

WINNING DOESN'T ALWAYS MEAN SURVIVING



THE
LAST
WINTER

THE SHADOWWEAVER TRILOGY - BOOK ONE

HOLLY MONROE

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Before You Go!

*To my husband and family, thank you for always supporting
me and believing in everything that I do.*

You may want to skip a couple chapters, though.

Prologue

Viola - Ten Years Ago

Birds chirp happily in the trees, a song that ignores the plight of those of us here on the ground, our aching bodies struggling to complete the Race. A sunbeam splashes across my face, and I wince at the intrusion. We've been at it for days, so when Mother and Father insisted we stop for some real rest, I was more than happy to take some time to just exist— after all, it's my first Race, and I'm not quite used to it yet.

I stretch languidly, the ache in my muscles throbbing and whining from use. Despite the heavy training my parents have put me through, my body is still adjusting to the continued exertion. Not for the first time, I wonder what it would be like to have parents who would treat the Race as a pilgrimage for the glory of the Gods and not something to be conquered.

My eyes scan the cave we slept in, walls moist with collected humidity. The natural stone, while good protection from creatures and other Racers, smells of rot, and the floors are so dirty that after a night of sleeping on them, I can't see

my skin, tawny and freckled from the sun. My parents are nowhere to be found within the cave, despite my search of all parts of it. I search for my canteen and drain it before standing to shake out my rigid limbs. They must have left to find a water source and breakfast.

Growing up, I was a bit jealous as kids in the small village of Dalery that I call home would turn eighteen and reach the age of Ascension and get to run the Race. For a while, I thought it would be an honor to imbue the soil with my courage and strength. But now that I'm here, freshly eighteen in my Ascension year, I just wish this could be over.

With parents like mine, though, it won't be over until we win.

There has been ample time for my parents to return with food and fresh water before we begin our day, and the sun continues to crest the sky. It's not like them to be gone for so long and to give up precious time to gain ground on other Racers.

I stretch and leave the small grotto I called home for the night, stepping into the beautiful summer sun that stretches overhead, marred only by a light sprinkling of rain. If you ignore the horrifying monsters that lurk in these woods at the base of the Summit, it could be considered peaceful.

I survey the land around me, quiet save for the chattering of wildlife in the morning light. A sinking feeling weighs me down, a hook in my belly demanding I hit my knees.

My parents are not here.

I see no sign of struggle, and as twisted as it is, I almost wish I did rather than face the truth I try to deny. A creeping feeling of unease climbs up my throat as the realization of my situation sinks in.

I'm all alone.

It's like they have always said.

In the Race, there are no friends.

In the Race, there is no family.

Part 1 - The Lowlands

Chapter 1

Viola - Present Day

All my days blend together since I've been on my own, but today is slightly different since it's laundry and market day.

Water is scarce, and I try not to waste it, so my clothing is dirty and stinks of sweat from training. I keep training the way my parents taught me because I am determined to make it into Ytopie and see them again. I don't care if I win or if I'm of the other ten and have to serve past winners and the Patricians until my death. At least then, I will not hurt for food or baths.

I finish washing one set of clothes, a pair of black shorts that stop at my knees and a gray shirt that belonged to my father, in the small creek near my home. The sun is high and warm, beating down on my neck as I plunge the clothes beneath the surface. The overgrowth of grass and weeds scratch my bare legs, making me acutely aware that I'm only in my undergarments for fear of dirtying my only clean clothes. After finishing and throwing the clothes on the line that stretches

between two gnarled trees behind my home, I throw on a depressing outfit of knee-length leather shorts and a cropped black shirt and gather up the items I have available for trade.

I have saved up three eggs from Hilda, my chicken, a bar of soap made from the milk of my goat, and some cheese. Hilda only lays one egg a day, so on light training days, I will skip eating it to have something to trade with. Market days make that gnawing hunger worth it.

I twist my dark hair into twin braids that fall on my shoulders. My hair has always been a security blanket for me, as it matches my father's, wild and unkempt as it is. It would be easier to Race with it shorter, but I cannot bear to part with it as I was left with very little from him.

With my trading wares in a small basket hooked on the crook of my arm, I head to the market, vigilant about my surroundings with the influx of people to Dalery. I cannot get attacked before the Race even begins. Competing at anything less than my physical best would guarantee another year in the Lowlands.

The town of Dalery is the closest to Ytopie. We border the outskirts of the Summit, and the Race starts just past our southernmost border. I feel for those in some of the farther villages. Feria, on the southern tip of Krillium, has a multiple-day journey by sea in the weeks before the Race begins. They must be exhausted before even stepping into Gallant Summit.

I've never seen any of Krillium save for Dalery and the glimpses I can get of Ytopie when I move to higher ground.

My mother spent her childhood in Colris, a large mining town southeast of here. She moved to Dalery to be closer to Ytopie, believing it would increase her chances of winning. It's no secret that most of the winners and the other ten come from our town. Other towns will say since we are so close to Ytopie, we get some of the God's blessings.

Really, it's just that we don't have to travel before the Race even starts. We're not worn out by a prolonged journey across the continent.

As a young child, I questioned my father about why the entirety of Krillium didn't move to Dalery as my mother did, and he laughed and ruffled my hair as if the answer were obvious. "Some towns have less oversight by the fae than Dalery does, and the people prefer it that way. Others believe their superior resources will make up for any weariness that may come from the travel to the base of the Summit."

At the time, I could not fathom how anyone would willingly give themselves a disadvantage to win the Race. Now, a decade into it, I realize that not everyone cares about winning in the way my family did. Most just want to get back to their lives.

Dalery is alive with people today. Market day always brings a crowd, but this is the last one before the Race, so people are desperate to collect supplies. Stands and tents have been set up in the town square, kicking up the red dust that makes up the majority of our roads. Chatter and arguments fill the air as we all attempt to trade and barter for the items we need to make

the weeks-long journey easier on our bodies. I'm lucky that I have so much available to barter with this year. That hasn't always been the case since I've been on my own.

I breeze through the market, looking at the various wares proffered by the vendors. Some sell knives, bows and arrows, whips, and assorted weapons I never bothered to learn, favoring blades and whips. Others have medicines, foodstuffs, bandages, and compasses. Anything you could find useful through the journey up and over Gallant Mountain is here.

Each town has its own primary resource that is abundant there that they can bring to market. Dalery is a foraging city, and we're known far and wide for the medicinal herbs that grow wild here. Usually, I would make extra tinctures to bring for trade since they fetch a high price, but I didn't have glass vials to spare this year.

My eyes stop on a vendor with parcels of dried meats, and my mouth waters. Meat is not easy to come by, and it's been ages since I've had any. We're waterfront, so fishing brings in the majority of our protein. Land creatures mostly avoid our area. The best hunting grounds are the grasslands, but they're all the way around Gallant Summit and through Vallon Vale. Most do not bother, not having the energy or supplies to make that journey regularly.

With so few people left, one would think that the Gods would figure out an appropriate way to allocate resources to ensure everyone could manage. Instead, the fae on top of Gallant Summit hoard the resources and their prosperity

magic, leaving us Lowlanders to scrounge and fight for scraps. I've heard Autumn magic allows them to grow all they need in Ytopie, but only the Race's top finishers have ever seen it.

The jerky would be such a boon for energy during the Race, and it has been so long since I've had proper meat that my stomach growls just looking at it. I meet the eyes of the gentleman holding the parcels on a wide and flat board. I do not recognize him, but that's not that unusual this time of year. With the Race just a few days away, we're already flooded with Lowlanders from all over Krillium.

He's got weathered skin of rosy bronze and hooded eyes that are honey-colored. I would guess he's about the age of my father. "Hello, lady. Can I interest you in some meats?" he says, pushing the tray towards me.

I nod and dig through my basket. "I could trade you some eggs, cheese, or soap for a parcel," I say, showing him what I've brought.

He grins wryly, "Come now, dear, the Race is so near. I'll need the eggs and cheese if you want some meat."

I scoff, shaking my head. "Absolutely not. That's far and above the regular trade value."

He shrugs, then reaches a single finger towards me, stroking it down the height of my cheeks. "Well, I always suppose a ... service... could be exchanged."

I slap his hand away and spit at his feet. The blade I have strapped to my thigh aches to be pulled out and thrust toward

the man. “Fuck off, grifter.” I snarl.

He steps back, laughing soullessly. “Alright bitch, fine. You’re not worth the trouble.”

Walking away and mourning the loss of the meat, I attempt to find something else useful in my perusal but come up blank. I had plans of trading for a whetstone, but I have yet to find one. When I am just about to give up and make my way home, I find a merchant with a basket of shining silver. He waves me over, and I lean forward to see what’s inside.

“It’s a spile,” he says softly, causing my head to jerk up.

My eyes meet a set that are so dark they’re almost black. I lean back, attempting to focus on the man in front of me, and I notice how soft his skin looks, and the blue-black hair that falls into his eyes begs to be pushed back.

I may be a loner, but I am human. The man is gorgeous.

“A spile?” I respond, clearing my throat and the image my creative mind has conjured of him.

“Aye, you just press it into a tree, and the water it holds inside it will drain out. It’s great when you don’t have a spring or creek near you.”

My eyebrows raise. That would be useful. “Where did these even come from? I’ve never seen one before.”

His face cracks into a lovely smile, and I can’t help but return it. “I hail from Colris. My father was a craftsman, and I learned the trade from him.” Colris is a few days’ journey through the Tella desert from here, but the ore mines produce

the strongest weapons. Many people save for ages to be able to trade for one.

“Colris? My mother grew up there.”

“Well, what a small world it is. I’d be happy to make a trade for one. What’s your name, miss?”

“Viola,” I say, stepping toward him and holding out my basket. “Whatever you’d like, it’s yours,” I say. Nothing I have could be worth the spile, but I’m willing to try.

He plucks the bar of soap from the basket, holds it to his nose, and inhales deeply. “What is that herb you’ve used?”

“Jasmine and lilac, for love and luck.” Hopefully, he misses the sarcastic tone of my voice.

He slides it into his pocket and tosses a spile into my basket. “Well, Viola, thanks for the love and luck. I’m Amio.”

The interaction at the market buoyed me, but there is still training to be done. I store my goods back at home, and then I’m up the hills and through the forest, practicing dodging roots, rocks, and squirrels from underneath my feet. I do some strength training with boulders by pushing them in front of holes I’ve dug for hiding in. My ultimate goal is speed and endurance, as it has been since the first time I trained with my parents.

I know plenty of people who are satisfied to be middle of the pack in the Race. They have families and children and forget about the fever dream that is Ytopie, treating the Race as a pilgrimage to honor our Gods. Those people are so

diametrically opposed to how my family raised me that I find it hard to relate to them at all.

I get into a zone, practicing throwing my daggers into trees and wrapping my whip around their limbs. I have yet to encounter a lot of fighting in the Race, but that could change at any time. Most of the altercations I've had would barely qualify as a squabble. I prefer to rely on stealth, but avoiding conflict will not be possible forever. There are always creatures prowling in the Summit, and of course, other people are an unknown element.

A crack of branches behind me causes my shoulders to tighten. I slowly slide one of my knives from my thigh strap and spin around, brandishing the relatively dull weapon like it may make a difference. I let out a breath of relief when I see it's Max, who looks different today than she usually does. "New haircut, Max?"

She grins, running her hands through her short, brown hair, its deep coloring reminding me of licorice root.

"Yeah, new haircut. I thought it made me look a little feral. Figured it couldn't hurt if others on the Summit thought I was a bit unhinged." She does a quick jump toward me, causing me to stumble back.

"Hell, Max, you should know better than to startle someone with a knife."

"That's not a knife," she scoffs, "That may as well be a hairbrush for all the help it's going to be for you. Tell you what. I'll trade you a whetstone for some eggs."

I know whetstones are worth a lot more than eggs in the days leading up to the Race, and I can't help but feel a rush of warmth in my chest toward Max. "I couldn't find one at the market today!"

She grins and shrugs, and I realize she's looking out for me, as she has for the past ten years. Max was a member of the pod that was particularly disappointed in my parents when they left me on the Summit.

"Well then. Let's go grab those eggs." I doubt she even needs them, but she knows I am too proud to take something so valuable as a gift.

We head back to the rust brown shack that I call home, and I grab a couple of eggs from the basket I brought back from the market. Max pulls a chair out from my table and flops into it, looking around at my meager accommodations. She catches the eggs as I roll them across the tabletop to her and slides them into the pocket of her baggy green pants.

Centuries ago, when a virus passed through Krillium and wiped out a huge swath of our population and crops, keeping a house in good condition became the least of the worries of the Lowlanders. I am no exception. The peeling color of the walls, yellowed with age, the cracked windows held together by rope and paste, and the leaky wood roof make up the place I call home and is far from what I would call comfortable.

But it's enough for me.

