as brothers, and to have an uneven social status where Torius technically serves Kirian... that's complicated enough. But now, Torius is also fated to Kirian's daughter, so he's actually his son-in-law, too.

I'm not sure how it went over when Torius and Danyetta got together, but it's obvious the family is in harmony now. Kirian and Torius might be mad at each other in this moment, but there's a lot of love between them.

The nuances of their history are complicated and unique. Armand couldn't have possibly nailed it so precisely.

Which, again, just proves to me that this is real.

This is the future.

Back in Valora, a catastrophe is headed their way, and they don't even know it.

And somehow, we're supposed to stop it from happening.

CHAPTER 34

Kai

“We’ll talk about it.” In true Torius fashion, my fellow warrior gruffly gives the non-answer before stalking up the stairs.

“There’s nothing to discuss,” King Kirian calls after him. “I’m putting my foot down.”

Without looking back, Torius dismissively waves him off.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, I find myself wanting to smile at how they bicker like siblings.

I wish I could talk to Torius now. I’d tell him to obey King Kirian, and I think he’d listen to me.

He’s among the most honorable men I’ve ever met, and I don’t blame him for wanting to stay to defend his kingdom, but I have to agree with the order he’s been given. Not just because King Kirian is my leader, but because saving Princess Danyetta and their daughter is the right thing to do.

I think he’ll come around. He’ll choose his wife, just as I’d choose mine.

“Stubborn bastard.” Huffing, King Kirian looks around to find that he and Queen Quinn are alone out here.

During the tense exchange, King Keryth, Queen Zella, Prince Caspian, and Prince Cassidy retreated to the formal dining room across from the grand hall where they’re gathered in a tight group. They’re already talking about the battle plan—how many people should be in the sky and who will stay on the ground.

King Kirian and Queen Quinn start that way.

“We need to be in there,” I tell Ro urgently, placing my hand at the small of her back as I jog in that direction.

Unfortunately, we’re not fast enough. We don’t make it to the door in time before it’s shut in our faces.

“Fuck,” I bite out.

The dining room is where private military discussions take place, and I'd really love to hear what's being said in there.

Pressing her ear to the door, Ro tries to listen in, squinting so hard an adorable little wrinkle forms on the bridge of her nose.

"It's no use." I tenderly smooth the scrunched skin with my fingertip. "The room is soundproof."

Distraught, Ro starts pacing, and it's disturbing that her slippers don't even scuffle audibly against the smooth floor. "We're supposed to fix this. You realize that, right? That's the challenge, but how can we do that when we can't touch anything, and we can't talk to anyone? We have no way to contribute."

I wish I had a solution, but I don't.

For most of my life, I've tried to be as unnoticeable as possible. I've been quiet and inconspicuous, never calling attention to myself.

But now that I can't be seen, I hate it.

"Are we seriously expected to just stand by while our family and friends die?" Ro continues, getting more distressed. "Because they will. Some of them won't make it."

"King Kirian is extremely protective of his loved ones. He'll do everything in his power to ensure their survival."

"Not Zella." Ro laughs humorlessly. "She's ready to throw herself into the sky right now, and believe me, Kirian can't order his mother around. I get that he's king, but she'll do what she wants."

"It won't come to that," I reason with conviction. "This is a test of mental strength, which means it's a puzzle we have to solve. There's a way out of this—some sort of strategy we must come up with. Otherwise, it wouldn't be a thrill for Armand. If he knows how it's going to end, that would be very boring."

"Even if that's true, he wants us to fail." Ro wrings her hands. "Because forcing us to stand by and cry while falling mountains kill people we love would be pretty entertaining for him."

"Mountains," I mutter, and an idea pops into my head. "That's how the Meteor Mountains came to be—stars rained down."

"Right." Ro nods. "Are you saying the upside to this is that we'll gain some new landscape?"

Grasping her shoulders, I look at her with hope bursting inside me. "Remember when I said Madden would move mountains for Zaylee?"

A bright realization lights Ro's eyes, and she grips my forearms. "That's it, Kai. We need Madden. Madden could stop all this, and no one would have to die."

"We need to go get him." My pulse is racing with exhilaration, but Ro voices the most obvious obstacle before I can.

"But how would we do that? I guess you could fly to Sterling, but the question is, would it be the same short distance from which we came? Or would it be half a day's flight like in the real Valora? Either way, I wouldn't be able to go with you because I'd just slow you down, but I could wait for you here."

Just as quickly as my excitement bloomed, it dies a swift shriveling death. "That won't work."

"I don't mind being left behind."

"It's not that. Madden isn't there."

"But we were just with him." Disappointment falls like a shadow over Ro when she sees where I'm going with this. "We were with him *five* years ago."

"Exactly. And I guarantee he moved Princess Zaylee immediately after the incident. Once he realized Armand knew of his hiding place, he wouldn't have kept her in the temple."

Ro's throat works with a rough swallow. "So how will we find him?"

Grinding my teeth, I think hard. I run through so many scenarios, but all of them end in tragedy. I see my world get destroyed again and again.

My head starts to ache. I massage my temples as the stress gets to me. I've kept my cool throughout this game, but I've reached my limit.

Knowing what I need, Ro hugs me. She wraps her arms around my torso and melds the front of her body to mine.

She's warm and soft. Her closeness soothes me, and it helps to clear my jumbled thoughts.

"Wherever Princess Zaylee is, I bet Madden is there as well. Find her, find him," Ro ponders. "What we really need is a portal and a Seeker, but we can't get those without communication."

"Communication. I think that's the key. Somehow, we need to get a message to the royals. Winning this challenge is about giving them the solution."

"Got any ideas on how to do that?"

"If I've learned anything about Armand's game, it's that the opportunity will come to us on his timetable. We can't force it. We just have to be

patient.” Though my reasoning is logical, I’m bitter and angry.

Armand has inflicted so much trauma on us. When we leave here, we won’t be unscathed. The internal scars will last forever.

“Well.” Ro’s tone turns sultry, and she slowly trails a finger down my arm. “Since we have to wait anyway, I have an idea about something we could do to occupy ourselves in the meantime.”

My body responds, and then I’m focused on my other head. My cock lengthens at the thought of plunging into her wet heat. “Are you serious?”

“Yep.”

I glance around at the empty foyer. “Here? Now?”

“We might as well.” Getting serious, she rubs my scarred knuckles. “You need this. So do I. We need each other.”

I can’t argue with that, and a bit of nostalgia sweeps over me because it reminds me of the first challenge when we enjoyed ourselves.

Oh, how naïve we were then. We were totally unaware of the hell we were facing, but I’m glad we were oblivious. If we’d known what we were in for, we probably wouldn’t have been able to let go the way we did.

We can do it again—lose ourselves in this love we’ve cultivated. At least for a little while.

I pick Ro up, and she automatically winds her legs around my waist.

Scanning the foyer for a good place to fuck, I decide on a shadowy area on the other side of the stairs.

After pressing Ro’s back against the wall, I hastily hike her skirt up. I bunch the fabric around her hips before freeing my cock.

When I hook my fingers in her panties to move them to the side, I feel how slick she is.

“Always so wet,” I praise, wondering if I can make her squirt again.

“Only for you,” she breathes out.

As she trails a finger down the scar on my face, I turn my head to nuzzle her hand. “I love you, Sunny. So fucking much.”

“And I love you.”

Putting the tip of my shaft at her entrance, I drive forward.

She covers her mouth to hold in her screech, and her eyes get glassy with bliss. Buried deep, I move inside her, rubbing her clit with my pubic bone while hitting her G-spot.

She whines behind her hand, and I pull it away from her face.

Grinning, I ask, “You want to know the best part about being ghosts?”

“What?”

“No one can hear you scream.”

CHAPTER 35

Kai

We've just finished up a rough and fast fuck when the bell in the tower begins ringing.

Startled, Ro plugs her ears as I slip my cock out of her dripping pussy and set her down.

If the entire region hasn't been informed about the incoming disaster, they'll know something is happening now.

A second later, the foyer is flooded with the cleaning staff. Half a dozen of them gather by the front door to await their orders. They stand straight and still, and I'm impressed by their ability to seem so composed at a time like this.

When the doors to the dining room open, the royals dash out and split up.

Taking the divide and concur approach, the princes run upstairs, presumably to inform Torius about the plans. King Keryth and Queen Zella calmly head in the direction of the kitchen, and I wonder if they're going to have a 'last meal' together. King Kirian and Queen Quinn go outside, motioning for the maids to follow them.

Looping my arm around Ro's shoulders, I hurry us to the open doorway before we lose our chance to get out of here.

Once we're on the front stoop, I see mayhem.

On either side of the main walkway, the sprawling lawn is full of chaotic activity.

Warriors are running this way and that. About ten portals are set up in various places, each manned by guards who are shouting the evacuation rules at the top of their lungs. Civilians are already lining up with their luggage in tow, but they're confused as they try to figure out what they're supposed to be doing. They aren't trained to handle perilous situations like this.

Simply put, this is a shitty deal.

Even if there were a hundred portals, it wouldn't change the fact that there hasn't been enough time to organize an orderly process. Staying calm might not be a realistic option, and I predict we're about to see a ridiculous level of buffoonery once everyone loses their sensibilities to the panic.

It's already happening on the other side of the wall.

A dozen warriors are at the closed gate. They're pushing against it, trying to keep it shut because the crowd behind the doors might bust through. The plank to keep the entrance locked is in place, but the wood is splitting from the force of everyone breaking in.

I understand the strategy the warriors are implementing. They're letting in a couple hundred people at a time so no one gets mowed down.

Picking Ro up, I say, "Hold on and fly with me. I want to get an aerial view."

She clings to me, and when I get high enough, my jaw drops at what I see.

It's worse than I thought. So much is happening at once, I don't know where to look.

In the west, the sky is illuminated by the incoming chunks of the moon. In the opposite direction, dusk is on the horizon, painting the sky a hazy purple that's dotted with orange clouds, but the beautiful backdrop is a stark contrast to the current events.

The bridge leading to the gate is packed full of people who are pushing and shoving each other. The mob goes all the way down the street, reaching as far as the maypole in the town square.

No wonder the warriors are having trouble keeping the gate closed. They're no match for thousands of rioting people.

And that's what it is.

A riot.

It's not the first time I've seen one, but it is the largest I've ever witnessed.

People are getting knocked from the platform. Before they can fall, their wings bust out and they take to the sky. Weapons come out in retaliation. Women are screaming because they have small children who can't fly yet.

Several warriors soar over the wall to interfere with the violence, but all that does is give the rowdy crowd the idea to fly themselves.

Breaking the law, they flap their wings and leap onto the palace grounds. Some of the guards try to stop the intruders, but I'm guessing there was a no-

harm order given because they don't use violence or powers.

One man, a newer member of the military named Webster who I personally trained, puts himself in front of three men and two women who're making a beeline for one of the portals. Holding his hands out in a 'stop' motion, Webster tries to reason with the unruly citizens, but one of the men clobbers him over the head with the hilt of his sword.

Webster falls to the grass with a bleeding gash above his eyebrow.

His efforts were honorable, but they were in vain. Because the gate doesn't hold. The plank snaps in half, and people come pouring in.

Inevitably, some trip and fall, and no one stops to help them. As if they're mounds of dirt, they get trampled. When I see a child among one of the people getting stepped on, a useless shout gets caught in my throat.

All the peace and unity I've been so proud of has vanished in the face of imminent death, and I'm disappointed in the dreadful reality.

The bell finally stops ringing, but there's a constant thunder-like roar coming from the sky that's getting louder with each passing second. The menacing sound heightens the panic.

I can't stand to watch any more of the rioting, so I spin away.

Near the gardens, there's an ingenious third line of defense setting up. Twelve cannons are in a row, pointed at the meteors.

I fly that way and land, my feet touching down on the lawn near the walkway to the gardens.

Things aren't as hectic over here because the civilians don't want any part of this fight, but it's not any less upsetting.