I've got a bed in the corner covered in tattered black linens, and it is just fine, if a little worn, a wood table and rickety

chairs, and a kitchen with a wood stove and a single counter. What more could I need?

“You got any mead?” she asks expectantly, leaning her head onto her hands.

Looking at her, I’m not surprised that Max is quite popular with the men and women of the Lowlands. Her pale eyes are reminiscent of the moss that grows on trees, and I have always thought the crescent her lips made when they flicked up in a smile was captivating.

I’ve had my fair share of interest in bedmates, but that’s all it’s ever been for me. I haven’t had a relationship or anything that could be called that since Link, which was a long while ago. Max, on the other hand, always has a new partner to keep her busy. It’s always seemed like a lot of work to me.

I pull a bottle of mead from the bottom of a bookshelf, blowing the dust off to avoid rubbing it on my newly cleaned shirt. “I’ve been saving this since last year,” I sigh, sliding back into my seat and taking a swig.

“How are you feeling, you know, with the anniversary of your parents completely betraying you being so close? It’s been what, nine years now?” Max inquires, snagging the bottle from me.

“Ten, actually. And, like shit, honestly. But hey. Only a few more nights to dream about the Race. We’ll be in the arena accepting our winnings in no time, and then I can confront them about it in Ytopie.” I grin, unable to help myself from imagining finishing the Race with Max. As much as I’ve tried

not to make connections, Max is the only person I consider a friend anymore. At this point, she almost feels like an extension of myself, the way she's latched herself onto me and refused to leave.

Most people live a somewhat normal life here in the Lowlands. They live joyfully, make friends, have relationships, and the Race is just a blip in their otherwise okay lives. Max has tried her best to live that kind of life, but she knows how much I struggle with it. In my family, there was nothing more important than the Race.

I just want to get out of Dalery and be able to have some sort of future. There is nothing left for me here.

“You ever consider what life would be like if you were content to be middle of the pack and just run the Race, come home, and have a life?” Max asks, quietly spinning the bottle of mead between her hands.

“For a minute there,” I answer, considering the proposition. “Every time I think about it, though, I remember when Jaz's grandmother was in the bottom, and they did nothing to help her catch up. I just don't think I can sit idly by and see someone labeled as expendable anymore.”

Max is silent as she nods her agreement, her eyes drilling into my core.

“Look, Max, I just can't imagine this being the rest of my life. Constantly training. Going through the Race year after year, worried that one day I will be too feeble to compete, and

I will be an expendable, put to death because I am deemed no longer worth the resources I consume.”

She interrupts me. “That won’t be you, Viola. You do nothing but train. Nothing is more important to you than Racing.”

I scoff. “It’s not important to me the way you think it is. It’s necessary. Do you think I enjoy that a council of fae get to decide if my only worth is as a sacrifice to the vitality of a God who couldn’t give a fuck about me?”

She cringes, snatching the mead from me to pull deeply on the bottle.

“It has been centuries since the Gods have shown themselves to the people of the Lowlands,” I say quietly. “I do not worship on their altars. If I wouldn’t be put to death for refusing to Race, I would. Who cares about their vitality when we’re starving here?”

Max and her family have always subscribed to the idea that the Gods watch over us every day, and it is our solemn duty to Race. I grew up alongside Max in an alliance pod, a group of families who vowed to watch each other’s back and children if they didn’t make it through the Race, and I watched her parents and mine butt heads constantly about their motivations in the Race.

“I’ll never be able to live a quiet life here, Max. I can’t trust anyone anymore.”

Max's brow lowers, her eyes cast down at the table. "You know you can trust me, Vi. I know you always say, 'In the Race, there are no friends. In the Race, there is no family,' and I try not to take it personally because I know how hardcore your parents were about this stuff, but..."

Her repetition of my parents' mantra, the one that played on a loop in my head my entire childhood, stuns me momentarily, and my fingers mindlessly tap on my thighs with the memory. Regaining myself, I reach out and grab her hand, unable to handle the hurt in her voice. "I know. You know you're the only person I could even possibly begin to consider being a friend. Being an alliance. You're my partner in this, Max, but that's all I have to give."

If there were anyone to trust, it would be Max. Max has looked out for me since we were kids and ramped it up when my parents left me in the Race. She looks at me expectantly, sadness creasing the corners of her mouth. I cannot stand the idea of disappointing her, and I can't see a world in which she would ever abandon me.

So, against my better judgment, and with my mother's words that there are no friends in the Race ringing in my head, I take a deep breath and say, "You know what, Max? Promise me that we will do this together. We run this year's Race, we make it to the arena, and we live our lives in Ytopie, leaving all of this behind us."

Her eyes dart to mine, and a sly smile creeps across her pointed face. Eventually, she can't help herself, and the smile

grows so large it seems like it may break her face in half. “I promise,” she says, grabbing my hand and shaking.

“Well, then that’s it. It’s a deal,” I pronounce, pumping her hand twice. A crackle of thunder sounds in the distance, and a cool wave of air rushes in through the broken window, bringing a chill through my skin.

“You think they have broken windows in Ytopie, or is that one luxury we’ll have to miss out on?”

Chapter 2

Zeph

I stand at the edge of the balcony atop the Tower of Ytopie, one of the highest points of the city, overlooking Gallant Summit. Sipping a glass of amber liquor, I take in the breathtakingly vast expanse of the Lowlands stretching out in the distance. If I squint, I can see people in Dalery milling about, getting ready to turn into their homes before the sun fully sets. Despite how exhausting my day was, I know it was nothing compared with the hard labor the Lowlanders put in just to stay afloat.

A crash sounds behind me, and I turn to see Plume stumbling onto the wide balcony from my sleeping chambers. Even drunk, she is somehow disarmingly pretty. My eyes catch on her long golden hair and the way it shimmers in the sunset with the colors of Spring.

Spring magic, granted by the Amaryn, the Bloomtide, is considered one of the more physical magics, and those who wield it always seem to look like flowers themselves. Plume is

no different. She slides up to me, her arm hooking around my waist, leaning her head on my chest. The soft cotton dress she wears brushes against my exposed skin since I tend to be shirtless in my own home. “I cannot believe it’s almost Race day,” she sighs, exhaustion lacing her voice. The streets below pulse with the anticipation of it, and all the Courts have hung their banners across the plaza below us. All the fae in Ytopie are preparing to spend a week in their homes, glued to the Race.

My eyes are drawn to the Palace of the Patricians, its facade decorated with an array of colors representing the various types of seasonal magic. It’s there that the Race is orchestrated, and the laws of Ytopie are made and executed by the Patricians. A beautiful building holding sinister secrets.

“Did the Tempests complete the mesh?” I ask, eyes fixed on the Palace. The Tempests, or Air wielders, are a subset of Spring fae, and they are responsible for setting up the system of magic that allows the entirety of Ytopie to watch as the Lowlanders compete for a chance to live a life we take for granted daily.

Plume nods, unwrapping herself from my waist and pouring herself a glass of liquor. “You still don’t want a mesh connection in your home?” she asks, sipping from her glass.

I shake my head. “You know how I feel about it. Besides, I swear it buzzes. It’s like there are hundreds of tiny bees in my home at all times.”

She laughs, rolling her eyes. Most people cannot see and hear magic, so maybe I am lucky in that regard. It still makes my head hurt to be around magic that is not my own so often.

“As impressive as the magic is, it still doesn’t sit right with me that the Lowlanders have no idea this mesh exists,” she mumbles, almost to herself. She is always careful with criticism of the Patricians around me, and rightfully so.

I am one of them.

The Lowlanders are unaware of the spectacle the trauma they endure year after year causes here. Fae place bets, throw parties, and have favorites that they track as they age within the Race. We have seen brothers betray brothers, wives betray husbands.

“Do you remember that year a mother and father left their child behind while she slept?” I say, turning to look at Plume and resting my back on the balcony wall.

“Wasn’t she in her Ascension year, too?” I nod at Plume, my thoughts drifting back to my own parents. Could they have left the child they had presumably loved and cared for their entire life like those parents left their child?

The fae value that sort of cutthroat behavior as a whole, so maybe my parents would have behaved the same. I was raised to see that ruthlessness as a strength. My parents believed it to be honorable that the humans would put Ytopie above all else - even their family. It has never quite sat right with me.

I am sure there are plenty of others who would disagree with me that power exists in unions with others. I know most of the Patricians, especially Mace Nightrout, disagree. Mace, who sits at their head, was young, by fae standards, when he ended up leading the Patricians, and most attribute that to his shrewd decision-making skills. Really, I think it's mostly due to his Autumn magic.

Autumn is the magic of influence and prosperity granted by the God Avidor. Those blessed with Autumn magic can speed up decay and manipulate the earth itself. Mace's particular brand of Autumn magic made it well-known that you could not be too careful eating or drinking from his table. At his best, he would increase the potency of your wine so you get drunk and embarrass yourself.

I have fallen victim to that a time or two in my life.

At his worst, Mace could turn the food in your mouth to ash, decaying you from the inside out. Those who wield Autumn are always quick to rise in political ranks because those who control the crops can control anyone. Add in the influence that Autumn magic can push over others, and you've got the recipe for a perfect leader, for better or worse. In Mace's case, I think it's worse.

"You've got that look on your face again," Plume slurs, having found a seat at the metal table nearest the door to the tower and helped herself to another glass of liquor from my decanter. That's at least three by my count, and she was clearly

drinking before she came over. An unusual amount of liquor for her, but who am I to judge?

“What look?” I raise my eyebrow, bracing myself for whatever is about to tumble out of her bow-shaped mouth.

“You’re scowling like you’re arguing with Mace in your head.”

I bark out a laugh and wave my hand as if purging the comment from the air. “Not arguing, just thinking about the Race and what he has up his sleeve for this year.”

The Race is meticulously designed each year. We tell the citizens of Ytopie that the Gods change the terrain and obstacles yearly.

But, the reality is a secret the Patricians would rather keep hidden.

With a sigh, I turn my back to the Lowlands, running my hands through my hair, a deep red like my mother’s, and massage my temples. With the disappearance of the sun on the horizon, the balcony becomes shrouded in darkness. Plume waves her hand at me to get my attention. “How about some light out here, sunshine?” I wrinkle my nose at her, but still snap my fingers, alighting flames on the sconces behind me.

Summer magic. When I first showed signs of it, my parents were thrilled. My mother was a Summer and my father an Autumn, and they were constantly arguing about whose magic I would manifest. I’m not ashamed to say I’m glad it was that of the God Solaris.

The magic of flame and light, of warmth and security. It is said to be the magic of great warriors, although it's been a while since we've had to battle here in Ytopie. While we continuously learn new things about Summer magic, one of the most well-known uses is that those who wield it can sew spells of protection around themselves and their loved ones.

It fit my mother well. Nurturing and kind, she taught me to wield my flame for the good of our people and protected me from some of the more unsavory situations of my youth.

Picking up my glass again, I slip into a chair across from Plume and sigh deeply. "Once the sun rises, you know you can see bits of the Race perfectly from up here, right? Do we really need to go to the Palace?"

Laughing, she pushes my shoulder. "I'm not a Patrician, so I'm going to avoid viewing as much of the Race as I can. If you want to risk Mace's wrath, have at it."

I know I should be in the Palace, watching over the obstacles Racers will have to pass or defeat, carefully crafted by my fellow Patricians to make it harder to succeed. But truly, the hardest obstacle will be the other Racers.

Part of what I need to do will require me to be at the Palace, but for some of it, I am going to have to find a way to escape. I am trying not to rope Plume into the chaos that I have planned this year. But if she knew, I don't think I would be able to keep her out of it. She always seems to sniff out my nefarious activities.

“I need to turn in. Busy day tomorrow,” I mumble, pushing back from the table and heading inside. Plume follows and wraps her arms around me from behind. “C’mon Plume, you’re too drunk to get home. Crash in the guest room.” She raises an eyebrow at me, a silent question I would prefer not to answer.

If I wanted to take her to my bed, I could. I pat her gently on the head and spin her toward the guest room.

Chapter 3

Viola

I haven't felt this nervous about a Race since I was eleven. That was the first time I vividly remember my parents getting ready to Race. I would sit with the animals on scratchy hay and watch my mom and dad toss a small boulder to one another.

That year, when my parents went off to Race, I took off, slipping the group of nearly Ascension age children who looked after all the children that were left behind during the Race. I was just looking for a place to rest by myself and take a break from the grueling day-to-day life I lived. I grabbed the one book that did not feel like it related too much to the Race, "A Study of Seasons: Of the Major and Minor Magics." This book had been passed down through the family for generations to prepare us for the magic we would encounter once we reached Ytopie. When I was small, I was fascinated with Spring magic.

“Can they really raise the dead?” I had asked my father the first time I read it.

“Well, yes, but only for a moment or two. Typically, it’s used to ask what someone died from or for their final wishes. Then they are gone, becoming one with the earth. The Bloomtide Goddess would not allow any more than that.”