Ro huddles closely, her body trembling as we watch a heartbreaking scene unfold.

Princess Danyetta's being dragged by her brothers to a well-concealed portal around the back of the palace. They each have one of her hands in an iron grip, while King Kirian and Queen Quinn hover nearby as if they're ready to join in the wrangling if they must.

Torius is trailing behind them with Princess Greenlee in his arms. The little girl is crying uncontrollably, and he doesn't look happy, but his face is resigned. He's forsaking his kingdom for his family. And that's the way it should be.

Alongside him, Lady Isla is carrying two suitcases and a backpack. The luggage is practically busting at the seams like they tried to pack light, but they're prepared for a lengthy stay.

“I won’t go without you,” Princess Danyetta claims angrily to her parents with tears streaming down her face. “And what about Andolyn? She can’t come with me. Who will take care of her?”

Her pet dragon breaks through some clouds in the distance, emitting a sad roar at seeing her favorite person leave. The silvery scales, large wings, and long tail are a stunning sight. I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to a real dragon flying around.

To me, it was just last week that I met the beast, and my first encounter with Andolyn was hostile, to say the least. She was guarding her island on the Endless Sea, and she burnt some of my hair off with her fire—that’s why my head is shaved on the sides. I suppose I should thank her if I get the chance, because Ro seems to love the style I’m sporting now.

“Andolyn can take care of herself,” Queen Quinn says with a reassuring tone. “I’ll tell her to go to the Day Realm.”

“What if she doesn’t listen? What if she tries to stay and sacrifice herself? I need to talk to her.”

The princess is stalling, but her resistance is ignored.

When the group stops just a couple paces away from the bright portal, I can tell it’s leading to Earth because of the field. The farming tactics are different there, and the identical rows of harvested crops were obviously made by a powerful machine.

“Dani, you’re the future of this kingdom,” King Kirian tells his daughter.

“So are you,” she cries.

Dark sadness invades my entire body when she projects her Empath power. It actually hurts my bones.

“What is that?” Ro gasps, rubbing her aching chest.

“The princess is trying to sway her parents with devastation.”

“Ouch.”

“Ouch is right.”

I’d forgotten how much Princess Danyetta’s emotional influence can hurt, and it affects anyone within the vicinity. Several of the warriors loading the cannons begin sobbing as they work.

King Kirian snuffles, but he stays firm on his decision. “We’re the current rulers. We’re staying because it’s our duty to defend the realm. Someday, you might have to make the same choice as queen. But today is not that day.”

Looking at her father with a defiant glare, Princess Danyetta goes for a low blow. “How could you let your mate die? Because that’s what’ll happen.

If you stay, you'll die, which means Mom dies, too."

King Kirian gazes down at his other half with a bittersweet smile and wetness in his eyes. "Your mother and I have discussed that possibility, and we've accepted it. We've had a good life. Such a good life."

Queen Quinn grins up at him through her tears. "I couldn't have asked for anything better. I've received more love than most people do in a hundred lifetimes."

They both pull Princess Danyetta to them for a hug, but she's still not okay with the circumstances. She clutches them tightly, refusing to let go. "Come with me. Please. This can't be goodbye. It can't."

"Torius," King Kirian says over his shoulder. "Only return when it's safe to do so. This is my last wish. A final request from your best friend." His voice softens with warm affection. "I'm not your king. I never was, was I? You and I are more than that—we're family. Take care of our loved ones, okay?"

The warrior wears a good mask of indifference, but his voice wavers with emotion when he promises, "I will."

"Boys," King Kirian says to his sons next, then amends the way he addresses them. "Men. I mean, men. Get the new queen to safety."

"No!" Princess Danyetta howls as her brothers pry her away and step through the portal, taking her with them.

Keeping up a strong façade, her parents plant kisses on little Princess Greenlee's wet cheeks, but as soon as they turn their backs, their features scrunch with anguish.

As they walk away, they cry because they know it might be the last time they see their children and granddaughter.

After Princess Danyetta and the twins have passed through the portal, Torius goes next with Princess Greenlee, but Lady Isla hangs back.

At the last second, the honored lady in waiting tosses the luggage to the human realm.

"Isla? Isla! What are you doing?" Princess Danyetta's panicked question echoes from the other world.

"I'm sorry, milady," Lady Isla calls. "I'm so sorry, but I'm staying."

The princess wails, a haunting sound, when she realizes she might be losing her best friend, too.

The portal closes for good, finalizing the plan.

Lady Isla's hands are shaking as she marches up to King Kirian and

Queen Quinn, her lips pursed with determination. “Reporting for duty.”

This woman has been through so much. I remember when she was part of a mass kidnapping at the end of Zarid’s rule. He wanted more females for his kingdom, and he made a dirty deal to obtain them from the Night Realm. Lady Isla was only fifteen years old when she was auctioned off to the highest bidder. I don’t know what happened to her during her days of captivity, but I can assume the worst.

After that, Lady Isla accepted a revered position in the castle as Queen Quinn’s personal companion, and she played a pivotal role in raising Princess Danyetta. Over the years, Isla became more than a caretaker or a teacher. She ended up being Princess Danyetta’s closest confidant, and those two are thick as thieves.

“I can’t thank you enough for all you’ve done.” King Kirian offers grateful words as he hands a flask of Glow to Lady Isla. “You, too, are one of us. Our family. We love you.”

Deeply affected by the acknowledgement of her importance, tears spring to her eyes. “Thank you. I love you, too.”

“Protect our home. Take watch in the belltower. Try to prevent anything from hitting too close to the palace.”

She nods before running off.

Ah, that’s right. She has the power of telekinesis, like Madden. I’m sure his power is a thousand times greater than hers, but if she has the assistance of Glow, she might be able to move the heavy rocks and make them fall in less damaging locations.

The sound of weeping draws my attention to the main fountain in the garden.

Behind some bushes, King Keryth and Queen Zella are holding each other as if it’s their last day together.

Because it is.

There’s no question that they’ve decided to give their lives, and when Queen Zella motions to the biggest chunk of the moon hurdling toward us, I realize she’s taking on the most lethal task. She’s leading the mission.

Go big or go home, as the humans would say.

An emotional farewell follows when King Kirian and Queen Quinn approach them, but they keep it brief because there isn’t time for long hugs. The rocks are getting closer, and the roar is growing louder, so the family gets a quick group embrace before Queen Zella takes her husband’s hand,

and they fly away.

Unbearable grief stabs me through the heart.

Queen Zella and King Keryth will perish, and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

Dusk is gone now, and a sickly green cast emanates from the incoming masses of destruction.

The people are still pouring in from the city and rioting near the front gate. Some of the portals are being flooded so much that they collapse from the strain of accommodating too many bodies at once.

At the rear of the palace, Alosi is shouting the plan to all the Pyros he's gathered. At least thirty of them are standing by some of the cannons, and it's an interesting mix of warriors, city folk, and farmers.

Pointing up, Alosi instructs everyone to observe Queen Zella's strategy so they can follow her example. She and her mate are just tiny dots in the night sky.

Soon, they'll be turned to ash.

Anytime Armand could show us what we're supposed to do, that would be great. I keep waiting to get a sign—some kind of clue about how we're meant to escape this hellish game before I witness atrocities I can't unsee, but my hope is disintegrating.

Suddenly, an explosion bursts far up in the sky with an orange flash. The light is so bright that it makes the Night Realm look like day for several seconds.

Everyone stops what they're doing. Even the rioters pause to stare at the once-in-a-lifetime sight.

Most of the residents of this realm have never stepped foot outside of it. They've never seen a blue sky, the pure color of the grass, or daylight on their loved ones' faces, and it's hard not to gawk at the momentary beauty.

Then the warmth fades, and a deafening boom jolts everyone from their stupor.

The large fragment of the moon splits into five smaller pieces, separating as they continue their track toward Delaveria.

The former queen did it. She paved the way for all the other Pyros who aren't as powerful and skilled as she is.

Was.

She was.

Her death rallies the other volunteers. They release long battle cries, and

their shouts embodying their desire to exact vengeance on the object that took precious people away from them.

Leaping into the air, the second line of defense zips toward the rocks that are almost here.

We have a minute, maybe less, before they hit.

Once the Pyros reach them, several sharp cracks accompany smaller explosions. The rocks multiply, and although there's a greater number to deal with, the reduced sizes are going to be much more manageable for the warriors on the ground.

Boulder-sized masses loom over us. Speeding through the air, they cause a kind of howling, as if fog horns are being blown.

"Ready!" a warrior shouts to the men operating the cannons aimed at the shower. "Fire!"

Squeezing me tightly, Ro cowers in my embrace as the shots go off simultaneously, and I watch the cannonballs. Some reach the intended target, further breaking up the rocks. Others miss.

One piece that remains intact flies over our heads and takes an unnatural turn toward the east as if it was blown by the wind.

Lady Isla.

She's preventing it from hitting the city.

It lands somewhere on the opposite side of Delaveria, sparing the homes and other buildings, but the impact causes a rippling quake.

The ground shakes so violently that it knocks everyone over, Ro and me included.

Then things get really crazy. The smaller fragments, ranging widely in size from a pebble to a beer barrel, start raining down around us.

On instinct, I spread my wings like an umbrella, crouch over Ro, and cover us the best I can.

"We can't be touched by moving objects," Ro reminds me, but a second later, a kernel whacks me on the temple.

"Wrong." Pelting sounds follow as hundreds of tiny pieces bounce off my leathery wings, and some blood drips down my face.

"You're hurt," Ro says, concerned as she wipes the stream of red on my cheek. "How?"

"It seems the rocks can harm us. Don't worry. It's just a nick."

"But your wings..." She tries to poke her head out of our shelter to check on me, but I stop her.

“My wings will be fine. They’re tough because of all the scarring. As long as they’re not perforated by anything, I can barely feel it.”

“Well, we might not be so fortunate in the next wave. If the little rocks can scratch us, the big ones can kill us.”

The falling debris pitters out, and I cautiously lift my eyes to the sky. “That is an issue. Another shower is coming in a minute or two.”

“Should we find a place to hide?” Ro suggests, gripping my hands for support as we stand because the ground is still trembling from the impacts.

“Where would we go?”

“Maybe somewhere underground, like the dungeons in the palace.”

Just then, a warrior jogs by us, but he slows when he sees the pattern of the rocks on the lawn.

Right where Ro and I are, there’s an unnatural circle that’s clear of any debris.

Cocking his head, the warrior looks on with confusion but, disregarding it, he resumes running toward his task.

Ro and I lock eyes, and we both have the same brilliant realization.

“The rocks,” she says with a smile.

I grin. “We can use them.”

CHAPTER 36

Ro

“We could spell out a message with them.” I bounce with excitement.

Kai’s energy matches mine as he jumps into action. Using the front of his shirt like a basket, he starts gathering the rocks. “Collect as many as you can. Apple-sized, preferably.”

Joining his efforts, I lift my skirt up like he’s doing with his shirt. The jagged hunks are warm from the blast, but not hot enough to burn me. Within thirty seconds, he and I both have as much as we can carry.

Kai zeroes in on the walkway leading to the garden. “Bring them over here.”

We run. Well, I waddle because I’m a bit weighed down from the heavy load.

On our way to the pavement, I keep waiting for someone to notice these big clusters that are seemingly floating through the air, but everyone’s focused on the sky.

Alosi just left, and he’s flying toward the biggest meteor.

There’s no fanfare for him. No heroic goodbye. He didn’t even announce that he was going. He only glanced around at his home one last time before racing to his destination.

Kai didn’t see his friend’s departure. He’s solely dedicated to our mission, tuning everything else out, and he reaches the pavement before I do.

As he dumps his load of rocks, I don’t tell him about Alosi.

What good would it do to make him watch another person he cares about get obliterated?

Still, Alosi deserves recognition, so I don’t look away. I honor him by witnessing his final act of courage.

With my eyes glued to the brave man, I slow down to a stagger.

A little orange flame ignites in the atmosphere, and much like when Zella

broke the portion of the moon, Alosi hits the giant meteor dead center. It cracks apart, as intended.

In my old life—the human one I was stolen from—I remember fireworks. The noises they made when they popped and whistled up into the darkness like shooting stars. How they would light up the sky when they expanded with bright bursts. The crackling as the sparks fizzled out.

This is like that, only times a thousand.

Fireworks on steroids.

When I finally get to Kai, I add my rocks to his pile. He's on his knees, already forming the first letter.

It's a 'G.'

I don't know what he plans to write, but it won't matter if no one reads it.

Kirian and Quinn are working on loading one of the cannons. They're not that far away, and I silently beg them to look over here.

We just need to give them the solution, and then we'll win.

Picking up a smaller pebble, I throw it at the king. I hit him in the back, but when he turns around and there isn't anyone behind him, he swivels away.

I do it a second time.

Annoyed, he rotates with a scowl on his face.

However, that scowl turns to puzzlement when he spots the moving rocks.

"Yes!" I exclaim as he stalks over to us.

Standing near Kai, Kirian peers down with alarm. To him, it looks like letters are magically appearing.

"Quinn?" He motions his mate over. "You've got to see this."

She gets next to him and slowly reads, "Get... Get what?"

"I don't know," Kirian responds, his voice tinged with wonder.

"How is this happening?"

"I don't know," he says again. "But someone is trying to tell us something."

Kai puts the 'M' in place. Then the 'A' and the 'D.'

"Get mad?" Kirian recites incredulously, not realizing the word isn't finished yet. "I am mad!" He shakes his fist at the sky, and his voice is strained with raw emotion when he shouts, "This is bullshit!"

"Wait, just watch." Quinn pats her husband's arm as the rest of Madden's name is spelled.

“Madden?” they both ask at the same time.

We’ve gained the attention of a few warriors, and one of them inquires, “Who’s Madden?”

“A suspect in Princess Zaylee’s kidnapping,” Kirian answers, flustered because he doesn’t understand. “This is a strange time for some mystical presence to tell me to find a fugitive. If I knew where to find the asshole, he would’ve been apprehended and executed already.”

Growling with frustration over the fact that he’s going to have to be more specific, Kai promptly continues the message, putting a period at the end of his two-word command. Then he adds ‘HE.’

Unfortunately, the fragments from Alosi’s explosion are almost here.

Wide-eyed, I stare at what’s coming.

This shower is dense, filled with a lot of rocks that are bigger than pebbles, and it becomes clear that this entire area is about to experience some serious damage.

“Move!” Kirian orders, gesturing the warriors back as he ushers Quinn away. “Take cover behind the palace!”

“Wait!” I yell, going unheard, of course.

Everyone flocks across the lawn, temporarily abandoning us and the cannons. With a combination of sprinting and flying, they all vacate the lawn very quickly, and I helplessly look at the message Kai’s desperately trying to finish. He’s putting together a ‘C’ when he gives the sky a quick glance.

“Go with them,” he barks at me, but I stay planted in the grass.

“I’m not leaving you.”

“You must. I’ll come to you soon. Do it, Sunny.”

Disobeying him, I watch two Pyros in the second line of defense fly toward a portion that’s frighteningly large. When they get near it, they blast it with fire together in a collective effort to break it apart. It works, but the man and woman end up sacrificing their lives because they’re unable to get out of the way in time to avoid a collision.

Upon impact with their bodies, there’s a bright burst of flames, and it fractures the meteor into three smaller pieces.

We’re not safe, though.

One chunk is headed for the gardens, really close to us. Kai’s finished the ‘CAN’ and he’s making the ‘HE’ in what I think is *help*, but he’ll have to come back to the message.

“Come on.” I urgently prod his shoulder.

He sends me an incredulous glare filled with fury. “What are you still doing here? Just listen to me for once and go!”

He’s so loud, so uncompromising, my feet automatically start moving. He’s been stern with me before, but never like that.

Stumbling away from him, I run toward the palace. I won’t make it around the building, but there’s a hole in the side of the throne room where a rock hit. Maybe I can get inside and curl up under a table or something.

Boom. Crack.

The most awful sound of destruction stops me in my tracks, and I look over my shoulder.

The meteor has landed in the middle of the garden, on top of the fountain. Marble and stone spray up in a thirty-foot wall of debris, but that’s not what has my heart in my throat.

The boulder doesn’t embed into the ground. Instead, it starts rolling and bouncing.

Straight at Kai.

He’s in such a frenzy, he’s unaware of the danger he’s in. His head is down, and his arms are hurriedly spelling out the last letter.

He’s going to get killed.

An odd sort of clarity washes over me.

In this moment, I finally see my worth. My purpose. I know what I’m meant to do.

I can change the future.

Aside from the fact that I can’t handle losing Kai, there’s another reason he has to survive: If he dies, so does Valora.

Because if these meteors are really going to happen, Kai must make it out alive so he can deliver the message for real.

The message that will save an entire world.

Sprinting over the trembling terrain, it feels like I’m in slow motion as I return to Kai. My limbs are heavy like I’m moving through water, but I keep going.

The boulder is speeding along, and I’m racing against it.

Fueled by adrenaline and determination, I get to my husband with only a second to spare.

Before the big mass can crush him, I place my hands on Kai’s shoulders and shove him with all the strength I can muster.

He’s a solid guy, but with how low he is to the ground, it’s not difficult to

knock him off balance.

He falls forward, smoothly tumbling into a somersault and pivoting to see what—or who—pushed him out of the way.

“Oof.” I land hard on my stomach, right where Kai had just been.

His eyes widen with fear when he realizes what I’ve done, and his opens his mouth to say something, but it’s too late for me.

Keeping my gaze on him, I spend the last split-second of my life looking at the man I love. The brave warrior who showed me how to love myself.

Managing to give him one last sad smile, I convey the acceptance of my doom.

CHAPTER 37

Kai

“NO!” I shout before I’m forced to witness the most agonizing event in history.

The large, jagged rock mows my wife down. It bangs against her head and rolls over her midsection with such force that it flips her from her stomach to her back, leaving her lying there, bloody and broken.

Then it continues on its path, undeterred, like it didn’t just destroy my world.

“Sunny,” I cry out, scrambling over to her. “No. No, no, no.”

Kneeling next to her limp, severely battered body, I feel like I can’t breathe as I take a visual stock of her extensive injuries.

Normally, I’d use my power to pinpoint all the damage. I’d place my hand over her chest, mentally seeking out every rip, break, and tear. Then I’d push her tissues back into place and make her whole again.

But I can’t do that.

I can only assess her from the outside.

There’s a gash on her forehead that’s gushing blood. The red rivulets are running down her temple and into her hair. One of her arms is obviously broken; the bone in her forearm is crooked. Scratches are all over her, and large bruises are already beginning to form.

I want to scoop her up and cradle her in my arms, but I’m afraid if I touch her, I’ll only hurt her worse. I have no idea what kind of damage has been done internally, but I suspect she’s mortally wounded.

I refuse to accept this.

She needs to be healed. Now.

Tugging at the Valonite necklace, I try to snap it off. I pull it so hard I end up cutting the back of my neck, but the design is too solid, and it won’t break.

Next, I try to yank it over my head, but I’d have to cut off my ears and

crush my jaw to remove it.

Which I'm honestly considering.

"Kai," Ro wheezes, and I'm both shocked and elated that she's still conscious.

"I'm here." I gently stroke her forehead.

She gazes up at me through fluttering eyelids. "I—I didn't panic this time. Aren't you proud of me?"

How can I be proud when her courage produced these results? How could I possibly be happy that she's the one lying on the ground instead of me?

I don't say those things, though.

Tears blur my vision as I reply, "You were so brave, Sunny. You always are. I'm sorry I yelled at you. I shouldn't have."

"It'sss okay," she slurs with a wobbly smile, and when she sees that I'm crying she says, "Hey, don't worry. It doesn't hurt that much."

I laugh and sob at the same time because it's ridiculous how she's trying to make me feel better when she's the one who's been mangled. "You don't have to lie to me."

Blood bubbles at her lips. "I'm serious. I barely feel anything."

That's not reassuring. At all. Not that I want her to be in agony, but the absence of it isn't a good sign.

"I'm going to examine you for a second, all right?" As softly as I can, I start my assessment.

Palpating her ribs, I feel the inconsistencies in the shape of the bones. They've been crushed. So has her pelvis, and there's no way her organs aren't affected.

I don't like the sound her lungs are making. They're filling with blood. With every inhale, she struggles with fighting gasps, and every exhale emits a disturbing rattle.

The pulse in her neck is weak and slow when I press my fingers to her artery.

Without a doubt, she's dying. I don't need my power to tell me that.

"Kai?"

"Yes, my love?"

"Just hold me?"

The request devastates me.

Because it's a *last* request.

Sliding an arm under her back, I lift her up until she's on my lap. As I feel

her spine, I can tell it's severed. Her back is broken, which is probably one of the reasons she can't feel the pain.

A groan of despair bursts from my throat as I glance around at a world I don't recognize.

The palace grounds are a battlefield. Rocks, blood, and body parts litter the grass. Smoke is in the air from the firing cannons and the exploding Pyros.

The garden is wrecked. All the greenery has been trampled by the dozens of meteor fragments. The side of the palace has crumbled further in the spot where it got hit, and inside, the thrones are toppled.

Suddenly, King Kirian and Queen Quinn emerge from the back of the palace, and they run this way.

Unfortunately, the rocks I'd organized into words are a scattered mess.

Our avenue to winning is demolished, and I realize I have two choices.

One, I could spell the words out again, but I'm certain Ro would die before I could finish. As it is, she's passed out, and her breathing stops for a terrifying second before raggedly starting up again.

Which leaves me with option number two: Forfeit.

Neither of the possibilities have good outcomes, but one guarantees Ro's death, right here, right now. With the other, she has a chance.

If I surrender, then I'll get this damn collar off and I can heal Ro. After that, I'll refuse the deal I made with Armand because I won't execute my wife. So what if my lifeforce gets sucked into the amulet?

From the beginning, I always knew it might come down to this. Armand knew it, too. I remember that moment before I entered the maze when he seemed so sure I would give up, and I hate that he was right.

Option number two, it is.

Gazing up at the night sky, I loudly announce, "Armand, I surrender."

The noise dies down. The shouts, the constant rumble... it all gets quiet.

Then everything darkens and my surroundings start to change. The Night Realm fades away, and the dusty interior of Armand's castle materializes.

Within seconds, I'm on the dirty stone floor in the Lost Land.

Slow clapping draws my attention to the twiggy throne.

Armand gets to his feet as if he's giving me a standing ovation, and Yugo is at his side looking just as ecstatic. They're wearing expressions of utter delight.

"Well," Armand breathes out. "I must say, you know how to put on a

show. We thoroughly enjoyed *everything* you and the queen did. We saw... so many sides of you both.”

When he says *everything*, I know he’s referring to how he watched us when we were intimate. Ro and I were certain we had an audience but hearing him say it feels like a violation. He didn’t have to tell me that. He could’ve allowed us to keep a modicum of privacy, but that’s how he operates. He wants me to be embarrassed and angry.

I sneer at him. “You won. Take off the collar.”

“If it makes you feel any better, most participants don’t make it past the first test,” he placates with mock sympathy. “You should be impressed with yourself.”

Right now, I don’t have the capacity to feel anything but grief and rage. “Collar. Off. Now. Let me heal her.”

Armand twists his lips. “Oh, I don’t think that’s a good idea. You forfeited the last challenge.”

“I did it so I could get back here to fix her. Now remove the fucking collar!”

Armand sends more of his artificial pity with his downturned mouth. “But the queen must die either way. You knew what you were agreeing to when you surrendered. Why not let her take the natural course? She’s almost there. Honestly, Kai, it’s a mercy for you and her.”