My father, the smartest person I knew, did not fear the fae. He never wanted to be one and certainly never wanted magic, but he saw its value. “The Gods chose to bless the fae with their magic and not humans for a reason. Who am I to argue with them?”

Reaching the top of a small hill, I flopped down in the meadow and closed my eyes in the warm sun, resting the book over my face. I was surrounded by flowers that my father used to sneak me out to see under the guise of collecting botanicals to categorize and make tinctures out of.

“Flowers have no real use other than they bring us joy. And sometimes, it’s okay to have a little joy,” he’d say, picking a wildflower and smelling it.

We spent many cool evenings walking that meadow, and sometimes, on the way home, Father would take me to another alliance pod to meet the members. I asked him about it once, and he shrugged and said, “One day, your mother and I won’t be here. Our alliances don’t have to be yours. I want you to have opportunities we didn’t have.”

Looking back, I think he always knew I would be going at this on my own.

With the heavy book over my eyes, I had begun to drift to sleep. Before I could, I quietly prayed for my parents as they Raced and begged the Gods to stop this and rescue us from this life.

“You’re the only one that can rescue you, kid.”

I sat up so quickly the book fell onto my lap as my eyes jerked open. “Who’s there?” It took a minute to adjust to the sunlight, and a large shadow was in front of me when they did. I blinked rapidly, trying to get my eyes to focus. Eventually, I saw who it was.

Link, a boy around Max’s age from another alliance pod. At this point, he was still several years away from his Ascension year. I had seen him around the Lowlands, but people tend to only socialize in their pods. The children are more friendly with those from other pods, but Link and I were not friends. I had seen him running around with Max and hiding out in the woods but had not spent time with him one-on-one. Max had tried, insisting I would like Link, but I never had any interest in spending time with him.

“Who are you calling kid? You’re not much older than me, Link.”

“I’m old enough to have let go of the idea that someone will save me. I’m old enough to be ready to Race while you’re lying in the flowers wasting time.”

I rolled my eyes, stood up, and started to walk away. I wasn’t going to play into these mind games. Competition brings out the worst in people; even children aren’t immune. My parents

consistently warned me that other pods would try to undermine my confidence and make me more pliable to their ideas.

Link grabbed my arm, his dirty fingers curling around my bicep and pressing in deeply as if he wanted to bruise me.

“Viola.”

Jerking my arm from his grip, I turned to face him. Despite having two or three years on me, he wasn't much taller than me. Malnutrition can stunt your growth. I rose on my toes to look directly into his eyes, which matched his hair and were the color of tree bark. Gritting my teeth, I hissed out, “Link.”

“My parents are going to be Expendable this year.”

I fell back on my heels and stepped away like he was contagious. Running my fingers in my tangled and dirty black hair, I tried to picture his parents. They had to be about the same age as mine. There was no way they could be Expendable yet. “How do you know?”

“They're choosing it. They're done fighting.”

I wondered why he was telling me this and not someone he was closer to, like Max or someone in his pod. But I believe I would be the same way. It's safer not to tell someone in your pod because that makes you look like a lousy alliance, and they needed people to continue to protect him after the Race. I'm safer. Ultimately, sometimes, you just have to tell someone when something terrible is happening. Anyone. For

all I knew, he came out here to yell at the sky and found me instead.

“I’m sorry to hear that. What will you do?” I asked, mustering up as much empathy as possible so the edge would leave my voice.

“Well, I’ll assist my pod in training the younger kids until my Ascension. Then, I’m going to win.”

I could not help but laugh at that. It was unheard of for someone to win on their Ascension year. Most winners were adults without children who had trained their whole lives.

“And how exactly do you think you are going to win?” I wondered, incredulous at his confidence.

A sneaky grin crept up his face, and I noticed briefly how very straight his teeth were. “Because I know where the elevator is.”

This brought forth hard laughter from me. There was never much of an opportunity for children to find joy in the Lowlands, but the myth of the elevator was something we all knew well. It was a story told to us by our parents to encourage us to be clever - but not too clever. Finding the elevator would take skill; if you were the first, you would immediately win the Race. It was a story we all loved to tell, but everyone knew it was not real.

There were no shortcuts in the Race.

“Okay, yeah, sure. Where is it?” He leaned close to me, lips so close to my ear I could feel his warm breath. He smelled

like honey and rich earth.

“I would tell you. But you’re not in my pod.”



Link was my first love.

It felt like real love, but what kind of love exists in a world where anyone can die as a sacrifice to the Gods?

After his parents became expendable, we forged a friendship. I was the only person who knew it was purposeful.

Suicide by God.

It created a unique bond between us. I think he just needed that connection with someone who knew the truth.

In the year leading up to his Ascension, we grew closer still, and he shared his fears and dreams with me. Several years later, he still was convinced he would find the elevator. I didn't have the heart to refute the idea. The optimism was endearing.

My parents had made it clear to me that there were no shortcuts in the Race, and the elevator was a myth. But it didn't hurt to dream.

“When it's your Ascension year, will you go for the elevator and come join me?” Link had asked me as we sat in the same meadow he found me in all those years ago. It was the day before the Race, and my heart ached knowing this could be my last night with him.

I leaned my head onto his shoulder, snaking my hand into his and nodding into the crook of his neck. Selfishly, I just hoped he would come back to me. He kissed my head, thumb stroking mine. It was the most physical affection we'd ever shown each other.

We'd grown up together, but I saw him with fresh eyes that night.

He was strong and lean, hair kept short out of his eyes. He was so handsome it almost hurt my teeth.

I was struck with a feeling of loss, even with him right there beside me. I lightly pressed my hand on his cheek, turning his face down to mine.

Worry and fear filled me with thoughts of him becoming expendable.

I swallowed my fear and kissed him.

His mouth met mine, and he returned the kiss with the greedy ferocity of a man on the precipice of death. Statistically, he'd have no issues during the Race, and we'd see each other in a few weeks. But things don't always work out as planned, and I did not want him to leave without showing him how I felt.

I gave myself to him wholly that night, right there in the meadow. Years of friendship, of stolen glances and hands brushing against one another. We'd never shared our feelings for each other in words. I was desperate to be closer to him, to take advantage of our time together before he left for the Race.

As we lay together, I hoped in the deepest parts of my soul that I would hear from villagers that he was in the winner's ceremony that year. I tried to push thoughts of him being marked as expendable out of my mind, but I just couldn't.

There was never an expendable ceremony. The Coalition of Lowlanders, who represented us to the fae, argued to the Patricians that it would be too tough on morale for us to see those we loved put down as if they were worthless. Every year after the winner's ceremony, the participants would march back down the Summit to their homes and count their loved ones and neighbors. In good years, only the designated number of expendables, which has been thirty for years now, went missing. In bad years, so many more would be gone.

One horrible year, when it rained the entire Race, we lost sixty-three Lowlanders. The time after the Race is always solemn, but that year was dark.

Ultimately, no one ever knew if those who went missing during the Race fell to the elements or were expendable, but did it really matter? Either way, they were dead.

That's what I was told when Link didn't return from the Race.

My heart hardened that day when all the citizens of Krillium returned, worn out and bloodied, and he was not among them. I begged for answers from everyone in his pod. I cried to Max, who was supposed to be with him in the Race that year, to tell me what happened. She said he left in the middle of the night,

and she finished the Race alone, a mirror of what my parents would do to me.

What makes the most sense is that he got eaten by a creature or attacked and succumbed to the elements. My logical brain knew that. But I prefer to tell myself that he found the elevator and was immediately taken to Ytopie to live a life of luxury.

It's better for my soul that way.

Chapter 4

Viola

“I do not understand why they’re doing this, today of all days,” I murmur under my breath to Max. She’s bouncing excitedly on the balls of her feet, hands clasped over the flowy blue dress that clings to her chest.

“Because why not! No better time to have a wedding than before the Race.”

Many people throughout Krillium decide to get married shortly before the Race, and it is always here in Dalery. The town is full of people in the days and weeks leading up to the Race as citizens from around the land congregate near the starting point. This unique gathering allows those with far-reaching families to see members we would otherwise be unable to see.

Would I have married Link had he survived the Race?

That type of thinking is a weakness, and I shove it down as soon as it crops up. What’s the point of a wedding, anyway?

Today, we're watching two strangers get married, as if there isn't something more important to be done this close to the Race. Max begged me to come with her, dangling the promise of food over my head.

Food is scarce in Krillium. We get to eat enough to survive, but there are rarely luxury foods like we've heard they have in Ytopie, except at weddings. Entire towns will come together to scrounge enough extras for the celebration.

Today's wedding features two people from Feria, the southernmost village of Krillium. It's a coastal community cut off from most of the continent by a rainforest. I have never seen the couple before, but they look happy. We're here, in the city square that just yesterday was decked out for the market, surrounded by strangers eager for a shred of happiness before our journey through the Summit.

My gaze, however, is trained on the petite elderly lady stirring a large pot over a fire. Her skin is soft like well-worn leather, the concentration in her warm brown eyes evident. The smell drifting up has me completely intoxicated.

Lately, my food has been for function. I've never seen the point in trading for spices or vegetables. If I can't forage it, I do without. I can fish, Hilda lays eggs, the goat gives me milk, and I know how to make cheese. I do just fine. Sometimes, it's more than fine.

Not lately, though.

The smell of the stew is enough to make my mouth water. Max notices and elbows me in the ribs. "Keep it together until

after the ceremony,” she hisses at me. A flush threatens my hairline.

I glance around the gathered crowd, narrowing my eyes. “Where is Jaz?” I whisper to Max. Jaz is someone that most could consider a friend, but to me, they were just a pod member. Max is fond of them, though.

Max looks at me, confused. “They got attacked, remember? They’re still recovering.”

“Oh shit, I forgot. Do we know what happened yet?”

Max shrugs, running her fingers through her short hair. She tamed it today, but with the amount of times she touches it, it won’t stay tame for long.

“Why does anyone get attacked before the Race? Apparently, they had managed to come up with a stockpile of dried meats to bring with them.”

My mouth waters at the thought, and I am immediately reminded of my own inability to trade for meat.

Racers are allowed to bring one pack with them. Most of the time, food takes up too much space in the packs, so people fill them with weapons, canteens, and more practical items, hoping to find sustenance on the Summit. A handful of dried meat only takes a little space, meaning Jaz would not have to spend much time hunting and could continue up the Summit much quicker.

I glance up at the ceremony to see a member of the Coalition wrapping a cord around the couple’s hands, and someone else

is wrapping their bodies together with another cord. They kiss, and the crowd gathered cheers and then begins to disperse.

Music drifts up around us, jaunty tunes played on lutes. I beeline toward the line forming before the woman with the stew. When I reach the front, she blesses me with an entire bowl of steaming prawns floating in a rich broth. Green vegetables swim in the milky broth, and I catch a faint hint of spice. I step out of the line and sit on a bench, slightly away from the crowd.

As I'm practically inhaling the best food I've had in ages, my eyes scan the crowd for Max. I finally spot her dancing with a tall woman with waist-length blonde hair in an impossibly short skirt. Max looks positively minuscule next to that woman but is clearly in control. I can tell from my brief observations of their interaction that Max will not be going home alone tonight.

I throw my head back towards the warm sun, closing my eyes and soaking it in. For me, leisure time always carries a heavy current of guilt. Just as the tension starts to leave my shoulders, I become aware of a presence beside me on the bench and stiffen.

Slowly, I turn my head to lock gazes with a newly familiar pair of dark eyes.

“Well, Viola, we meet again.”

His voice is low and gravelly, the type of sound that sends shivers down my spine. It takes a lot to fluster me, and it seems this man is damn near trying his hardest to do it.

Feigning indifference, I take a small bite of my stew. “Amio, from the market, right?”

He shoots me a glittering smile, “That I am. Don’t you just love a wedding?”

I scoff, shaking my head. “It’s pointless. They’ll die in the Race, win, be expendable, or have to do it all again next year. Why bother? It’s never going to change. No use in getting attached to someone.”

His laugh is deep but chagrined. “How very... cynical of you, Viola,” he mumbles softly.

I look up at him, acutely aware of how he’s gazing at me. He looks at me with hungry, dark eyes. I’m unnerved, but I push that feeling down in favor of the coil of warmth in my lower belly.

He finishes his bowl, stands, and extends his hand to me. “Come dance with me. If we die in the Race, we should have fun before going.”

Against my better judgment, I allow desire to take control and I take his hand. “I’ll go with you. But I don’t dance.”

He laughs and gestures into the village. “Then, by all means, lead the way.”



I invited this stranger to my home. I don’t know what came over me. It’s not the first time I have brought a man to my bed, but to do so this close to the Race is reckless. Normally, I

would spend this time training or lamenting with Max, but she's got someone between her legs tonight, so I would be on my own anyway.

I must be losing some of my focus. But something about Amio unnerves me in the best way.

He trails his hand over my bare chest, nails scraping every few passes.

“So, you take the Race quite seriously, huh?”

I look at him in the setting sun's light, the rays making his hair almost glitter. I fold my arms behind my head with a shrug. “My parents were very singularly focused on getting to Ytopie. My whole life, I was raised to Race and to win.”

He looks around at my shack, which clearly only houses one person. “And where are your parents now?”

“Ytopie.”

He stiffens, but it's so slight it's almost imperceptible. He recovers quickly, his fingers circling the soft skin low on my belly. I glance up at the wooden roof of the place I call home. It is not lost on me that moments like this could be possible for me. I could entertain the idea of settling down and making it my goal to get through the Race to return to my life.

But, as much as I want to believe I would be satisfied, I know I wouldn't. Ultimately, all that matters is getting to Ytopie and seeing my parents again. Despite the anger I have felt for them this last decade, I love and miss them more than I can say.

Amio pushes himself up on his elbow, his fingers tracing dangerously close to the middle of my thighs. I slide out from under his hands and walk to the window. My dark hair is loose and wild against my bare back, mussed from indulging in my baser nature with him.

“This was fun, Amio. Thanks for the stress relief. But I’ve got to get to sleep - training starts early tomorrow.”

I don’t turn around to see his expression. I grab myself a mug and fill it from the pot on my wood stove.

“Wait, are you kicking me out?”

I root around for some stems and leaves to make a relaxation tonic and toss them in the warm water. “Yeah, sorry. I don’t do sleepovers.”

I hear him huff and the rustling of clothes as he gets dressed. I keep my naked back to him and don’t turn to face my bed until I hear the door close.

Chapter 5

Viola

I wake with a start as if someone trailed their fingers down my arms. Of course, no one is there, but I cannot shake the feeling that someone was. I sit up slowly, rubbing my eyes as they adjust to the room's darkness. It must be well past midnight. I stumble over to the makeshift kitchen and get a glass of water from the pitcher on the counter. Looking out the window at the ethereal glow cast by the moon on my homeland, I steel myself for what I know I am about to do, even if it is against my better judgment.

I have been thinking for a while that I need to give myself a leg up in the Race. I was unsure what it would be, but Max gave me an idea yesterday. Fortuitously, I am awake in the middle of the night while the rest of the Lowlanders sleep. My choice is easy.

I have to rob Jaz.

I need that leg up, and besides, Jaz is already injured and will not be able to win anyway.

At least, that's how I'm going to justify it to myself.

I pull on my boots and search for my blade, freshly sharpened by the whetstone I traded to Max. I have no idea how long I slept after I kicked Amio out. I spent the rest of my waking hours internally talking myself out of what I was about to do before falling into a fitful slumber. Being woken up in the middle of the night like this feels like a sign.

I slip out my front door, carefully closing it so as not to make noise and garner attention. The homes in the Lowlands are not particularly well built or far apart, so stealth will be critical if I am to be successful. I swiftly make it to Jaz's home and peer through the window at their sleeping form. The moonlight casts a magical glow on their peach skin, and I am struck by just how awful what I am about to do is. Jaz has always been on my side. We grew up in the same pod. Despite being much older than Max and I, Jaz always treated us like their little sisters. I am a monster for even considering this, much less doing it.

But still, I progress.

Circling around the home, I look for the easiest point of entry. Since their attack, Jaz has boosted the security of their house quite a bit. The front and back doors are clearly braced from the inside, and the windows appear sealed. This is going to be more challenging than I thought.



My shadow grows long as the moon continues its journey across the sky, and I still have not moved from my spot by Jaz's window. I have to get moving if I am going to get this done before first light and get a little more sleep tonight. Steeling myself, I turn to the window that seems to be the path of least resistance, a large one in front of a table in the home's sitting room. The window wiggles at my touch and appears to be less braced than the others. I run my knife under the edge of it, pushing against the resistance the frame creates to break into the home. Sliding it around the corners of the loose window, I cut through the rope, securing it. It felt suspiciously simple.

What sounds like someone stumbling reaches my ears from my right. I freeze, trying my hardest not to attract attention. It may just be a stray animal, but my gut tells me that is not the case. If I have learned anything, it is to trust a gut feeling.

I see a shadow, long and nondescript, around a corner a few houses down. Shit. If I can see their shadow, they can see mine. I begin to rack my brain for how I will conceal myself. I frantically try to find a place to hide, and I see a wheelbarrow a few paces away in Jaz's yard, which will have to do. Carefully sliding my knife from the window frame, I slip to the wheelbarrow and crouch behind it. My worry about my shadow quickly fades as a thick cloud drifts across the sky in front of the moon, and shadows descend upon me. Still, I do not want to move and risk being heard. I stay still as I hear the footsteps of the shadowed person come closer.

My chest burns with the breath I'm holding despite the darkness that envelopes me and provides a measure of cover. It wraps around my arms and legs, plunging me deeply into the night. There is comfort in the shadows, and the longer I spend embraced by them, the easier breathing becomes.

The person approaching stops, and I can see the outline of their head turning and looking around. The figure is much taller than I thought they would be, and they seem to be looking for something. I close my eyes and will them to pass me by and not notice me.

I do not have it in me to fight someone tonight.

After what feels like a torturously long time, but really is only a few seconds, the figure moves on. I hear their steps retreating more than I see them, but I track them all the same. They continue past Jaz's house, and I watch the barely visible form disappear in the distance, releasing my breath shakily.

Another traveler must've been taken to bed by a local tonight. I, of course, am not surprised as I did the same. I am surprised that the traveler is sneaking out in the middle of the night, though. I saw no sign that they were attempting to rob someone, either.

While pre-Race robberies are not unheard of, they have never occurred regularly. Since Dalery is so tiny, everyone here knows one another, which makes it harder to betray someone in this way.

That near miss makes me question what I am here to do. Is this really who I have become? Robbing someone I know to

get a leg up over them?

As I ask myself that, I, unfortunately, know the answer already. Yeah, this is who I am. This is what I have trained for my entire life to be - someone who puts winning the Race above all else. My parents leaving me behind would have cemented it even if I had not been raised this way. Now is not the time for morality.

Under the cover of the deep night, I slip back to the window I released from its guarding earlier. Palms flat on the glass, I slide it quietly up. It moves without resistance and silently, thank Gods. Heaving myself through it, I am grateful the room has been plunged into darkness with the rolling clouds. I may not be able to do this if I have to see Jaz sleeping peacefully a second time. My eyes adjust quickly to the darkness, allowing me to spot a pack leaning against a wall.

On gentle feet, I make my way to the pack, dropping to my knees when I reach it. Reaching gently into the pack, I pull out an unassuming string with feathers tied through it, knots all down its length. It sparks to life in my hands, a soft humming reaching through my fingertips.

A Witch's Ladder.

I've never seen one before, but I heard about them from my parents. Each feather and knot is said to hold a powerful spell imparted by a Winter wielder. Experienced Winter magic is known for its ability to curse anyone, especially those who break deals with them. In addition to the more common traits of snow and ice, Winter magic includes command over

shadows and the night, and children in the village used to whisper stories about Winter Seasonale stealing your blood to control you.

I marvel at the age of this item. From what I've heard, there has not been a Winter Seasonale in centuries.

This must be why Jaz was attacked, and they just told Max a lie about the meat. How did Jaz come into possession of such a thing? Running my fingers down the string, I feel spots where knots clearly used to be tied. It must be a family heirloom used by Jaz's ancestors to help them in the Race. They must have paid a fortune from one of the last Winter Seasonale.

I shove the string into my pocket without thinking, knowing I need this with me. I cannot help but wonder if fate drug me out of bed tonight. The Ladder calls to me with almost a low hum from my pocket. I press my hand over the lump in my pocket, and my fingers vibrate over the pent-up magic.

I dig through the rest of the pack, grabbing a small piece of cloth wrapped tightly around dried meat. I help myself to a handful of their tinctures, slipping all my spoils into my now very full pockets. I seal the pack back up and make my way out the window. With a final glance towards Jaz's bed, I ignore the pain in my chest for betraying them and turn to leave. I do not bother replacing the window - they'll realize they were stolen from reasonably quickly anyway.

The clouds pull back from the moon as I make my way to my home, and I slip back through my front door. It feels fortuitous on the balmy summer evening. I slump at my table

and bury my face in my hands. Self-preservation has made me do plenty of questionably moral things, but this one feels like I am condemning someone to death.

I feel compelled to examine the Witch's Ladder again. I empty my haul from my pockets and grab my pack from the shelf it sits on. Dumping the contents of it onto my table, I begin to sort what I have set aside and what I have acquired.

My base needs are covered with items like flint, a canteen to fill with water, the newly acquired spile, and alcohol for making tinctures and cleaning wounds. I also have a roll of cloth for bandages wrapped around two additional blades. My whip is tightly curled and strapped to the front.

My mother's voice about always having a backup to my backup plays in my head as I rewrap the blades tighter and slip in the whetstone to accommodate the new additions to my pack. I add the meat and premade tinctures from Jaz's pack and stare at the Witch's Ladder. I touch it, the soft vibrations from it echoing in my fingertips.

I am drawn to this ancient item of power. Should I even bring this along, potentially to use, not knowing what the spells within it contain?

It's as if I have no choice in the matter. I'm bringing along unknown magic.

I know it as soon as I question it, a little niggling in the back of my mind making it clear that I cannot possibly leave it behind. Wrapping it gently around itself, I slip it into a hidden interior pocket of the pack. It bumps against a smooth obsidian

stone carved with a flourished M. Slipping it into my palm, I remember my father giving it to me the night before my first Race.

“The Mistflow name used to mean greatness, Lola.”

He only called me Lola when my mother was not around, and it always brought a smile to my face.

“My father made me my talisman when I was born and gave it to me before my first Race. I carry it with me to this day, and I credit that love with all of the good in my life. When your mother told me she was with child, I knew I had to do the same for you. I shined and polished this stone, carving it by hand while you grew in your mother’s belly. I have carried it since, hoping it absorbed all my love and dreams for you. Now that you are about to run your first Race, I want you to carry that love with you as you journey up the Summit.”

I grip the stone tightly, tears brimming my eyes and threatening to spill at the memory. How could someone who loved me so much leave me behind? His words reach out through the past and echo in my head.

“Viola Mistflow. You are destined for greatness and adventure. You will live the life I have dreamed for you in Ytopie. I promise.”

I cannot stop the tears from falling and press the stone to my chest.

Chapter 6

Zeph

It was bittersweet when I first became an elected member of the Patricians. The role was only open because Stone was stepping back to an advisory role instead of a ruling one. Stone has been in my life for as long as I can remember, having also been an advisor to my father. He's a Bliksem, or Storm wielder, a lesser magic under Autumn.

I would have preferred to live a quiet life without being a part of a regulatory body, but Stone informed me that it was my duty to all of Krillium, and I have always had a hard time turning him down.

My father was a Patrician for decades alongside Stone. When he died, and Mace filled his empty spot, I assumed Stone would stay on to guide Mace. That was not the case. Mace did not need Stone's oversight, so here I am. A reluctant participant in the political structure of a society I do not even know if I support fully.

The Patricians were initially formed for the citizens of Ytopie to communicate with the Gods. The Gods were not entertaining individual requests and grievances from citizens, so the Patricians were elected to be the go-between.

Or rather, that's what was told to the citizens.

When I gained my seat on the board, I was let in on the best-kept secret of the land.

The Gods are gone. And no one is sure where they went.

Our history says that the first fae colonized Ytopie to avoid persecution from the humans of Krillium. While it may seem unlikely for humans to have any leg up on magical fae, they had sheer numbers on their side. There are at least three humans for every fae, and at the time, the fae were not practiced in their magic the way we are now.

The location of Ytopie, wrapping around Gallant Summit, was strategic to keep the humans from breaching the city. Jealousy over the fae's close connection with the Gods and our magic created a hostile relationship we could never overcome.

Everyone, save for the Patricians, believes the Gods are solitary and quiet and will only deign to show themselves to us. However, Stone informed me that no living fae has seen the Gods when I gained my seat on the board. "Why are we keeping up with this facade?" I asked, confused at the point of it.

"The humans will not Race if they do not believe the Gods demand it," Stone had said simply.

I shouldn't have been surprised that Stone did not see a problem with this. I remember the day I discovered the dirtiest secret of Ytopie. Stone, a Patrician then, was in his study, working on the plan for that year's Race. My father was sitting across from him, and I, a young child at the time, hid behind a bookcase, undetected to the two. It was my father's first year as a Patrician, and Stone was getting him up to speed on the inner workings of the Race.

“So, after the winner's ceremony, we escort all of the humans down to the village,” Stone said, his voice quiet and grim. “These humans, the strongest, most clever of the lot, hold the most risk to Ytopie and everything we hold dear.” A wave of anger had clawed at my chest even then, a monster trying to escape with his words.