Resorting to trickery, I point out, “She was supposed to die by my sword, yes? That was the deal.”

He narrows his eyes with skepticism. “You’re telling me you want me to allow you to heal her, just so you can kill her anyway?”

“Yes,” I blatantly lie.

“You surprise me. That’s so very vicious.”

“It’s not viciousness,” I insist, determined to convince him of my—admittedly false—sincerity. “We didn’t get to say goodbye. I need to speak with her. I want to kiss her one more time. Tell her how much I love her. Surely, you can understand that. If it were you and Yugo...”

I know I’ve touched something inside Armand’s black heart when the lines of distaste on his face soften as he looks at the man he loves.

Surprisingly, Yugo takes my side, stating the positive. “We’ll get to have that execution. I do enjoy those so much.”

The tempting must be enough for Armand because he sighs heavily before relenting, “All right. Who am I to stand in the way of final farewells

between lovers?”

Acting like it's a huge inconvenience to dig the key out of his pocket, he grumbles as he hands it to Yugo, requesting that his husband carry out the act of removing my collar.

I keep my attention on Ro as Yugo makes his way behind me. His fingers slip into the necklace, and I hear the quiet click when the key turns. The collar falls away, and my power surges back. It takes a few seconds to recharge, but when it does, I start the healing process without delay.

Holding Ro close, I place my hand over her chest. I shut my eyes and implore the damage within.

I empty her lungs, nudging the blood back into her veins and toward her heart. I fuse her broken ribs together. I repair her spine. I reform her pelvis.

Concentrating hard, I simultaneously work on the snapped bone in her arm while patching the rips inside her abdominal cavity. I sew up the vital organs, smooth them over, and drain the excess fluid around them.

Last, I target the minor injuries she sustained in previous challenges so she's good as new. The burn on her hand, the scrapes on her legs, and the shallow cut on her neck.

Then she's perfect.

Any second, she'll wake. She's going to be so irate with me for doing this, but I don't care.

Sucking in a loud gasp, Ro's eyes snap open, and there's immediate alertness because she thinks we're still in the third challenge.

Flailing, she tries to sit up, but instead of letting her off my lap, I keep her there with one arm around her back and the other clamped over her legs so she can't get away.

I want to hold her for as long as I can.

“Shhh,” I soothe her, slightly rocking us. “You're all right. You're okay, Sunny.”

“What's happening?” She scans our drab surroundings before gawking at her own body. When she notes the lack of pain, happiness lights her face. “Did we win?”

I wish I could tell her we were victorious. I'd give anything to be able to say I somehow managed to beat Armand and save her at the same time.

With a lump of emotion clogging my throat, I rasp, “No.”

Wary, she asks, “Then how did we get here? What did you do?”

I let a few beats pass. “I surrendered.”

“What?” Fuming, her chest rises and falls with quick breaths. “Why? How could you? We promised we wouldn’t.”

“No,” I contradict. “I made *you* promise not to forfeit for me, but I never said I wouldn’t do it for you.”

“Oh, that’s bullshit. Don’t play those fae word games with me.” Her adorable little finger comes out, and she sticks it in my face. “We had an understanding. We weren’t supposed to give up.”

“Yeah.” I get louder. “Which is why I’m wondering why you pushed me out of the way. What the fuck, Sunny?”

Now that she’s better, my anger over the situation is unleashed. I’m scowling so hard I can feel my facial scar stretching uncomfortably.

“I took your place, yes.” Ro is exasperated and completely unremorseful. “But think about it—if I’d been the one to survive, I would’ve remained a captive here, and Valora would be none the wiser about the meteors. Don’t you see? You’ll be able to save them now.”

“I don’t want to,” I state petulantly, refusing to acknowledge that she’s making sense. “It’s not worth it if I have to sacrifice you.”

“You don’t mean that,” Ro says, soft and sad. “It’s a romantic concept—forsaking the entire world for the person you love. But would you really choose to do it?”

I’ve already made the choice, and yes, I’d choose her over and over again. Every single time.

She just doesn’t know it yet.

Her gaze drops to the sword attached to my belt. Underneath her leg, it’s sheathed, and just like when she asked me to kill her when we met, her fingers go to her neck.

“You shouldn’t have healed me.” She swallows hard. “Because now... what you have to do, Kai... You have to kill the person you love. You’re never going to recover from that. You’ll be emotionally traumatized forever.”

“Admitting defeat is such a rare talent,” Armand interrupts our moment. “I commend you both for your ability to concede your loss.”

This evil asshole.

I’ve had enough of his shit, and I need to be on my feet for the confrontation that’s about to happen. I might be losing this war with Armand, but I’m not going down without causing some serious chaos first.

Standing from the floor, I bring Ro up with me and set her at my side. Then I get in front of her protectively, making it obvious that I have no

intention of harming a hair on her pretty head.

Surprise registers on Armand's face, and he taps his amulet. "Really? So you're choosing this?"

"What?" Ro tugs on my arm. "Kai, no."

Ignoring her, I shrug. "I'm not sure."

"What do you mean, you're not sure? We have a bargain to complete. You kill the woman, or you get sucked into my gem."

"Kai, don't be foolish," Ro protests again, but I go on as if she's not part of this conversation.

"Ah, yes." I feign cluelessness, pretending I'd forgotten the details of the deal, and I scratch my jaw. "And how long am I allowed to ponder this life-altering decision?"

"I—you—there is no time," Armand stammers, realizing he never specified if I can consider my fate with care and calculation.

"No time *limit*, you mean?"

I know I've gained the upper hand when the overlord's nostrils flare with indignation. I'm sure the gem has its own rules, but Armand doesn't seem certain about what they are. Maybe no one has ever thought to question it.

Well, we're about to find out how impatient the gem is and what it will let me do in this indecisive limbo.

Just to make it real, I keep my thoughts in a neutral space where I volley between visions of attacking Armand and beheading Ro. It's painful to imagine doing that to my Sunny, but I can suffer through the inner turmoil if it buys me just a few minutes.

I don't even need that long. Give me sixty seconds.

Apprehensive, Armand shifts closer to Yugo as some of his fear shows. I can actually smell it—that distinct scent of stress sweat—and I don't blame him.

He's seen me in action. He's watched me dismember, disembowel, and decapitate multiple people in the time it would take him to piss.

"Kai, please don't do this," Ro begs through gritted teeth. "We don't even know what it's like inside the gem. It could be endless suffering. And Valora is depending on you."

She clasps her hands together under her chin as if she's praying to me, and I want to picture her like this in the temple. Someday, she'll get to be there, talking to her god. Maybe she'll even talk to me. I hope so. I hope I can hear her, wherever I am.

I caress the side of her sweet face. Bending down, I press my lips to hers for our last kiss. I linger and let the finality of it sink into my aching heart because no matter what I choose, I'll never get to have my mouth on hers again.

Gazing at her with all the gratefulness and affection I have for her, I say, "Your love is like a mirror for me. When I look at you, I see who I really am in your eyes, and for the first time since I got my scars, I like my reflection. I'm endlessly grateful for that." I smile, lopsided facial muscles and all. "Now, please, for the love of fate, stand back. Things might get ugly."

She knows me well enough to see when there's no point in arguing, and tears fill her eyes. She clings to my shirt, but my resolve is steel, and I jerk away from her.

When I turn to the overlord and his husband, I take out my sword and my machete.

Nudging Yugo, Armand shuffles until they're both partially hidden behind his big throne, but those twigs won't protect him.

Snarling and showing a fang, he claims, "You won't be able to get close enough to touch me. I have magic you can't begin to comprehend."

"Is that so?" I challenge. "Because I think I've seen most of it. Pretty fancy stuff, but do you know what's more dangerous than a wizard with tricks and spells?" He doesn't ask me to elaborate, but I do anyway. "A man with nothing to lose. See, you fucked up," I continue, advancing on the couple with slow steps. "You got so greedy with our misery, you forgot to give us something to hope for."

"I gave you both the opportunity to experience true love, and you got to kill your worst enemy in the first challenge. Those are gifts!"

"Fuck your gifts. If you take everything from me, none of it means anything, and that includes consequences."

"We can't renege on the deal," Armand whines with a tinge of regret. "Even if I wanted to take it back and let you go, I couldn't. I told you the gem wouldn't let that happen."

"What's the matter?" I coo condescendingly. "You're going to get the tragic ending you wanted. But the question is, a tragedy for whom? You know, I just can't decide." Acting frustrated, I sigh dramatically. "Gah, all this uncertainty is making me feel so very... murderous."

In a last-ditch effort to scare me, Armand warns, "You wouldn't want any harm to come to poor Ro after you're gone. If you try to kill me, I'd have to

take out my frustrations on her.”

He’s right, but I don’t want him dead. That would be too easy. I want him very much alive so I can teach him a lesson.

Let’s see how he likes it when I strip him of what he holds dear.

I’m going to kill Yugo. Then, just to make sure Armand can’t hurt Ro, I’m going to cut off his arms. His legs, too. I might even go as far as ripping out his tongue so he can’t talk. Then I’ll heal him up so he’s not too distracted by pain to maintain the enchanted bubble around the property, but that’s not for his benefit. It’s for Ro’s.

Tensing every muscle in my body, I break out into a sprint and charge at Armand and Yugo.

“Guards!” they both holler, and the sound of about a dozen sluggish footsteps echoes from the foyer as the emaciated men answer the call.

I ignore them.

I don’t care if they’re coming up behind me. One swing of my sword will take several of them down.

Intent on dividing my attention, Armand orders, “The woman. Go after the woman.”

“Fuck,” I mutter, having no choice but to attack the group.

Change of plans.

Apparently, I’m going to murder every single dark fae in this place.

They’re so fucking slow from how feeble they are, they don’t even get within twenty feet of Ro.

Thank the stars, she’s obeying me, and her back is against the far wall as she keeps her distance from the action.

Beheading three and four at a time, I pick off the guards. Their spears clatter to the floor as they drop, and the blood seeping from them is thick and black. These men don’t have much circulating in their veins, so it’s not as messy as it would usually be.

Stabbing the last remaining minion through the gut, I twist my sword so it severs his spine, then I use my machete to remove his head as well.

Honestly, it’s better this way. These men deserved to die. They saw Ro naked, and now their eyes will never look at anything ever again.

Plus, Armand will be the only one of his kind left in this region, and he’ll have to stew in his grief alone. Ro will still be here, but she’ll be a constant reminder of what he lost.

Using the corpses like steppingstones, brittle bones crunch under my

boots as I make my way back to Armand.

He's fumbling with a little wooden box of tools. His specialty is illusions, and he proceeds to do what he does best—he changes our reality.

Suddenly, light fills the space. Brightness spills through the windows as if we're in the true Day Realm. The throne room isn't dusty or dark anymore. The floor is paved with shiny marble. There are golden chandeliers, and the ceiling is a mural of a night sky.

New guards fill the doorway. These men are nothing like the starved creatures I just slaughtered. They're strong and capable, and they'll give me a run for my money.

Unfortunately for me, Armand can create as many as he wants, and he'll probably just keep them coming, holding me off until the gem sucks me in.

Much like in the hallway at the end of the first challenge, the guards swarm me. I swing and grunt and kill. Swing. Grunt. Kill.

I have no mercy, busting knees and noses. Cutting off limbs. Stabbing faces.

All too soon, though, I feel it when my time as a free man starts to dwindle.

Once the gem recognizes my avid protest, an invisible pull begins like there's a rope between me and the amulet. Struggling against it, I continue hacking away at the imaginary guards with my sword, but my feet are slipping across the floor.

I give up on the mob. When I face Armand, several blades slice me on the arm, and one stabs my right side, but I heal myself immediately.

Thinking he's got me beat, Armand makes the guards disappear so he can give me his full attention.