For all his faults, my father was not a fan of the deception. “What do you mean? We tell the Lowlanders and our own people that these humans represent the best of them. That is why they deserve to live in Ytopie, even if it is just the outskirts.”

Stone had nodded gravely, “Unfortunately, sometimes we must bear the burden of the truth so our people do not.” I watched in silent horror as Stone revealed the worst of it. “It's in the village that the winner and the other ten meet the fate of the expendables. The Gods will not be satisfied with sacrificing just the weak and meek.”

The words echoed in my head. The euphemism for death was used throughout the Race. The last finishers are marked as

“expendable” each year. We execute them. Determined to be not worth the resources to sustain, they are removed from this world, and their bodies returned to the soil to nurture it.

When we explain this to the citizens of Krillium, we tell them the Gods demand a sacrifice to maintain their immortality. Being expendable is an honor that will keep the world functioning and keep us from being plunged into eternal darkness.

“Expendable?” my father had said, his disgust mirroring my own. “I would think the cleverest would be the least expendable.”

Stone sadly shook his head as he replied, “Those are the ones we have to worry about the most. They threaten everything. Who else but the cleverest and dedicated could figure out that the Gods have abandoned us? If that were to happen, we would not be able to staunch that revolution that would occur.”

“But why bother with the Race at all? Has this been in place since before the Gods went missing?” My father had asked, voice barely above a whisper.

I had strained to hear, but I could not make out any more of Stone’s words. Eventually, they left, leaving me to process all the deceptions I’d heard.

It took a long time for me to forgive Stone for his role in deceiving all of our people. When my father died, I felt I had no choice but to give in to him. He stepped in as a parental figure and supported me through my grief. I disagreed with

him upholding the practice, but I have always understood the difficulty of changing it. I have been a Patrician for years and am just now working towards a change.

I often ask myself why I am doing it now. Part of me wonders if I want to cut Mace off at the knees. His political career is only growing, and he's rapidly becoming one of the most beloved members in the history of the Patricians. My jealousy is palpable. I never wanted this role I was thrust into, but that does not stop me from wanting to be successful and revered for it.

But I sleep better at night, remembering that, regardless of my motivations for working to end the Race, doing this is the right thing.



I pour myself another glass of liquor and turn to face my companion. "Would you like a drink?" I ask her. She looks up from my bed, blanket gathered at her hips. Her straight black hair hangs over her buttery brown shoulders, brushing against her dark nipples. I don't remember her name. I rarely ever do.

It has been a while since I brought someone home from the taverns. The stress leading up to the Race must be getting to me.

"Sure, do you have wine?" she asks.

Her voice is melodic and soft. I'm naked save for my tattoos, which curl from my shoulders up my neck and into my

hairline. Her eyes drift greedily over my skin. She looks at me with reverence, like I've done more than bring her home from a tavern. I feel embarrassed by it, but I should be used to it. As a Patrician, we can gain a somewhat celebrity status.

I join her in the bed and slide the glass of wine into her hand. I rest on the mussed blankets, not touching her but close enough. I always ensure the women I bring home are sober when I bed them.

But I hardly ever am.

Tonight is no exception. After spending a painful few hours alone with my thoughts, I went out drinking and gained the favor of the woman beside me.

My bedmate leans back against the head of my bed, quietly drinking from her glass of wine. The silence is uncomfortable. I clear my throat, trying to bridge the gap between sleeping together and getting her out of my home.

“So uh... what's your magic, again?” I asked, searching for anything to talk about.

She smiles, a flush creeping up her hairline, “I'm an Esha.”

Eshas wield the magic of Yearning, a lesser magic under spring. Their rare magic allows them to increase desire in all forms - sexually, romantically, and even physical hunger. Unlike Light users, they do not reveal what's hidden but instead, bring your heart's greatest desires to the forefront.

Due to the sensitive nature of their magic and the effect it can have, they're heavily regulated and required by law to

disclose their magic when used.

“You know it is illegal to use Yearning to take someone to bed, right?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at her.

Her flush furthers, warming her chest. “I... I didn’t, you have to know that. You approached me, Zeph. I couldn’t... I wouldn’t... Please,” she begs, rising to her knees and crawling towards me. “You cannot say to Mace that I am misusing my powers. I know what happens to Eshas that do, I...”

I wave my hand, cutting her off. “Calm down. I know you didn’t cast on me.” Her shoulders droop as relief flashes across her face. “Mace may be the mouthpiece of the Patricians,” I continue, gritting my teeth, “but you know we all work in tandem, right? Mace, knowing that you misused your powers should be no more worrisome than me knowing.”

It irks me that Mace is seen as the most powerful among us. We all have our strengths, and while I have no doubt he uses his influential magic to boost the public perception of him, it frustrates me that my strengths are constantly underestimated.

The girl in my bed slowly backs away from me, slips to the floor, and begins dressing.

“Of course, Zeph, you’re right, I know that. Mace is just... Well, he just scares me a bit? And you took me home, so I figured you’d look out for me if it came to it?” Every sentence from her mouth is a question, a sign of her nerves clearly rising to the surface.

I throw back the rest of my drink, savoring the sharp burn on my throat. I tend to be a bit of a mean drunk, a trait Plume has tried to cover up for me numerous times. Nothing gets under my skin more than being compared to Mace. I fight to keep my words measured and maintain my composure.

“Taking you into my bed doesn’t mean much, Esha. I think you should head on home.”

Chapter 7

Zeph

“Well, well, look who finally decided to grace us with his presence,” Mace sneers, facing me as I slide into my seat at the round table in the middle of our headquarters.

The rounded table is meticulously stained to a deep cherry, with ornate carvings on the sides. The meeting room is scarcely used but is still kept in pristine condition by the staff working in the Palace. Not a spot of dust hangs off the gold light fixtures that are powered by the Bliksem grid, and the cabinets surrounding the square room are always stocked with writing supplies and refreshments for long planning sessions.

I meet Mace’s stare and make my face into a mask of indifference as I shrug and casually say, “Yeah, some of us have exciting evenings that make it a bit more difficult to get up in the morning.”

Rolling his eyes, Mace turns back to face the table, “And some of us can go all night and still be productive the next

day, but I'll apologize to the women of Ytopie on your behalf for your lack of stamina."

The group of Patricians and advisors around the table titter with laughter, and I start to reply when Cirrha, the lead representative of Air and fellow Patrician, speaks up, "Now boys, you're both pretty. Let's move on to business."

"She's right, team. We've got a day until the opening ceremonies. Where are we at?" Stone calls out over the clamor of noises in the headquarters.

"Tempests have the mesh set up and should be visible in all homes and businesses as long as the home has scheduled the setup of their connection," Cirrha responds, as Stone nods and checks something off on the paper he's holding.

"Nereids are preparing the rain, siphoning magic from the sea as we speak, waiting for Zeph's command to drop." Nimh, the water-wielder's voice, like a cool breeze, snaps me out of my musings. I nod appreciatively at her, admiring the shimmering blue hair that falls into her eyes.

"The Bliksem are prepared with the lightning," Stone says, speaking for his magic clan.

"Geomancers have increased the hazards of the terrain, adding more boulders, carving out some pits, and generally just making the terrain hellacious," Mace laughs, representing the earth wielders. They are solitary, preferring to live on the city's outskirts in caves. They always come through with assisting on Race Day, though. As a magic under Autumn, Mace is the vocal representative of the society of hermits.

Why they'd choose him to look out for their best interests is a mystery to me.

“And what of the Seasonale?” Mace asks, turning to me. I have been working quietly for weeks to avoid detection from all of the Patricians in how I plan to expose the Race, which is hard when I'm the one responsible for assigning tasks to the most powerful magic users of the city.

I want all of Krillium, including Ytopie, to know that the Gods have abandoned them. I want them to understand that the Race is a pointless spectacle designed to keep humans below the fae.

I want to burn it all down. Starting with Mace.

To do that, I have to make the Race easier for humans but still entertaining for the city. Then, when the majority of the Racers enter the arena for the winner's ceremony, I'll expose to everyone how the Gods have abandoned us and that the winners are slaughtered every year.

But Mace doesn't know that, so I tell him what he wants to hear. “Spring is on standby to encourage the growth of healing plants for anyone we do not want to see out of the Race too soon. Autumn is preparing to decay trees for fall hazards and coordinate lightning storms. You're also going to influence groups to meet up to increase conflict, right Mace?”

He nods, a wicked grin on his face. “Okay, great. And Summer?”

I glance down at my papers as if I'm reading from them, "Summer has strengthened the shields around Ytopie and is prepared to extend the sunlight hours if needed and increase the ambient temperature."

The shield is, in fact, not strengthened. I've been working diligently for the past few weeks to strategically place weak spots throughout it. I can only hope it will be enough for the Lowlanders to break through once chaos erupts. The benefit of being the head of Summer is that I can keep others from undoing my work.

Mace nods appreciatively and then turns to Stone, clapping him on the shoulder. "Alright, old man, it seems like all is in place. Has anyone checked to ensure the Coalition is setting up for tomorrow's opening ceremony?"

We all exchange furtive glances, and Mace runs his fingers aggressively through his dark hair in frustration. "Zeph, can you please go check?" I nod, grateful for the excuse to get out of the room. With a quick straitening of my clothing, I slip out the door.

I make my way down the intricately decorated hallway to the command center, where the connection site for Race viewing has been set up. The walls are adorned with sconces of gold and black, and soft carpets in rich shades of red cushion my footsteps. As I step into the room, I'm greeted by pitchers filled with water and mead, along with platters of fruits, nuts, and cheeses arranged on the counter. A U-shaped table sits empty in the middle of the room save for scattered papers atop

it. After last night's activities, I should not have skipped breakfast, so I pluck a round red fruit and lean against the table, taking a bite as I gaze up at the connection site. At that moment, my reflection catches my attention, and I see the features that remind me so much of my mother.

My mother was small, with hair like a sunset, that I was lucky enough to inherit. Where her hair was long and fell in waves to her waist, I keep the thick auburn locks short, barely touching my forehead. My eyes are hers as well, bright green and clear.

Throughout my life, I've been told that I bear a striking resemblance to her. Her presence was captivating, like the flicker of a candle in the dark. Her vibrant energy mirrored the sparks of magic that ran through our family, and she was beloved by the citizens of the city. Her fiery spirit was an intensity that lit up a room, leaving a lasting impression on those she encountered.

I still feel her loss deep in my chest, a pounding that never quiets. It's especially bad around Race time. The incident that took both my parents from me after a Race decades ago still remains shrouded in mystery despite the efforts I've expended to find out the truth of what happened. Questions linger, and the absence of answers only deepens my ache.

All I know about their deaths is what Stone told me shortly after. He said a freak accident left them dead on their way back from the arena. I was too grief-stricken to examine it any deeper than that, and now that I have healed, the absence of

information leaves me consistently frustrated. Stone is adamant that all he knows is what he's told me, but in my gut, I know there must be more.

Lost in my thoughts, I'm brought back to the present by Stone's voice behind me. "Zeph, we need to double-check everything. Mace is on edge, and so am I."

Startled, I jump off the table's edge, attempting to appear engrossed in my tasks. I turn to face Stone, the tension evident in my body. "I know, Stone. The start of the Race and the opening ceremonies set the tone for the event. I've got this, you need to trust me. I'm not the screw-up kid I once was."

Stone places a reassuring hand on my shoulder, his gaze filled with concern. "I trust you, Zeph. We all do. But this is a pivotal moment, and the pressure is on. Stay focused, and let's make this happen."

Taking a deep breath, I try to steady my nerves.

The Race is deeply rooted in Ytopie's culture and is eagerly anticipated by our citizens yearly. Doubts creep into my mind, questioning why I have taken it upon myself to challenge the established order. Whispers of rebels and dissenters have reached my ears, but I've chosen to tread this path alone. I wonder if I should have sought the help of Plume or even Stone.

I look at him and briefly consider revealing my plan, but ultimately, I decide against it. Stone has had many options to change our lands, but he hasn't. I cannot risk telling him and having my plan go off the rails.

I've come too far to turn back now.

Chapter 8

Viola

“**Y**ou ready?” Max asks, tightening the laces on her leather boots and slipping a small knife into the side of them.

I nod, barely paying attention to her as I braid my hair into a shiny single plait down my back. I washed my hair this morning for the first time in a while. We have no idea how long the Race will take us, even though, in most years, it does not last much more than two weeks for the fastest of us. Regardless, starting out with clean hair couldn't hurt.

Max rises to her full height, at least a head shorter than me, and knocks me with her shoulder. “Well then, let's go get in position, partner.”

On Race Day, all Lowlanders who have reached the age of Ascension have to report to the base of the Summit, where a member of the Coalition of Lowlanders and a representative from the Patricians wait to kick off the event.