He and Yugo come out from their shelter behind the throne. They want to witness my demise, and they smile when I'm lifted off the floor. My toes drag as I float toward the gem against my will.

It's a huge mistake for Armand to think this is over, but I feed into his assumption. I drop my sword and machete in a show of surrender just to lull him into a false sense of security.

His shoulders relax, and he puts an arm around Yugo with a look of cheerful confidence.

I'm about to wipe the arrogance off his fucking face.

Rapidly, I lift my throwing knife off my belt and chuck it as hard as I can. It hits my intended target—Yugo's heart.

Yugo chokes out a sound of pain as he glances down at the blade embedded in his chest, and Armand wails, “No!” before yanking the knife out.

A rivulet of blood leaks from the gash, painting Yugo’s bare torso with a red line. His legs buckle, and Armand catches him to lower him to the floor.

It’s nice to see Armand on his knees for once.

I’m tempted to taunt him about it, but I need to use what time I have left to strategize.

I won’t be able to kill Yugo *and* maim Armand to the point that he’s incapacitated, so I’m choosing the latter as the priority.

Before I’m sucked into the gem, I need to cause as much injury to the overlord as I can. Armand’s arms must go first, and if I cut off a leg as well, that will be a bonus.

In an ideal ending, I’ll be so quick and coordinated that I’ll lop off Yugo’s head, too, but I’m probably being overly optimistic.

Still, I prepare for it and get my ax.

CHAPTER 38

Ro

Terror grips me as Kai slides closer to his doom.

Sparing just a second, he looks over his shoulder at me.

In his brief glance, there's love, relief, approval, and appreciation.

He's glad.

Glad to be the one who's about to give his life.

He's completely at peace with what he's about to do.

But I'm not.

Seriously, we need to stop trying to die for each other. It's annoying.

It can't end this way.

It can't.

Rubbing my temple, I push away the stress clouding my mind. I need to analyze the bargain. There has to be a way out of it.

All the years I spent as a faerie taught me a few things, and one of them is that deals are shaky, especially when they've been made in haste. They have weak spots. You just have to find them, and it usually has to do with vague wording and how it can be interpreted.

Armand was so eager to watch Kai and me suffer, I bet he missed something important in the terms.

You have to give the woman what she wants.

Give the woman what she wants.

What she wants.

That's not very specific. Armand never actually said Kai has to execute me. He let Kai assume that was the price because that's what I'd asked for at the time, but so much has changed since then.

That's not how I feel anymore.

That's *not* what I want.

Oh my God. I don't need tricks to get out of this. I just need the truth.

“Wait!” I cry out, thinking my demand will stop the madness unfolding. It doesn’t.

Kai is still floating toward the amulet while Armand is cradling Yugo and frantically petting him as if his hands can heal the damage that’s been done.

“Stop,” I order firmly.

Nothing changes.

Armand isn’t paying attention to me, and even if he was, I’m not sure it would make a difference.

The amulet has taken over. Somehow, I need to appeal to the gem. That’s what has the real power here.

Quickly retrieving the dagger from my pocket, I wince as I study the sharp blade for a moment before bringing the edge to my throat.

I shallowly slice the skin on the left side of my neck while firmly announcing, “We’ll fulfill the original deal.”

Warm blood runs down my skin, and the force pulling Kai toward the gem ceases so abruptly, he drops to the floor in a heap.

I’m so happy I almost laugh at his bewilderment when he finds himself on his ass.

Hopping to his feet, he’s stunned and slack-jawed when he sees that I’ve injured myself. “What are you doing?”

Armand’s sharp gaze bounces between Yugo and me. “You’re going to honor the bargain?”

“Yes.”

“The fuck you are,” Kai exclaims. “Drop the knife, Ro.”

Ro. It’s actually cute how he calls me that when he’s pissed.

Lowering the dagger, I direct my statement at Armand. “What she wants. That was the deal.”

“That’s right,” the overlord snarls. “So?”

“What. She. Wants.” Each word is punctuated to get my point across. “What *I* want.”

Armand scowls as if I’m wasting his time. “Yes, yes. Why do you keep repeating facts we already know?”

“Because you used *present tense* when you made the bargain, and you never said I couldn’t change my mind.”

The instant Armand realizes his mistake, his facial expression morphs to one of horror. His eyes take on a wild, desperate glint, and he scans the carnage around him.

All his servants are dead, and the man he loves has been stabbed in the heart.

Yugo won't die from his wound, but I'm sure it hurts like a bitch. Every heartbeat will send zings of agony through his body, and it'll take months to heal—even longer if he doesn't have proper nutrients. And with only the two of them, there won't be enough healthy blood to go around.

"What I want is to walk out of here with Kai, so that's what we're going to do," I declare. "We're going home."

"No." In fervent denial, Armand swings his head back and forth.

"This was all for nothing," I go on, pushing away from the wall to daintily step over body parts as I make my way to Kai. "You lose. It's over, Armand."

"You can't do this!" he screams hysterically.

"I can. Even your amulet agrees with me. It can tell what the truth is. Isn't that right?"

Pausing and waiting, I search for any sign that Kai is being pulled away, but he's just standing in the same spot. The gem has released him, once and for all.

In shock, Kai looks me up and down like he doesn't know who I am.

Maybe he doesn't.

Not this side of me, anyway.

I'm not usually conniving, but this whole ordeal has cultivated some new traits.

Cruelty is one of them.

I get immense satisfaction seeing Armand and Yugo suffer, and I smile deviously as I dare, "Try to stop us. I'd like to see what happens."

If Armand intervenes, he'll be the one breaking the bargain. The gem will take him instead, leaving Yugo alone, injured, and without the protection of the enchantment. He wouldn't last two days once the barbarians realize they can breach the perimeter.

All of this goes through Armand's head. I can see the wheels turning as he comes to the conclusion that he's been bested by little ole me.

Avoiding the last dark puddle of blood between Kai and me, I hop over it. Not that it would matter if I danced in the stuff. I'm already covered in my own blood and so much filth.

I'm definitely going to need a new outfit.

And extensive therapy.

But that's a worry for another time.

Finally snapping out of his shock, Kai surges forward and picks me up, lifting me away from the gory floor. As soon as he sets me down, he engulfs me in a tight embrace.

"You did it." His voice catches. "You saved us. I'm not happy that you cut yourself, but it worked." Warmth radiates from his hands, and the pleasant heat flows through my rib cage, up to my heart, and then my skin crackles quietly as it fuses back together.

The sting fades to a tickle, and then I feel no pain. I must confess, being healed by Kai makes me kind of horny.

"You can thank me properly later," I quip.

Seriously, we've got some celebrating to do.

However, Kai's frown is prominent when he puts some space between us. "Before we leave, I want to kill Yugo."

"What?" Armand and Yugo simultaneously shout.

"And I'm going to mutilate Armand," he continues his gruesome plan in front of the pair as if they're not listening. "It was my plan and I'd still like to carry it out."

He wants retribution, and I'm not opposed to it. If he feels that he needs revenge, I won't get in his way.

"You don't need my permission," I tell him.

"You are my queen."

"I'm your wife," I counter with a small smile. "However, I do appreciate you consulting me about important decisions, and you have my full support on however you want to handle these two."

"Why?" Hunching over his husband, Armand tries to shield Yugo. "Why would you do that when you've already won?"

"Because I can," Kai answers coldly, aiming his anger at the overlord. "Besides, Yugo's suffering, and according to your ways, I'd only be giving him the same mercy you tried to grant my wife—I'd be putting him out of his misery."

"Please," Armand begrudgingly begs through his clenched jaw. "Let him live." A few seconds pass, then he adds, "And heal him before you go."

Kai barks out a laugh at the ridiculous request. "Why would I do that?"

"I can help you find the lost princess and your warrior friend," Armand rushes out, and his claim about Zaylee and Pippin makes everything stop.

Talk about a mic drop.

“It’s a new bargain,” Armand insists.

“Fuck that,” Kai grunts, “I’m not getting involved with your amulet again.”

“No amulet this time.” Holding his hand out in a placating way, Armand says, “It can be a simple promise between us.”

“Why would I trust you?”

“I’m waving the white flag, okay? Yugo is more important to me than anything in all the universes. I know I’ve done nothing to deserve any favors from you. I’m still asking anyway. Let us call a truce because we both have something the other needs. Heal my husband, and I’ll make sure the warrior finds the princess.”

Kai shifts on his feet as he stares at me with a silent question.

I understand his hesitation. We have no reason to believe Armand, but this is our best chance at bringing my granddaughter home.

Yugo lets out a wet-sounding cough, sputters, and groans. It makes the overlord so desperate that he addresses us respectfully. “Your Majesty and Sir Kai... I’m... I-I’m sorry.”

He actually apologized. It was stilted and totally unnatural, but he sounded somewhat genuine.

I’m flabbergasted, and I start to let myself hope that his offer is real. “Your promise needs clearly defined terms. You’re saying you’ll follow through as soon as possible?”

“Yes.” Armand nods enthusiastically. “Making contact is the first thing I’ll do after you leave.”

“And this contact will be done with the intention of getting Zaylee and Pippin back to Valora, unharmed?” I specify.

“Absolutely.”

“And Madden, too,” Kai tacks on the very important stipulation. “You have to convince the barbarian to come back with them.”

“That, I cannot guarantee.” Armand grimaces. “You’ve seen him. He’s feral. The barbarians don’t take orders from the overlords, and it’s likely he wouldn’t want to go to a place where he’s an outlaw. Crossing over to Valora would be a death sentence for him.”

“Tell him he’ll have amnesty,” I say. “He has the protection of Queen Ro.”

This is the first time I’ve ever called myself that and felt proud. I’m finally accepting the title because I’ve earned my position a thousand times

over, and I deserve the clout that comes with it.

“And if he doesn’t believe me?” Armand presents the possibility because he knows he’s so untrustworthy that his words don’t hold much weight.

Kai’s mouth twitches with a calculating smirk. “Just say it’s for Princess Zaylee. Inform Madden that her life is in danger, and only he can protect her.”

Tilting his head in agreement, Armand muses, “That might work. I’ll do my best. I swear it.”

“If you don’t follow through on your end, I’ll come back,” Kai vows. “I’ll return to the Lost Land and kill Yugo in the most brutal way possible.”

“Fine.” Armand frantically waves a hand at Yugo’s gaping gash. “Now, will you just fix this already? Hurrying would be in your best interest. With how differently time works between our worlds, we both know you don’t have any to waste. Literally every minute you stand here and argue with me, you’re pissing away Valora’s chances of survival.”

He’s not wrong, and we have no choice but to put our faith in him. Which is fucking terrifying.

Approaching the couple, Kai unceremoniously holds his hand several inches away from Yugo’s chest. A subtle glow illuminates the inches between them, and some clicking and popping follows as the tissues repair.

Seconds later, Yugo goes limp, sighing because his pain is gone.

Coming back to me, Kai asks Armand, “The Gatekeeper will be waiting for us outside your walls, right?”

“Yes.” Armand’s answer is absentminded because he’s too busy inspecting Yugo.

Without another word, Kai collects his sword and machete from the floor, then he holds out his arm chivalrously. “Shall we?”

I take his elbow. “We shall. Let’s go home.”

Our exit from the broken castle is uneventful. On the cobblestone path, we walk at a quick pace. The stroll is free of panic but filled with the desire to get the hell away from here as soon as possible.

When Kai opens the door to the exterior walls, Ellister is waiting for us like Armand said he would be. Obviously, he can see that we made it out alive, and the shocked lift of his eyebrows tells me he didn’t think we would.

“To the Night Realm,” Kai demands tersely. “Delaveria.”

“All right, then.” Ellister doesn’t delay the process.

He instantly opens a vortex behind him, and Kai wraps his arms around

me as the force sucks us in. Holding onto Kai tightly, I shut my eyes and brace myself for the violent swirling.

I've traveled through Ellister's vortex before. When he kidnapped the girls and me, I remember fearing I might die during the travel. It's like getting caught in an undertow in the ocean. Falling, spinning, drowning.

But this time is different. With Kai as my rock, it's not as frightening, and after all the dangerous events we've overcome, being tossed around is more like a minor inconvenience.

Soon, things slow down. The atmosphere changes. The air becomes fresh and cool.

I open my eyes just in time to see a dark opening at the end of the tunnel. We're hurdling toward it. Fast.

Turning us, Kai gets horizontal, putting himself on the bottom to make sure he's the one who receives the brunt of the landing.

He grunts when his back hits a grassy knoll, and although he's there to break my fall, I'm not immune to the force of it. All the air leaves my lungs in a whoosh on impact.

My face is smushed against his chest, and our fronts are mashed together.

Groaning a little, I push up to look at Kai. As my fingers curl against cool, supple handfuls of grass, I study my husband's features. His eyebrows are furrowed, and his frown is in place.

"What's wrong?" I'm pretty good at reading his facial expressions, and I don't see pain. Maybe he's just really disoriented from the drastic change in locations. "Are you okay?" I ask, toying with his long braid. "Did you hit your head?"

Sitting up, he gasps a little before replying, "I'm fine. I just... do you feel that?"

He rubs his chest, and I begin to register a fluttery sensation behind my own sternum. My brain is also buzzing, and all the hairs on my body rise.

A strange, all-encompassing warmth fills me, and then a rush of happiness sweeps in as a deep contentment clicks into place.

My soul.

The soul that's been missing for so long just returned to me.

To us.

I'd almost forgotten about the best part of leaving the Lost Land—we get to be whole once again. We get to be connected to God, to fate, to magic or whatever it is that ties us to our spirits.

Kai and I release happy sighs, but within the next second, another bewildering event happens.

My soul is... unsettled. It's moving. Reaching, like it's trying to expand outside of me. Like it's casting a net.

Looking at Kai, I open my mouth to ask him if it's normal for the soul to be unstable after returning from the Lost Land, but as soon as our eyes lock, our souls merge.

Mine tangles with his, and his fuses with mine.

The two become one in the most joyful, satisfying moment of belonging.

In an instant, everything that's ever happened to me makes sense. The question, 'why?' is no longer a wonder in my mind because the answer is right here.

All along, I was being led to Kai. Our destiny was written eons before we existed, and it will go on forever after we're gone.

"We're fated mates," Kai declares breathlessly, while I laugh so obnoxiously, it's more of a cackle.

Bright sparks go off in the air around us.

The little fireworks are because of the bond solidifying. The display is produced the first time a fated pair makes love. Our celebration is just happening a little later than usual because it couldn't occur until we returned to Valora.

Before I have a chance to admire the glittering, Kai mauls me. Engulfing me with his embrace and rolling us so my back is on the ground, he peppers me with kisses.

His lips go from my lips to my forehead to my cheek. "My mate, my wife, my love. You're my fate, and I'm sorry I didn't realize it sooner." More kisses. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't apologize," I say, happier than I've ever been. "You chose me. You chose me without the bond, and I wouldn't want it any other way."

He moves his mouth to my neck. "Still, I should've known. There were so many signs. Your alluring scent, the undeniable attraction, my inability to control my cock."

I moan because the cock he just mentioned is rock hard and notched perfectly between my legs, and I'm getting super turned on. "Okay, okay. But I'm just as guilty as you for being clueless. The way I reacted to you in the beginning should've given it away."

"I guess no one could've seen this coming." Kai licks my throat, but he

stops abruptly before lifting his head. “Wait. That motherfucker.”

“What?”

“Armand. He knew we were mates. Remember when he peered at us through his magnifying glass? He could tell. That’s why he set the deal up the way he did—if he won and I had to execute you, I would’ve died eventually, too. Or vice versa. If I’d given myself to his gem, I would’ve been sentencing you to death as well. He never intended for either of us to survive at all.”

Now that our souls are linked, I can sense Kai’s outrage through our tether. Before, I felt it externally, but now it’s inside me.

Boiling.

Although I can’t read his mind, I know he wants to go back and finish Armand off.

“Hey.” I lovingly tug on his beard and remind him, “We won. We beat him, despite his best efforts to take us down. Honestly, we shouldn’t be surprised by his cunning ruthlessness. What’s important is, he can never hurt us again.”

“You’re right.” Kai calms with a few cleansing breaths. “You’re mine now.”

“I always was. For as long as I’ve lived, I’ve belonged to you. We just had to find each other.”

He caresses my cheek while gazing at me with pure adoration. “If only we’d met before this, we could’ve avoided so much suffering.”

We both stiffen at his lamenting because it spurs an astonishing thought—Armand isn’t the first person to interfere with our bond.

It’s ridiculously unbelievable that our paths didn’t cross a long time ago. For suns’ sake, Kai and I lived in the same city during the early years of my captivity.

If he’d moved up in ranks like he’d planned, he would’ve been invited to the palace with the other promoted warriors. After taking one look at each other, the bond would’ve automatically freed me from Zarid’s forced matrimony.

Zarid would’ve had no choice but to let me go, even as the highest ruler. In the fae world, one law is revered above all others—you can’t keep fated mates apart.

But he did keep us apart.

Somehow, he found out that Kai was my soul mate, and he wanted to preserve his pride. He didn’t want to be a king who had to give his queen to a

lowly warrior.

So he punished Kai and tried to kill him.

“Zarid did this to you because of me.” Pain and remorse flow out of me as I rub some of the scars on Kai’s left shoulder.

Taking my hand, he places my palm over the line on his cheek. “Then I’ll love these marks. I’ll wear them like badges of honor—proof that I belong to you.”

“You should’ve never had to go through such torture. Twice.”

“I’d willingly get whipped every day if it means I can be with you.”

“Don’t say such things.” I wince when I remember seeing his flesh split open. “You might be able to survive it again, but I couldn’t stand it.”

“And you won’t have to. The past is the past. We shouldn’t dwell on it because we can’t travel back in time to change it.”

“Actually,” Ellister pipes up, “I can time travel when I ingest Glow.”

I’m a bit startled by the Gatekeeper’s announcement because I’d completely forgotten he’s still here. He’s sitting several feet away, running his hands through the grass, appreciating his beautiful surroundings while he can.

“You’re lying,” I accuse. “If time travel were possible, you wouldn’t be in the predicament you’re in now with Vaeront.”

Ellister’s lips thin with a condescending smirk, neither confirming nor denying it.

Kai gets quiet for a few seconds, and I can see him rewriting history in his head as he contemplates a different life for us.

He imagines what it would’ve been like if he’d known I was meant for him. What could’ve happened if he’d busted into the palace, found me, and whisked me away. Erasing his servitude with Kirian, he replaces it with us together. Serenity in the countryside, maybe. Children.

But just as fast, he accepts the way things are. If our lives hadn’t played out exactly as they did, Zander wouldn’t be here. Zarid might still be in power today, and he’d probably be ruining the Day Realm with his depravity.

Our unfair circumstances resulted in a lot of good.

Kai shakes his head at Ellister. “I wouldn’t want to go back.”

“I wasn’t offering.” Ellister scoffs. “Just bragging a little.”

The wind becomes disrupted as a vortex opens, whipping some of my already messy hair around, and Ellister promptly leaves.

The gentle breeze resumes, and the air is crisp, like the perfect autumn

day.

It reminds me of when we arrived in the third challenge. There's a sweet smell floating around, and we're on the outskirts of the city. To my right, there are some backyards with goats and chickens running around. There's a squeaky windmill next to one of the houses, and a distant chatter of people at the market.

The ruckus of civilization is so welcome, and I have to say, I'm getting some serious déjà vu.

Scooting down my body, Kai puts his face between my breasts, pushes the mounds together, and nuzzles the cleavage.

I laugh and fondle his ears.

"We got our reward, Sunny—each other." He kisses the bulging flesh in his hands. "So, these are mine." Moving lower, he pokes my belly button with his nose before giving it a peck through my dress. "And this is mine." Sliding some more, he gets to the pulsing place between my thighs, and I can feel his hot breath when he claims, "And this... this is definitely mine."

I just nod emphatically because that means every part of him is mine, too. Including every inch of his massive cock, which I want inside me right now.

I don't even care that we're out in the open. I give zero fucks about someone seeing us.

All I want to do is be with my fated mate as free people.

Starting at my ankle, Kai drags his fingernails on my leg while bringing my dress up.

Every place he makes contact with is even more electric than before. All his touches and kisses feel amazing.

When he exposes my inner thigh, he licks a long line to my panties.

Hooking a finger in the material that's drenched with my arousal, he's about to pull them off when he abruptly stops.

Lifting his head, he angles his ears as though he's straining to listen, then he blanches with fear.

"What?" I ask, not liking the grayish hue of his skin.

"Singing. Children are singing the birthday song," he replies huskily.

"No. No." Dread makes my stomach drop as I deny the unthinkable. Because we just escaped hell. We can't go through it again. "You could be mistaken. Tell me you're mistaken, Kai."

"I'm not." His eyes are filled with terror as he states the awful conclusion, "We came back on the day the world ends. We're out of time."

CHAPTER 39

Ro

In a rush, Kai and I zoom above the city. We go by the barracks and pass the maypole. Soaring over the palace wall, we land on the walkway leading to the entrance.

Holding hands, we charge at the door. Alosi and his crew are guarding the area, only this time, we're not invisible.

At first, Alosi is ecstatic to see Kai. With a huge smile on his face, he turns to the men next to him and orders someone to go tell the kings and queens that Kai and I have returned, and his jovial tone conveys the happy news.

However, once he pivots back to us and notes how disheveled we are, his grin drops.

Yeah, we look horrible. We're covered in dirt and blood. Our clothing is torn. Our hair couldn't look worse. We've just been through a battle, and it shows.

And I'm sure we look like we've seen a ghost, but at least we're not the ghosts in this scenario.

Automatically, Alosi opens the door to let us through because we're not even pausing for pleasantries.

Not beating around the bush, Kai barks, "Is it Princess Greenlee's birthday?"

"Yes, it is," Alosi responds, sounding confused while following us into the foyer. "Are you all right? Is there something I can do for you?"

Ignoring his inquiries, we dart around the caterers holding the snack trays and head straight into the throne room where we can hear the commotion of dozens of people talking.

When the long table comes into view, all the seats are filling with guests. Greenlee is at the end, hopping in her chair while she waits for her cake.

Torius and Danyetta are on either side of her, and the rest of the royals are seated near her.

No one has noticed us yet. The guard who was sent to announce our arrival hasn't made it to Kirian, but he's getting there with brisk footsteps.

The kitchen door swings open, and I know what will happen next.

Music starts up from the string quartet, and everyone sings as a grand cake is carried out. The lit candles on the top tier glow brightly, and when the cake set in front of the young princess, the little flames illuminate Greenlee's delighted face.

Her smile is what captivates me the most. Such a big, adorable smile.

I hate that we have to wipe it away.

Making our presence known with a very untactful method, Kai shouts, "Stop!"

The singing cuts off, shocked silence takes over, and all heads swivel toward us.

Kirian stands from his chair so fast the seat almost topples over.

"Kai," he says with a mixture of surprise and relief. His lavender eyes move to me. "And Queen Ro. You're back." A wide grin spreads over his face and he whoops with a fist pump. "They're back!"

"Mama?" Zander shoots up across from Kirian.

Time seems to stop as my son looks at me. He looks at me with perfect sight. That hasn't happened since he was a child before he was inflicted with the coven's curse because I left before I could see the result of his restored vision. Overwhelming emotion speeds up my heart as I stare back at his golden eyes.

Everyone starts clapping and talking all at once.

They're happy and excited.

For them, our return makes this day especially joyous.

Zander grabs Maelyn's hand, and then he's on his way to me. He's jogging, dragging his mate behind him. With her short legs, it takes her twice as many steps to keep up.