We merge with the crowd, heading towards a makeshift stage where I see two nondescript figures standing on top of it, heads close together in conversation. The stage is set up at the entrance to the forest surrounding Gallant Summit, its weathered boards hauled out year after year just for the occasion. The heat from the summer sun beats down on us, threatening to tighten my skin already.

Behind me, I hear the huffing of someone out of breath and turn and see Jaz catching up with Max and me. Inwardly, I cringe, knowing just how badly I betrayed them.

Their arm is in a sling, a remnant of the attack they suffered. “Max, Vi... I was robbed.”

Max startles and turns around. “What? How?”

Jaz shrugs, hand ruffling their short-cropped curly hair. “I don’t know. I had all of my windows secured, and my doors barricaded, but I found a window open. It was well secured, and that one has always squeaked loudly. I have no idea how I didn’t hear it.”

“Oh shit. What did they take?” Max asks, as my stomach burns with guilt for what I’ve done.

“I didn’t immediately check my pack since I assumed it was a fluke. So, when I grabbed it to ensure I had everything I needed, I found that all my dried meat and a handful of my healing tinctures were gone.”

Odd. Jaz did not mention the Witch’s Ladder. They must not want anyone to know about it.

“Well, that’s a relief,” I say, trying to keep my voice level. “At least you can make some tinctures while on the Summit and do some hunting.”

Jaz shrugs, eyes downcast, “I mean, yeah. But I’m already going to be slow since I’m down an arm... There is no chance of me winning this year.”

Max nods solemnly. “Well, we’ll keep an eye out for you, Jaz.” I take her hand and hurry us through the crowd, leaving Jaz behind. “That sucks for Jaz,” Max begins.

I interrupt her. “But it’s just us. I do not want to take on a third that can slow us down.”

We reach a comfortable spot to see the opening ceremonies and the stage, and I look up to see the leader of the Patricians, Mace Nightrout. My breath catches just as Max locks eyes on him as well.

“Fuck if I don’t hate him, but Gods, that is a beautiful fae,” she whispers, not taking her eyes off him.

She’s not wrong. He is tall, towering over Maude, the Coalition representative, next to him. The Coalition was formed to give the Lowlanders a voice to the fae, but I can’t see what good they do. Standing beside Maude, Mace looks young, but I know that is just how the fae age. He’s got a smooth face, freshly shaven, piercing green eyes, and dark hair that is pushed back from his face but still ends up shaggy around his ears. His sharp jawline flexes as he speaks, and my eyes trail down his body, his muscular arms, the flash of exposed skin on his chest, and the long, lithe legs.

I flashback to my time with Amio, which clearly wasn't enough to quell the hunger I feel deep in my belly at the sight of Mace.

I have always been attracted to power. Why bother putting myself in a vulnerable position if I can't get something out of it?

Amio was a lapse in judgment, that is for sure.

I cannot help but feel like a fae as powerful as Mace would be no such thing. Every year, I stand here, avoiding his gaze, ignoring the chatter of the other Racers as they gossip about him. But this year, I allow myself to indulge in a little fantasy.

My face heats, and I look away, nodding at Max. "He is something, that is for sure. What's his discipline again?" I ask, trying not to look at him. It's easy to pretend I don't know already. I've tried my hardest to hide my strange attraction to and fascination with the fae man.

"He's Autumn, apparently. His specialty is influence, if Maude is to be believed." Maude is Max's neighbor, and her position on the Coalition gives her access to the fae, so I can believe she has some knowledge about him. I adjust the black shirt I've tucked tightly into my long shorts, a poor attempt to distract myself from the fae before me.

A throat clears, and everyone turns to the stage, where Mace steps forward. "Good morning, Krillium! And welcome to the Race. We are honored you all have chosen to participate this year."

“Like we have a choice,” I mutter to Max, all attraction to Mace seeping out of me.

I turn my eyes back up at the stage and am met with the icy stare of Mace Nightrout himself, who subtly raises an eyebrow at me before he resumes talking, eyes locked on me.

“As you know, the first person to the arena at the top of the Summit will move to Ytopie and live a life of luxury, with the next ten joining them and being a part of the fabulous working class that will support all the past winners.” The crowd cheers, everyone here thinking they have a chance of winning. There are hundreds of Lowlanders here from all over Krillium. Our prospects are all slim, and deep down, we know it.

“However,” Mace starts, casting his eyes down, “The Gods have informed us that with the continued growth of Krillium, the magic required to sustain it is being taxed.” There are murmurs rising up from the crowd, everyone whispering to each other about how that could be. My chest feels tight, and I anxiously tap my fingers along my collarbone, counting each connection with my fingertips as my father once taught me.

“It is because of this,” Mace continues, “that the Gods have tasked us to increase the number of expendables this year by ten for a stronger sacrifice, bringing our total number of expendables to forty.”

The crowd quiets, entirely still. “Are you joking?” I hear someone shout.

I look over and see Jaz angrily pushing their way to the front of the crowd towards the stage, the arm in the sling slamming

into sides until they are right before Mace. “You’re increasing it by TEN this year? How do you justify that?” The group starts to voice their agreement, the volume around us rising. Mace raises his hands, motioning for us to quiet down.

“I know, I know, this is not good news,” he begins, crouching down to look Jaz in the eye. “Unfortunately, the Coalition and the Patricians have no say over this. We are but the mouthpieces of the Gods. We are lucky they look out for us at all.”

I feel bile rising in the back of my throat. This is the most considerable increase in expendables in my lifetime. I cannot fathom why it would need to continue to increase year after year. Mace’s attempt to quiet the crowd only amplifies my agitation.

He rises to his full height once more and looks at the restless crowd before him. Suddenly, a feeling of warmth and pliability runs through me. Influence magic, of course. He’s using his magic to manipulate us to quiet down. I steel myself, the feeling of ice running through my veins, and I shout, “Easy for you to say. You’ve never had to Race before.”

Eyes dart to me, and people in the crowd turn to face me with shocked expressions. It’s an unspoken rule that we do not talk about how the fae seem exempt from the Race. It is mainly unspoken because anyone speaking of it appears to be made expendable shortly after. Mace locks eyes with me again, a sinister smile creeping on his beautiful face.

“Yes, you’re right. I have never Raced before. However, my magic allows me to help the crops grow that fill your belly, Lowlander, so I have paid my dues,” he drawls, never once taking his eyes off me. “The Gods have determined that the fae cannot be sacrificed, as our magic will not nourish them. We contribute to Krillium in other ways.”

My gray eyes lock with his vivid green, and we stand there silently for a beat. His jaw is locked, and his nostrils flare slightly, the smooth demeanor of a leader starting to crack under my scrutiny. His attention makes me feel as if my skin is being peeled back and my most sensitive parts are being showcased. My belly fills with heat at the intensity, but my mind is frigid against his influential magic that I still feel dripping down my spine.

I start to shrink beneath his harsh gaze. Against my better judgment, I fight through it, straightening my back and harshening my stare.

His pointed face cracks into a smile that lacks the warmth and joy you’d expect. Instead, it’s predatory, and my stomach clenches. “Any other criticisms you’d like to lob at me, Miss Mistflow, or should I continue?”

I freeze, and a lump forms in my throat. Mace Nightroot knows who I am. The implications of that fact are unknown, but I doubt it’s very good.

It would make sense for the Patricians to have knowledge of all the Racers in a passive way, mainly to make sure no one hid out and didn’t participate, but this is another level. The

eyes of the Lowlanders are on me, their gazes heating my cheeks. The pressure to bow and back down is great, an invisible hand on my back pushing me toward the dirt.

I will myself to think of my father, of the strength he possessed day in and out. A cool breeze blows over me, bringing clean smells of sandalwood and sea salt. The feeling is soothing, and that anchor loosens its hold. “I have a few, but we can discuss those privately when I win the Race,” I shout at him, garnering laughs from my neighbors.

His grin widens, eyes gleaming with mischief. I catch sight of his tongue running across his teeth before he says, “I will welcome the conversation, Miss Mistflow. If you make it.”

There can be no if. There is only when.



After the opening ceremonies, everyone is spread out around the base of the Summit, stretching from the edge of Dalery to the entry of the grasslands. All of us cannot enter the same place at the same time - it would be a bloodbath. We've been waiting for the start for hours, the morning having given way to the heat of the late afternoon long ago. We chose a location on the northernmost side of the Summit. The path in this way is a bit more difficult, but my gut tells me it's the right starting point.

“I cannot believe you called out Mace like that,” Max chastises as we wait on a fallen tree for the official start notification.

Ahead of us lies a forest that I know from prior years circles several hills and valleys before you get to the Summit. Once arriving at the Summit, there is nothing to do but find as steady of a rock path as you can and climb. Over Gallant Mountain, and slightly down its northern face, sits Ytopie, and just outside of it is the arena - our finish line. The distinction between Gallant Summit and Mountain does not matter to us. It is all one obstacle we have to make our way through.

“You should not call attention to yourself like that,” she continues.

I shrug, absentmindedly running my already sharp dagger along my whetstone. The sound is music to my ears, a comforting song that sings strength into my bones. “He already knew my name, Max. I did not need to call attention to myself. Clearly, I’ve already got it.”

“Well, you didn’t have to make it worse.” She’s frustrated with me, I can tell.

Grabbing her hand, I force her to look at me. “Max. I would never knowingly put you in danger.” I tilt her chin with the edge of my knife, ensuring she’s looking into my eyes. “You know that, right?”

Exhaling deeply, the tension melts from her shoulders. “I know, Vi. I... I just worry you’ll put a target on your back, and I will lose you.”

Chuckling, I store my knife in the leather strap around my thigh and shake my head. “I’ve had a target on my back since I

was born. Or rather, my parents seemed to think so. I've adapted."

A horn blares and I jump to my feet, the piercing sound carrying across the Summit through the air. Max's face breaks into a wolfish grin. "Looks like it's time to Race," she says, bouncing excitedly on the balls of her feet.

The area of the Summit Max and I start at is covered in green, summer in full swing, and the flowers and weeds growing tall, covering our pants in their soft fuzz of pollen. The buzz of insects fills the air, and I cannot help but smile at how much this place reminds me of the hill my father used to take me to, where I encountered Link all those years ago.

He should be here with me.

"If we go at a good, steady pace, we should be able to reach the arena in nine days," Max tells me, picking a flower and pushing it behind her ear.

I snap out of my memories. "If we don't encounter any major issues," I add, forcing a grin.

"Which we will." Max laughs. "If we maintain a quick pace, hardly stopping for sleep, I think we can reach it in eight days."

"Eight days it is, then. What was the average last year?"

Max sucks on her front teeth, thinking back. "The winner made it there in just over eight days, with all ten filing within another day. So... we have maybe seven and a half, eight days exactly. If we hope to get in the top this year."

I nod, half listening and sweeping my eyes across the plain before me. I spot some feverfew growing a few paces ahead and jog forward to snatch it out of the ground. I drop to my knees, pull a bottle of alcohol out of my pack, and toss a handful of blooms in it.

“Oh, look at my little Witch,” Max laughs, ruffling my hair.

I smack her shin with the back of my hand. “We’ll see you making fun of me if you get a fever, bitch. I’m over here trying to take care of you.”

She grabs my elbow and hoists me up, and I quickly stow the bottle. We look ahead and see the first line of trees that will soon become our view for the next eight days - or less if I have my say in it. We link arms and head forward because back is not an option in Krillium.

Chapter 9

Zeph

“**W**hat the hell was that?” I demand, crowding Mace against the wall of the command center when he returns from the opening ceremonies. “You called out a Lowlander - by name. How did you even know who she was?”

Mace raises an eyebrow, his expression calm and collected. Ignoring my question, he replies, “She will assume the Coalition mentioned her, and it will soon fade from her memory. The Race is their primary concern.”

His flippant attitude and quick response grates on me.

The room falls into an uneasy silence as our advisors and the Patricians watch our confrontation unfold. I release a frustrated breath and run a hand through my hair, trying to compose myself. “If the Lowlanders realize they’re being observed, they might suspect our manipulation of the terrain,” I state firmly, keeping my voice steady. “We can’t afford that risk.”

Mace dismisses my concerns with a wave of his hand and moves to pour himself a glass of mead. “They’re not clever enough to make that connection,” he remarks casually, dangling the glass precariously between his fingers. “Now, let’s focus on the Race.”

I want to keep arguing, to push back on the idea that humans are not clever enough to figure out how manipulated they’ve been. I know the best thing I can do is keep my anger in check and not draw unnecessary attention, but that feels like a battle against my instincts.

Reluctantly, I take my seat next to him and turn my attention to the connection, which slowly rotates between groups of Racers, hours into the Race by this point. He hasn’t missed much, as his journey back to Ytopie is made quicker because he can enter the city by skirting the mountains and taking a well-worn path from Dalery. Once there, some of our best Bouclier, shielding fae under the Summer Seasonale, drop a small portion of the barrier and allow him passage. What takes the Racers eight or nine days, he can do in a matter of hours.