I can relate to that. We're both a little stout and noticeably short compared to the fae.

The woman assigned to Zander by fate is just as beautiful as I remember. Her blond hair is pulled into an intricate side braid, and her pink dress hugs her body much like my outfits used to before I was starved.

I'll admit, the first time I met Maelyn, I'd thought it was funny how

different she and Zander are. With their size discrepancy, her light to his dark, and her cheerfulness to his constant stoicism, it would be easy to see them as complete opposites.

But they're the perfect complement to one another. They're two halves of a whole.

Just like Kai and me.

"Are you hurt?" Zander barks, still rushing.

"No," I answer quickly. "I know I look bad, but—"

Zander collides with me, and the air is stolen from my lungs from his tight hug.

"Careful," Kai admonishes, firm yet understanding of Zander's enthusiasm. As my fated mate, the instinct to protect me at all times will be too strong to ignore, even if he knows the person I'm with isn't a threat. "Sunny has been through a lot recently."

"Sunny?" Zander parrots, confused by the nickname.

"I'm fine," I claim, though it's a little hard to breathe in my son's embrace.

"It was less than an hour ago that I saw your body crushed," Kai argues grumpily.

"What?" Alarmed by the information, Zander pulls back to inspect me. "You said you're not hurt."

"Kai healed me," I tell him. "I'm perfectly okay."

Zander's gaze is narrowed as if he doesn't believe me, and he studies the blood and rips on my clothing.

His eyes travel down, then they lock onto where Kai and I are still holding hands. We haven't stopped clinging to each other.

It's a mate thing, this need to touch at all times. Fated pairs are blatantly obvious because of the constant contact.

Within a second, Zander realizes what it means—I'm forever connected to the man at my side, and my son's poker face gives away nothing as his blank gaze volleys between us.

Zander's never known me to be romantically involved with anyone before, and I hope he's okay with the permanent match. Honestly, he doesn't have a choice, so he better be.

Suddenly, he gives me one of his rare smiles, and he nods at Kai.

Fully approving, he follows up with, "I couldn't have chosen a better person for my mother. Thank you. Thank you for bringing her home." He

notes the blood on Kai, too. “Whatever you’ve been through, you fought for her, and I’ll always be grateful for that.”

My shoulders relax a little as Zander puts his hand out and Kai meets him halfway for a manly shake, complete with forearm grips.

They’re family now. We all are. We’re stuck together for as long as we live. Which might not be long if we can’t get Madden here within the next few hours.

I’m about to state that fact when Maelyn utters, “Zaylee?”

That one word is so full of hope—a mother’s only wish—and it’s my wish that I had better news for her.

Even though I didn’t have a choice when it came to leaving Zaylee behind, my heart is still shattered from it.

Shaking my head, my lips tremble a little when I say, “We saw her briefly. She’s alive and unharmed, but she couldn’t come back with us.”

“What do you mean? Is someone keeping her from you?” Zander asks, aggression bleeding through at the thought of someone holding his daughter captive.

“We’ll give you every detail,” Kai assures him before urgently stating, “but first we must speak with all the royals about a different matter. In private.”

“Now?” Kirian asks, joining our reunion with Quinn at his side. “It’s a bad time.”

As he glances at his granddaughter, he’s torn and reluctant because he has no clue about the emergency heading our way. And how could he? The meteor shower is something no one saw coming. Not even the royal astronomer.

Speaking of Oriantus, where is he? He should’ve barged in by now.

“We hate to wreck the party,” Kai says, “but we can’t stop the events that are about to unfold. We can only give as much warning as possible.”

I nod. “This can’t wait.”

“We could meet in the dining room for a brief rundown,” Kirian suggests as though he’s assuming the festivities will be able to continue after he gets the info.

During our conversation, curious partygoers have been getting up from the table to get a closer look.

A lot of the other royals have started coming this way, too. Damon and Whitley. Zella and Keryth.

The sound of crying makes everyone get quiet, and we all look to the devastated birthday girl. “Is my party over?”

“I’m not sure,” Danyetta replies softly to her daughter. “Maybe.”

Greenlee snuffles as she wipes her wet cheeks. “But I didn’t even get to blow out my candles, and they’re all melted now.”

She’s right. The candles are just pink puddles of wax pooling around four dying flames.

Four.

“Four candles,” Kai whispers harshly, and asking no one in particular, he questions, “She’s four years old? Not five?”

“Yes,” Torius answers, pushing his way through the people to get next to Kirian and Quinn. “What’s going on?”

Now that I’m looking around at the room, I notice the décor for this party is different than the one in Armand’s game. It’s not creature-themed with insects. Instead, flowers are everywhere. Roses, peonies, and lilies. Garlands are strung up on the walls, hung from the second-story balcony, and dangling from the ceiling. There’s no face painter and no one is making balloon animals.

Oh my God.

The world doesn’t end today.

“We have a year.” My grip on Kai’s hand tightens as glee fills me. “We have a whole year.”

“Fuck,” Kai huffs out with relief.

The tension drains from him until his limbs become jelly-like, and he sways on his feet like he might fall over.

Immediately, someone pulls a seat away from the table and slides it our way. As soon as it’s within reach, Kai grabs the arm and collapses onto the upholstered cushion. Taking me down with him, he hooks an arm around my waist so I’m firmly planted on his lap.

A caterer shoves a goblet of water at us. Accepting it, I bring it to Kai’s mouth, encouraging him to take small sips. Even though he’s this big bad warrior type, he lets me fuss over him in front of all the bystanders.

Then he pushes the cup away and motions for someone to take it so my hand is free.

“I just want your touch, Sunny.” Kai places my palm on his left cheek and nuzzles it.

And I do what he needs. I kiss the scar on his forehead while petting his

face, his neck, his shoulders, and his back. I rub him everywhere and he soaks it up unapologetically, without a hint of self-consciousness.

“Give them space,” Kirian commands, motioning for people to back away.

They reluctantly obey, but not without some gossip. Several of them whisper about our pairing. I catch murmurs about how we’re an odd couple and one person says something about Kai’s skin.

I remember how Kai implied people would be surprised when they see us together romantically, but I don’t give a damn about any of them.

“The show’s over,” I quip—quite bitchily if I do say so myself—and I embrace the queen in me because fuck these judgmental people. “False alarm. Go back to the party and don’t even think about glancing this way.”

Getting the harsh memo, the nobles take their seats without another word.

The royals, however, are still hanging around.

“False alarm?” Zander repeats. “Are you sure? Because it sounded serious.”

“It is serious. We still need to talk to all of you, but we were mistaken about today’s date. Really—there’s no need to address it now. Get one of the bakers to redo the frosting on the top of the cake. Proceed as if it’s a normal birthday.”

Fortunately, Kirian and Quinn take my word for it.

They recede and resume the party as if nothing out of the ordinary has occurred. There’s laughter, light chatter, and the clinking of glasses as everyone toasts to their own good fortune.

So very fae.

Kai and I can run in here like the city is on fire, then say, *never mind*, and they just go back to what they were doing without giving it another thought.

However, my son is still lingering, and I wonder if he’s wanting an apology.

Taking his hand, I give him a loving squeeze before letting go. “When I ran from this world, I wasn’t running from you. I might’ve wanted to see what else was out there, but I never, ever, stopped wanting you. I’m so sorry.”

Zander gazes at me with nothing but understanding. “Mama. You could leave for a thousand years, and I’d still welcome you back. Anytime. Every time.”

His love astounds me, and I’m about to promise I’ll never abandon him

again when Maelyn waves down a couple staffers and requests, “Please tell the maids to prepare our room for Queen Ro and Kai. Move our belongings to one of the other guest suites, and make sure they have enough supplies to last them for three days without leaving.”

“Three days?” My eyebrows go up. “We only need enough time to clean up and get a nap.”

Maelyn gives me a wink. “I can tell when a mated pair is in their honeymoon stage. You should have the option to isolate... and celebrate.”

Uncomfortable at the implication that Kai and I are going to have a sex marathon, Zander clears his throat. “Yes. Well. While they’re getting your room ready, there’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

When Zander swivels and gestures behind him, a tall young man who’d been conspicuously hanging back turns around.

“Maverick,” I breathe out.

When he reaches me, he bows. “Hello, Grandmother. Although we’re just meeting, I feel as if I already know you. I’ve seen paintings and heard so many stories. Honestly, I’ve waited all my life for this moment.”

Bypassing pleasantries, he bends down and engulfs me in a hug.

At first, I’m too overwhelmed to reciprocate. I didn’t think this would ever happen. Not long ago, I’d come to terms with the fact that I probably wouldn’t get to meet my grandson. I’d convinced myself that I didn’t have a home or a family.

I was so wrong, and I’m here right now because Kai refused to give up on me.

“Hey, Kai,” Maverick says over my shoulder. “Good to see you, too. Does this mean I have to call you Grandpa now?”

“Just Kai is fine,” my mate replies, chuckling a little.

After I lovingly pat Maverick on the back, he pulls away and his grin fades as he solemnly states, “I do hope you’re here to stay because I’d really like to try to beat you at chess.”

I laugh, but Zander nudges him in a slightly chastising way and mutters, “Don’t pressure her.”

My heart is warmed by the way my son values my freedom. Even after missing me for so long, he’s thinking of my happiness above his own.

Wanting to deliver some good news while we can, I inform them, “Well, you don’t have to worry about me going anywhere.” Glancing at Kai, I grin. “We’re staying in Valora. We don’t know where we’ll settle yet. Maybe we’ll

travel a lot, but we promise to visit often.”

Maelyn releases a long exhale like she'd been holding her breath. “Oh, thank the suns. You have no idea how glad we are to hear that.”

“Yes, very glad,” Zander agrees, trembling a little as his pupils elongate, and Maelyn rubs his arm vigorously.

She's trying to keep him grounded. Meaning, she's preventing an involuntary shift. Zander's experiencing a surge of emotion so strong he might turn into his griffin form in this very room.

Wouldn't that be a party foul.

“Go back to the celebration,” I urge them. “We'll have plenty of time to catch up later.”

Reluctantly, they do, and a staff member tells us our room is ready.

However, before we leave this spot, I want to bask in the moment.

The joy of this minute.

And the minute after.

And the minute after that.

From here on out, the present will be fully appreciated.

I won't wish a second away because Kai and I have each other, people who love us, and most importantly, self-love.

It came hard earned, but it's ours, and no one can take that away from us.

EPILOGUE

Eleven months and three weeks later

Kai

I love mornings with Ro the most. Don't get me wrong, every hour we spend together is amazing, but these quiet moments are my favorite.

I like it when the happenings of the day haven't played out yet, and the possibilities are plentiful. It's fun to decide if we should be adventurous or if we should stay right here in our favorite spot—the honorary suite in the City Hall of Sterling.

This is the best place for us to stay when we need temporary lodging.

Ro and I had discussed getting a home here, but it would be impractical because we simply have too many places to go. We're constantly packing up and preparing for our next vacation.

In the past year, we've zigzagged around Valora in a magical tour.

First, we went to the Day Realm to have a proper reunion with our family. Initially, Ro had been worried being there would stir up bad memories for both of us, but on the contrary, it was healing. We got to experience what it's like to feel safe in the place where our worst nightmares occurred, and we swapped bad memories with good ones.

Plus, we got some much-needed therapy. One of the abducted human women who decided to stay in Valora after being taken by a snatcher has a background in counseling. She's been working at the medical center in the mental health department Queen Maelyn set up in Hailene. Admittedly, it was strange to talk about my feelings in the beginning, but I always leave our sessions feeling lighter. It seems to help Ro a lot, too, so we plan to keep regular appointments.

After our three-month-long stay in the Day Realm, we went to the Dream Realm where King Damon and his family welcomed us with open arms. I got to show Ro the glowing castle built out of bricks mined from the Meteor

Mountains, and we watched the sky light up with green and pink streaks at dawn and dusk. During our visit to the Enchanted Forest near the palace, Ro met a bunch of sprites. The little creatures fell in love with her, just like I knew they would.