The Race’s early stages are uneventful, the participants making their way through the fields of the start and into the wooded area at the base of the Summit. The true test of their desperation and aggression is yet to come. And if it doesn’t, I’m sure Mace will ensure it does, one way or another.

We catch sight of the woman Mace called Miss Mistflow, gracefully navigating the tree roots as she enters the overgrown forest. She’s accompanied by a small, mouse-like

woman with a pointed face and sharp hair. Mousy watches Mistflow with admiration as Mistflow appears to be demonstrating something to her.

“What’s she got there?” Nimh asks curiously.

“Looks like a spile,” Cirrha answers, a hint of admiration in her voice. She leans forward onto her deep brown hands, squinting for a better look.

“Impressive. Those are quite expensive to make or acquire.”

I barely notice their conversation; my attention is fixed on the connection. I see that Mace, too, seems intrigued by the duo, although he tries to conceal it behind an air of indifference.

Mousy grabs Mistflow’s hand and whispers something in her ear, eliciting a joyful laugh from Mistflow. It’s over too soon, her expression quickly returning to a stern glare. She is intriguing, but I can’t pinpoint why she seems so familiar. I feel entranced by her, almost as I felt the one time Plume tried a little Yearning magic on me so I would know how it felt. I cannot break my eyes from the connection.

Before I can dwell on it further, I observe Mistflow effortlessly pushing aside a fallen tree that blocks Mousy’s path. It’s clear that she possesses considerable strength, with well-defined arms beneath her solid black sleeveless top. Her attire, consisting of short black leathers, is worn but still in good condition. It must have cost her a fortune. Hilts strap her thighs, and she’s got a whip resting on her belt. She looks positively lethal.

A stark contrast to her travel companion, Mousy is slight and quick-footed. Her hair is short, and her clothes are practical green pants and a gray top. I can't immediately spot any weapons on her, but with a friend like Mistflow, I know she wouldn't be unarmed. Where Mistflow is the consuming darkness of night, Mousy is the warm light of dawn.

Everything in me says these two will be the ones to watch this year.

The connection pages away from Mousy and Mistflow, and I lean back, not nearly as interested in a group of young boys, clearly in their Ascension year, who are dicking around playing with tree branches as swords.

I suck on my teeth, absentmindedly picking at the skin around my fingernails. Stone slides a glass of mead in front of me, "You look like you need this," he says under his breath.

"Thank you, old friend." Smiling at him, I cannot help but feel grateful for all the assistance he has provided me over the years.

Despite my affection for him, I am still convinced I am making the right choice, not involving him in my plans. Still, his presence feels like home. His long gray hair is pulled back with multiple leather bands today, mimicking a plait down his back. He's got on his black linen trousers and a plain gray shirt with no metal in sight. This is business Stone, getting prepared to assist the Bliksem in creating a storm in a little over an hour.

As the connection continues to shuffle through what is easily the most tedious part of the Race, I sip my drink and try not to think about my encounter with the Esha I brought home. I broke several of my own rules in bringing her there. A lingering embarrassment for my overindulgence and the harsh way I treated her still climbs up my collar.

I've never been one for settling down, but I may need to be. Having a woman around to keep me in line doesn't seem like such a bad idea anymore.

Nimh leaves her seat and stands behind me, her small hands resting on my shoulders. Nimh and I have known of each other for our whole lives but have only recently grown closer since she took a position within the Patricians. She's small, with an ethereal face and pointed ears. Once, Plume told me that she caught Mace and Nimh in the throes of passion, but I have difficulty believing that, considering how they bicker.

She doesn't say anything, just presses her fingers into my tense shoulders. "You cannot properly cast if you're so stressed out, Zeph," she hums, a tenor only I can hear.

I shrug her hands off and stand. "I've got it, Nimh. Appreciate the concern, but I've done this before."

She holds her hands up in submission, "Suit yourself, Zeph, but you know you don't have to do everything alone."



I stand in the green behind the Palace, surrounded by Nereids and Bliksem. With Stone and Nimh at my elbows, I know the group assembled is awaiting my command. The Race has been uneventful until now, with the participants just traveling through the forest. That will change when the storm we are about to conjure hits. Some will be forced to seek shelter while others attempt to carry on and get struck by lightning or caught in a mudslide.

I did my best with the few Geomancers I could trust to make the terrain as stable as possible, trying to limit casualties, but I cannot predict what the Racers will do. At least we were able to add additional caves for shelter. I just need to keep as many Racers safe as possible and group them together so they can all make it to the arena. Once there, I can finally reveal the secrets being kept from them.

Casting a spell of this magnitude, containing components of water and lightning, takes more focus than a single spell. It is a delicate dance between elements, with every spell member working harmoniously to produce the desired effects. It has always reminded me of a symphony, with everyone's part having to be carefully designed. When combining multiple disciplines of lesser magic, a Seasonale must be present to weave all the magic together. While an exhausting process, it really is quite beautiful.

A Seasonale is the only one who can combine magics, but they need one of them to be a lesser magic under their season to be a part of the spell. That makes a spell with Water particularly difficult.

Historically, there has been a lot of back and forth on whether Water is a lesser magic under Summer or Winter. Water can wield rain, control the tides, and use oceans and lakes to help them summon. But Water can also call down snow and ice over roads. I can see an argument for both sides, and I personally have never been able to call water to me. These spells are the closest I have gotten to utilizing Water magic. But with no Winters around to challenge it, Summer has taken Water on as a lesser.

We rarely get to cast spells like this. Most of our day-to-day lives in Ytopie require individual spells or a small cooperative group. But we have a lot of ground to cover with the spell, so the group assembled in front of me is surprisingly massive.

Mace, leaning back against the stone wall of the Palace, tuts and urges us onwards, “Alright, let’s get this going, team.”

I acknowledge him with a curt nod and turn back to the team I have assembled. “Nereids and Bliksem, I want to thank you for agreeing to be a part of this spell today. Each of you provides a crucial element, and with your assistance, we can create a marvelous piece of nature. I am honored to lead you all today. Let’s begin.”

I fold my knuckles into the palm of my hand, hearing a satisfying crack before shaking them out loosely at my side. With a nod at Stone, he raises his right arm and signals for the Bliksem to begin casting. Their low chants fill the space, a hum of ancient words calling upon the natural electricity around us to focus on one spot. I do not speak my magic into

existence, but some prefer to, and even more have to. So when I hear the combining of their voices, it sends chills down my spine.

Once they all appear in a trance, Stone joins them on the green, weaving his older, more powerful magic with the fray. Nimh nods towards her assembled group of Nereids, and they all climb into the fountain on the green, rooting themselves in water to help them set their intentions. I've always admired how Nereids are so connected to their magic. Most look like they spend their days in the rivers and streams, only surfacing when required.

I raise both of my hands, closing my eyes in an attempt to visualize all the individual voices merging together and traveling to me.

I fall into my rhythm, calling upon memories of warm summer days, ripe fruit, and my mother's embrace to sink into the magic of Summer that lives in my veins. Once there, I open my eyes, ready to receive the spells that have revealed themselves to me. The air is filled with shimmering fragments pouring out of the mouths of each of the spellcasters, shining like stars in the deepest night. I watch the sparkling specks of gold for Storm and cool, liquid blue droplets for Water rise through the air, spinning lazily above their casters. I pull their magic towards my own, slowly gathering them within my hands. I have always found the combination of disciplines stunning, but Storm and Water is arguably my favorite. The blue and gold swirl together, pooling in the palm of my hand like liquid.

It takes considerable focus to view magic in this way. To an outsider, I'm sure we'd look ridiculous. But with training, anyone with magic within them could spot the flecks of it floating through the air as a spell is cast.

The pool grows larger with each fragment of magic I gather, threatening to spill from my grasp. When I cannot hold it anymore, I tilt it to my mouth and gulp it down.

The golden sparks of Storm burn on their way down my throat, but the cooling droplets from Water soothe. I feel the power of the spell creep through my limbs, filling me with a spell that yearns to escape. The heat that runs through my arms and belly is not unlike the burn of good alcohol, just ... more. It is all-encompassing and overwhelming. The magic pressure builds in my body, and I know I do not have much longer to grow and develop it within me.

I focus on visualizing the storm, the lighting and thunder that will shock the senses, and the hot, sticky rain that will fall, leaving the air behind it humid and thick. Setting my intentions, I open my palms up to the sky and will the magic to blend with my own of Summer and release into the atmosphere.

A loud crack of thunder sounds over the Summit, and in the distance, I can see the water begin to fall, focused solely on the Race area. I slump, stumbling backward towards any place to rest my weary limbs. Stone and Nihm are at my side immediately, each holding me by one arm.

Mace approaches with a glass of mead and a piece of chocolate to help restore my energy. “Great job. Let’s go see it in action.”



“You can take a break if you need to, you know. No one will blame you. That’s a lot of magic to course through your body,” Nimh whispers, sitting on the edge of the chair next to me in the command center.

“I’m okay,” I mumble, still not feeling fully myself. Casting my own magic would eventually take a toll, but the individual spells have such a negligible impact on my well-being that they hardly register after decades of honing. For some reason, conducting multiple disciplines never gets easier.

When I first began merging elements, it started with just Water. Despite it being unknown if Water is a subset of Summer or Winter, it is said to be compatible with both for spellcasting, and I have always been able to work with it. Molding Water with my fire of Summer is tiring, but in the way a good fuck is tiring. It leaves me feeling exhilarated and content to bask in an afterglow of the power. Combining with an element under another Seasonale, though? That is exhausting in the way a battle is exhausting. My body forces against it, rejecting the invader for what it is. I have never been able to contain any lesser magic but Light, Fire, and Water for more than a few seconds before it bursts from me, so I must set my intentions and target fairly swiftly.

Nimh pushes a dish with rich cheeses and nuts in front of me. “Eat,” she says, comfort and care in her tone. “You look like you’re going to keel over. We can’t have that - you won’t see the outcome of your hard work!”

“Our hard work,” I correct, popping a few nuts into my mouth and crunching down loudly. My face slips into a small, appreciative smile.

How in the world could she ever sleep with Mace? Nimh is a slow, babbling brook that caresses your toes as you cross. In comparison, Mace is a crashing tidal wave, destroying all in his path. I look to find him sitting with his feet crossed on the table, leaning back as if he doesn’t have a care in the world. It takes everything I have not to get up to kick his chair out from under him.

Nimh and I fix our gaze on the connection, where the storm has intensified and is now in full swing. A lightning bolt strikes a tree near an older man, causing it to split, engulfed in flames. Startled, he slips on the wet ground and lands with his leg bent at an unnatural angle.

The connection swiftly shifts away from him and lands on Mistflow and Mousy, seeking shelter under an outcropping of rocks newly constructed by my Geomancer friends. Mistflow’s braided hair is coming undone, strands plastered to the side of her face. Fresh cuts mark her arms, and I wonder what dangers she has already faced. I can’t help but feel a twinge of guilt seeing the injuries she’s already sustained. Mousy wears a

grim expression, staring out from their makeshift shelter into the darkening sky.

Just as I anticipate the connection to switch to another gripping moment involving different Racers, my attention is captured by a looming figure emerging slowly from the depths of the outcropping, unbeknownst to the two women.

Chapter 10

Viola

I hear him well before I see him. His hot breath seems to fill the small cave we managed to find before the storm got too brutal. It looks like we were not the first to find it. I try to get Max's attention without letting the man know we're onto him, but she's still staring at the sky and angrily cursing the delay. I slowly reach for the blade at my hip, hand inches from the handle, when I feel a warm breath caress my ear.

"I wouldn't do that, Viola."

One of his arms wraps around my shoulders, pinning me against his chest. The amount of his body that has contact with mine makes me cringe. I feel each rise and fall of his chest intimately.

The voice is familiar, and I feel dread drift down my spine. His hand tightens around my chest, and his nose drags up the side of my neck as a familiar sensation trickles down my spine.

“Amio?” I spit, attempting to turn around to confirm my suspicion. His grip tightens further, and the closeness flashes me back briefly to the feel of his naked body on mine.

Max spins around, finally, and sees us. “What the fuck?” she shouts.

“What the fuck indeed,” Amio spits, pushing the tip of a blade into the base of my spine. “Didn’t Viola mention me? I’m devastated,” he deadpans. Max shoots me a look like I kept something from her.

I tense against the pressure of his blade, and though I try to fight it, my mouth will not keep quiet. “I am not in the habit of sharing every lousy lay with her.”

He pushes the blade, and I feel it cut my shirt and break the top layer of skin, a small bead of blood running down my spine into the top of my pants. “Big talk for someone who was panting my name,” he hisses in my ear. A manic laugh leaves my throat, much to the shock of Max. She must think I’ve lost my mind. Really, I just cannot believe that it’s less than half a day into the Race, and I’ve already got a knife to my back.