Last, we stopped in the Night Realm where we were served honeysuckle wine and butterscotch pudding in excess. King Kirian was a great host, and we even got to go to one of the largest gnome communities where Ro received a lot of hugs. I mean, a lot. Hundreds. And when we left, all the little people gave us the thumbs-up salute of respect.

In between our trips, we always come back here, where we have as much privacy as we want. Of course we enjoyed spending time with the royals, and Ro has become close friends with the other queens, but we value our alone time, too.

Unfortunately, our time is running out.

Our luggage is packed and stacked against the far wall, but we're not headed for another castle or enchanted territory because...

As if Ro can read my mind, she's a bit morose when she finishes my thought. "We only have a week left."

I sigh. "I know."

"Evacuations start tomorrow."

Dawn shines through the bedroom window. The peachy glow casts the most serene light over everything around us, contrasting the gloomy conversation.

"At least we're getting ahead of it." I try to sound upbeat. "Warning everyone a year in advance has given the people a chance to prepare. There are protocols in place. There won't be any panic, and so many lives will be saved. The Day kingdom has been stocking up food, and they've built shelters for the refugees. They're ready. Valora is ready for this."

Reminding Ro of positive facts is all I can do to ease her sadness, but I wish I could do more.

"I just thought—" Huffing, Ro rolls over to face me. "I thought Zaylee, Pippin, and Madden would have arrived by now."

I trail a finger down her beautiful cheek. "Me, too."

It's entirely possible that Armand fucked us over. He could be breaking our promise on purpose with the hope that I'll die in action, subsequently keeping him safe from my retaliation. But that would be a huge gamble on his part, and I think he's smarter than that.

More than likely, the time difference between Valora and the Lost Land has gotten in the way. Maybe only a day has passed there, and Armand hasn't been able to locate anyone yet.

"What are you looking forward to the most in the human realm?" I ask Ro, predicting the response I'm going to get.

Scowling, she looks at me like I'm crazy. "Nothing. I don't want to go. I want to stay, but you're 'putting your foot down.'" She does air quotes with her fingers, which I find to be extremely cute. "I should pull the queen card on you."

"I'm surprised you haven't yet."

"I still might." She pouts defiantly, and I can't help kissing those luscious lips.

"Do it," I dare with a whisper against her mouth.

"Maybe I will."

"Go ahead. Order me around. Force me to my knees."

As I kiss my way down her jaw, she starts to gasp, then she growls because I'm distracting her on purpose. "You know I won't."

No, she won't. She's never treated me as if she's above me, and that's one of the things I love the most about her. We're equals. We value each other.

We look out for one another.

And that's exactly what I'm doing by making her go to the Earth realm.

"It has to be this way." Placing my hand on Ro's swollen stomach, I feel where our baby is growing.

My child.

My miracle.

I lovingly rub the bump, and just like every time I think about being a father, emotions expand inside me until I feel like I'll burst.

When Ro and I got together, having a baby hadn't occurred to either of us as a possibility. We'd both assumed her fertility was nonexistent because of her age, but we didn't take into account the fact that she'd reverted to her human form, thus bringing back her ability to get pregnant.

Several months ago, she started experiencing sudden and debilitating nausea. She vomited so violently, I thought she'd been poisoned.

Poisoning is an ailment I can't fix with my power, but damn it, I was determined to try anyway.

However, when I put my hand on Ro to heal her, I sensed something odd.

An extra life inside her.

There were two heartbeats—hers and a tiny one.

According to Astrid, it's a girl. There's no modern medical equipment in Valora, so we can't do what Ro calls an ultrasound, but it comes in handy having witches who know things.

If only Astrid could tell us the future of Valora. She and Queen Whitley have done many seeing spells together, but it's never clear—there's dust and fire, and too much chaos for them to tell what the outcome will be. It comes down to the fact that a lot of events are happening all at once, and there are too many people involved.

“We will return,” I promise. “Honestly, it won't feel like we're away for a long time. If we stay Earthside for a couple of weeks, that will give our world fourteen years to recover, and then we'll raise our daughter in Valora.”

Where, exactly, we'll do that is still undetermined.

Ro graciously offered to live in the Night Realm because she knows that's where I feel most at home, but the Day Realm has always been on the table as an option as well.

Soon, it might be our only option. Worst case scenario, there won't be a Night Realm left to come back to.

“I just don't want to leave Zander again,” Ro admits quietly.

“It's different this time. You're not abandoning anyone. In fact, your son would order you away if you weren't going willingly.”

“Kai, we could help, though. How awesome would it be for us to be there at the intake stations for the refugees? You could heal anyone who's been injured as they arrive. We wouldn't be in harm's way in the Day Realm.”

When she pins me with her big doe eyes, I drop my focus to her naked breasts. I'm not trying to ogle her. Of course her tits are always fun to gaze at, but I just can't stand it when she's staring at me as if I can give her anything and everything she wants. It's too damn difficult to say no.

“You're doing it again.” Sounding slightly amused, Ro calls me out.

“Doing what?” I play clueless, staying glued to the enticing full mounds.

“Staring at my boobs when I'm trying to talk to you about something serious.”

I hike a shoulder. “They're great boobs.”

Laughing, she puts her hand under my chin, and she lifts my face until I'm looking at hers.

Fuck.

It's not fair for someone to be this beautiful.

Since Ro's gotten healthier, she's put on some much-needed weight, and she's so adorable with her full cheeks. When she smiles, they puff up, and it's impossible to resist kissing them.

I do just that.

Loud smooching follows, and I shamelessly change the subject.

"So the plan for today is..." I make a path down her neck. "At least three orgasms for us both before we go down to the café for breakfast. After that, we'll go to the temple. Then tonight, I have a tournament at the arena."

Harumphing, Ro pushes at my shoulders and gives me a perplexed lift of her eyebrow. "Why would you sign up for another fight when we have to pack?"

"I already did it last night after you fell asleep." Tipping my head behind me, I indicate the stuffed suitcases with everything we'll need for our stay in the human realm. "I want our last day here to be fun, and it wouldn't be complete without watching me kick ass."

Ro scoffs at my arrogance, but she can't deny that she loves watching me fight. The first time I participated in one of the weekly tournaments, she was so nervous I'd get hurt, but she soon found out she had no reason to be.

I'm undefeated, and I plan to keep it that way. Plus, the competitors love going against me, even if I do beat them. Because it's all in good fun, and after it's over, I heal them. No one has to limp away, nurse a black eye, or deal with a bloody gash.

I'd even go as far as to say I've made friends in Sterling.

I worry for them when I think about the days to come. We don't know how the Dawn and Dusk Realm will be affected by the meteors. All it would take is one rock landing in Issika Lake, and the entire coast could be washed away, but the citizens here are stubborn about sticking it out.

Noticing a dip in my mood, Ro lightly scratches my beard. "You don't want to leave either."

My mate can see right through me, and I let my façade of optimism drop. "I love this world, and I don't want it to change. I hate thinking of the people suffering or dying. King Keryth and Queen Zella are still insisting on being in the front line, which is madness."

"I know," Ro says sadly. "I tried to talk Zella out of it. I really did, but she wouldn't budge."

A knock suddenly comes at the door, and it's startling because we're

supposed to be left alone in the private suite.

Grumpy, I get up—naked—and stalk over to the door. I swing it open without a shred of self-consciousness, and Alosi is standing there.

My friend has the decency to keep his eyes on my face as if I'm not nude, but really, it's not the first time he's seen me without clothes on. In the barracks, warriors walk around in their birthday suits all the time.

However, I don't like the idea of him seeing my mate in bed, so I make sure I'm blocking his view into the room.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, confused because he'd have to have a good reason to come all the way from the Night Realm.

"Pardon the intrusion, but I have news that can't wait." In the next breath, he says, "Princess Zaylee has returned."

I blink at him. I almost can't believe it. It's the one thing Ro had I have been hoping to hear.

My wife prays for it. Each night. Every visit to the temple. Before meals, and even during mundane tasks such as brushing her hair.

I've gotten used to her muttered words, sometimes in English but more often in Portuguese. They've become a comfort to me, even if I haven't put any of my own belief into her god.

Well, maybe her prayers just got answered.

"Where is she?" Ro asks excitedly, and I can hear her wrestling with the covers behind me.

I glance back to see her wrapped in a sheet as she waddles over to us. Grabbing a robe off the back of one of the dining chairs, I drape it over her shoulders and tie the front to cover her.

She gives me a look like this isn't the time to be worried about being exposed, but I can't help it. If Alosi even catches a glimpse of a nipple through the fabric, I might end up getting the tournament violence out of my system early.

Respectful, Alosi's gaze is stoic and unaffected. "Princess Zaylee arrived in the Night Realm outside of Delaveria just minutes ago. She was with a... very unhinged looking man. I don't mean to be rude, but that's the best word I can use to describe him. Unhinged."

"Madden," I blurt at the same time as Ro.

"I wasn't told his identity," Alosi says as if our guess might be incorrect. "King Kirian just gave me a box of portals and told me to inform the royals of the princess's return as soon as possible. You're my second stop. King

Zander and Queen Maelyn were first, of course.”

“Was anyone else with Princess Zaylee and this man?” I ask. “Pippin?”

With a disappointed frown, Alosi shakes his head. “I’m afraid not.”

“We have to go,” Ro states, assaulting me with her doe eyes again. “Right now.”

Okay.

She’s going to get her way because this changes things.

We’ll have to mitigate the—most likely—hostile situation with Madden. We’re the only ones who actually know anything about him, and it will be much better if we’re there to vouch for him. I can’t see it going very well when King Zander finds out his daughter has been kept in a glass case for years.

With the shift of plans, I glance at our luggage. I mentally sort through what I packed.

Regrettably, I grimace at the suitcases. “We don’t have proper attire. It’s all jeans, T-shirts, hoodies, and sneakers.”

Beaming, Ro shuffles away. “No worries. I already prepared my own bag with fae dresses and shoes, just in case. I even have a couple outfits for you.”

She pulls a black backpack from a hiding spot under the bed, looking so damn proud of herself.

My jaw drops.

That little sneak.

All along, she’s been holding out hope for the best outcome instead of assuming we’re all doomed. She had faith that it would all turn out right.

That’s such a huge leap from who she was when I first found her, and this is a pivotal moment.

For some reason, it’s just now hitting me how much she’s improved. How much she’s healed. How strong she really is.

“Do you need a portal?” Alosi offers, but I’m already shutting the door in his face.

He won’t take offense to the rude action. He’s in a hurry to be somewhere else, and so are we.

Soon, all the royals will be gathered in the Night Realm where we’ll talk about how to utilize Madden’s power to our advantage.

That is, if he cooperates.

He might not be willing to put his life on the line for a universe he isn’t a part of. I don’t even want to think about the negotiations. He could ask for

whatever he wants, and we won't be in a position to say no.

That's an obstacle we'll jump when we get to it.

Smirking, I take the backpack out of Ro's hands, sling it over my shoulder, and bend to give her a kiss. "All right, then, Sunny. I guess we have to go save the world."

She grins and caresses my left cheek. "And we're going to enjoy every second of it."

THE END

A note to the reader: Thanks for reading Kai and Ro's story. If this is your first introduction to the world of Valora and you want more, I have good news. There are other books in this series for you to binge, plus a spinoff about Ellister! Keep reading to check out my 'other books' list.

If you're on Facebook and you'd like to interact with me and other readers who love my books, you should join my group [Jamie Schlosser's Significant Otters!](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jamie Schlosser writes steamy new adult romance, romantic comedy, and fantasy romance. When she isn't creating perfect book boyfriends, she's a stay-at-home mom to her two wonderful kids. She believes reading is a great escape, otters are the best animal, and nothing is more satisfying than a happily-ever-after ending. You can find out more about Jamie and her books by visiting these links:

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