“Listen, Amio, we do not want to fight you. There is room in Ytopie for all of us. There is no need for this to get ugly,” Max says, palms turned toward the man as she slowly walks forward.

“It already got ugly. It got ugly when her parents left mine dead during the Race.”

My mind lights up with a memory from nearly twenty years ago, long forgotten now. A gangly, black-haired teenager, sobbing on his knees by the base of the Summit. My mother turned me away, telling me to let those whose family was expendable grieve in peace. I questioned how someone so young could have parents already expendable, and my father said, "There are many ways to become expendable, Viola." The statement confused me at the time, but the situation I have find myself in brings forth startling clarity.

Did my parents kill Amio's? Is that what this is about?

"I came to Dalery looking for your parents, and how lucky was I to fall right into your bed? It won't be as satisfying as killing them, but you'll do." The arm around my shoulder slacks as he pulls the knife from the base of my spine to my neck.

My mother did not skimp on teaching me how to evade a hold, so while Amio glares at Max's approaching figure, I slip from his grasp, drawing my dagger and pointing it directly at his heart.

"You may think you have me at your mercy, but you have no idea what I'm capable of." I glower at him, teeth bared despite the rapid rise and fall of my panting chest.

"If you're anything like your parents, you're capable of murder," he spits at me.

I balk, my arm dropping slightly as I shake my head. "My parents were not murderers. They Raced, and they won, fair and square."

His laugh filled the cave, but it was joyless and dark. “My parents were not expendable. Their deaths were not accidents.”

The idea that my parents, who were single focused on winning the Race, were capable of murder doesn't sound as preposterous as I want to believe it is. Still, my love for them and my pride will not allow me to believe a word of venom he spits at me.

“It wasn't just my parents, either, Viola,” he whispers, his voice low and sinister. “They left a trail of broken families and shattered lives every year when they Raced.”

“That's impossible,” my voice rings out defiantly. A chilling breeze, wholly out of place amid a summer storm, sweeps through us. Max silently slides beside me, her dagger in one hand and the other pressed against my lower back, where moments before Amio's blade rested.

My parents raised me to prioritize the Race over all else. I was told stories of those who were expendable because they trusted the wrong people, showing me I could care for no one. While I feel for Amio, ultimately, I knew my parents did what they had to do to return to me and eventually win the Race. Anyone would make the choices they made, and I do not begrudge them for it.

Still, Amio was young when I saw him crying by the Summit. Being orphaned at that age would harden anyone. “I understand that's your perspective, but everyone knows the

Race is the Race, and we do what we can to survive. Anyone would've done the same."

He scoffs at me, looking like I said something entirely foreign to him. "No, they wouldn't! There are plenty of elderly who CHOOSE to be expendable year after year. Invalids who tire of a painful life would gladly lay down themselves as well. There is never a need to murder someone to save yourself." He stalks towards me, his blade dangerously sharp and glinting in the low light. He meets the tip of my dagger with his own and snarls, "So that means what I'm about to do to you is wholly for me."

I roll my eyes at him, feigning indifference. "Oh, okay, you took me to bed to gain my trust and kill me? Why not just kill me after we fucked?" Max's fingers on my back tighten at my vulgarity.

His laugh is rueful as he says, "What's the fun in that? I like a little more chase, and you just made it way too easy."

Max, ever the peacemaker, attempts to get between us to diffuse the situation. "Get the fuck back," Amio spits. He rears his knife back and brings the butt swiftly down on her temple. She falls, a red welt forming from the impact.

As she moves to stand, I put out my hand. "Stay down, get in the corner. This is between us, Max." I sense the trepidation in her, but she does as I say and moves away from the two of us, standing face-to-face, our short blades trained on one another.

"What you don't understand, Viola, is that nothing at this point can dissuade me. I tried to ignore this anger that grows

within me like a weed, but seeing you at the market brought back all the memories of my loss. I can't let you live when my parents didn't." His voice cracks, betraying his genuine fear of the situation he's gotten into.

Distracted by the emotion in his voice, I momentarily let my guard down, and he lunges towards me, slicing upwards toward my throat. I nimbly duck back but take a small nick on my cheek. Despite the hit I took, I managed to sidestep his advancement and slash at his upper arm in the same instance. Blood pours from the wound, and his expression shifts from conflicted emotion to pure rage.

He moves to kick my legs out from under me, and I slip and fall in the blood he left on the grotto floor. The smell of it awakens my senses, and I relish the feeling it gives me.

From my vulnerable position on the floor, memories of past injustices, of men who thought they could take what they wanted from me, threaten to float to the surface. After my parents abandoned me on the Summit, I had to fight tooth and nail to finish the Race on my own. And I've done it every year since. I've made mistakes in who to trust and who to ignore, which cost me dearly.

Maybe not my life, but it broke parts of my mind.

Unfortunately for Amio, that broken part of me is the guiding force today.

I jump to my feet, motivated by the cool breath of the storm that swirls around us. Another lightning strike illuminates the darkness that lives deep within Amio's eyes. What once was

attractive and alluring to me has become clouded with sickness and devastatingly empty. My gaze locks with his, and I tighten my grip around the blade, cool and calming in my hand. The feel of the leather, hand wrapped by my father around the hilt, and the sheen of metal of the tip ground me as the realization of my situation weighs heavily in front of me. It is like a specter I can almost touch. That specter seems to whisper a grim truth that echoes through the cavern walls and my mind.

Only one of us would be leaving here alive.

Despite our size difference, we parry back and forth for what seems like ages, a surprisingly equal match of strength and dexterity. While he gets in a few good blows in the form of punches and cuts, I give as much as I get.

The storm outside mirrors the tempest brewing within us, a perfect backdrop to the impending clash of our conflicting destinies. Amio snarls at me, “You’re just like your parents. I bet blood stains your hands, too.”

The weight of my parent’s choices and their legacy presses on my shoulders, a burden I can no longer ignore. My breath hitches like something deep in my mind is trying to stop what I’m going to say next. “I won’t let the sins of the past define me. I prefer the sins of today.”

The weight of others’ choices can guide you, but the weight of your own defines you.

The darkness threatens to engulf us both, and it’s high time I embrace it.

I lunge, slicing through the air with trained precision, but Amio parries me well, his movements a desperate dance of survival and retribution. We circle one another, the fight intimately close with the length of our respective weapons.

He manages to slice my thigh, leaving a gap in my leather shorts. I wince at the blood flowing but shake the burn off quickly. I want to slap the look of triumph right off Amio's beautiful face. He moves towards me, setting up a killing blow, his hand gripping the back of my hair. The world around me seems to slow as he raises his blade to the freckled tawny skin of my throat. Before he can make contact, I stab with my off hand, my blade making contact and sliding effortlessly into the flesh between two ribs.

I make a mental note to thank Max for the whetstone again.

I slide the blade from his flesh, blood spattering on my face, and Amio drops my hair and stumbles to his knees, clutching his side. His blood pools beneath his feet, glistening in the low light. The stories this bloodstain will tell when we are long gone from here call to me. I long to know them. I see the anger he felt, the desperation to avenge his parents in those stains. I watch the blood drip from his wound, his fingers slipping as he attempts to staunch it. My eyes linger on the slick of his blood on my knife before wiping it off on my shorts. It mingles with mine, and the revulsion I feel for sleeping with him bubbles to the surface. He meets my gaze with a vulnerable defiance, knowing he lacks the strength to continue but unable to admit it.

“Just leave me here to die, Viola. You won.” He winces and pulls his hand away from the wound. Max is at my side quickly, and her eyes narrow at the depth of the puncture.

“That looks really bad, Vi,” she says quietly. “We need to get out of here. Just leave him. It’s an act of mercy at this point.”

My goal was always to incapacitate, not to kill, but I know I will spend the rest of the Race, and potentially my life, looking over my shoulder for Amio because our paths are now entwined. My grip on my dagger wavers briefly as I consider the implication of that.

“He acted of grief, not of wisdom. It doesn’t have to be like this,” she murmurs softly, her hand reaching to clasp mine around my blade.

Panting, Amio grins painfully, hands still trying and failing to contain the blood that flows from his side. “Listen to your friend, Viola. Let me go. Show more kindness than your parents ever did.” The dig lands, and I step towards him, bending my knees to be eye to eye with my attacker.

“I spent my whole life training to Race,” I say, slowly twirling my blade between my fingers. “It was the most important thing to my parents - that I one day win. Other parents believed the most important thing they could do was to love their children wholly. When I was young, I was envious of that. But today? I am glad that I know the only thing that matters is winning this fucking Race.”

Max screams as I calmly slide my blade across Amio’s throat.



A silence hangs heavy between Max and me. She has not spoken to me in the hour since we left the hollow, Amio's lifeless body sprawled along the rock floor. I have tried to get her to talk to me, to yell at me, anything at all. But she is stoic, her gaze trained forward as we walk through the woods in the shadow of the setting sun.

I tried a few times to capture her attention, explain my motivations, and justify my actions. It fell on deaf ears. I don't know if Max will ever look at me the same way again.

I need to make her understand that this choice was for the best. Whether it was during the Race this year or next, Amio would have found me, and it would have ended the same way. I'm lucky he didn't gut me when we slept together. His fury at my parents must not have been more of a driving force than the desire to bed me.

Whether it happened here today or next year, one of us was going to kill the other. I just sped up the process a little. Couldn't she see that was what was best for everyone?

Max's body is tense from carrying the guilt for not stopping me. I stop walking and turn to face her. I extend my hand and press it against her chest so she has no choice but to stop moving. Frustration flashes across her face, and she gnaws anxiously on her lower lip, the edges of it already showing signs of abuse from the action. No matter how I turn my face to lock eyes with her, she won't meet my gaze.

“Max,” I say softly, gently, trying to get her to take a breath and remember who I am. “Max!” Louder this time, a small amount of frustration bubbling up in me from this indelible event that changed our friendship.

“What do you want from me, Vi?” she asks, her voice low, defeated. Her expressionless face is a mask of resignation and defeat as she slumps down to the earth and digs her fingers into the moist ground. “You murdered him.”

Murder.

Logically, I know that is what it was. But it doesn't feel that way, not to me. I have been raised in a world that does not value human life and condemns people to death because they cannot pass an arbitrary standard set by those who do not hold themselves to it. If my life isn't valued, why should I attribute value to anyone else's? Death is all around us, in the fabric of our society. I did what anyone else would do in that situation.

I drop my knee into the soil, training my gaze on Max. “It wasn't murder, Max. It was survival.”

She scoffs, shaking her head at me, and the look in her eyes weakens my resolve. “That wasn't survival. He wasn't going to win the Race. Hell, he would've been lucky just to finish after that type of injury. We could have left him in our dust and been on our merry way, and you slit his fucking throat.” She spits out those four words, and I flinch back. “How can I ever feel safe with you again?” she implores, eyes shiny with tears that are being willed not to fall. “I asked you to give him mercy, and you became a monster before my eyes.”

The words do not resonate with me the way they should have. Maybe some fundamental part of me is broken. “I know you asked for mercy on his behalf,” I begin, as soft and gentle as I can muster. “There is no mercy in the Race, Max. You’ve always known that.”

She’s on her feet now, angrily pacing in front of me. “Bullshit, Vi. That’s bullshit, and you know it.” Her anger erupts through the surface in a way that I am unsure I will be able to tame. I have never seen Max lit up like this before.

“You were faced with a choice, Viola. One your parents apparently were also faced with. You had the opportunity to be different than them, and you chose wrong.”

Locking eyes with my oldest, and arguably only, friend, the affection we’ve held for each other over the years floods my vision. I remember a young Max, defiant and strong-willed, much as she is today, but without the control. She was a hurricane and a sight to behold. I have always managed to calm that hurricane, but today feels like a more considerable challenge than before.

“I know you’re right, Max. I do. And maybe I’ll live to regret my choice. But all that matters to me is that I fulfill my promise to you that we will win the Race and live the life we have dreamed of.”

Max steps back, almost tripping over her feet to move away from me. “I watched you slit a man’s throat with no reaction,” she says, her voice quiet and hurt. The evidence of my crime is still with me, caked on my hands, clothes, and shoes. There

was more blood than I expected, and the scent of it filling the grotto made my head buzz. It was as if I could feel every mistake Amio had made until that point as the life drained from him.

“I did not recognize the woman that stood in front of me,” Max says, softer this time. “She was inhuman. Unfeeling and cold.”

I am steadfast in my belief that Max will come around and forgive me as she always does. In the meantime, I need to figure out a way to diffuse this situation so we can continue our journey. We cannot afford to lose more time if we hope to win. I step towards her, putting my hands on either side of her face and pressing my forehead to hers. I inhale her scent, which is usually sweet and sharp but is now mixed with wet dirt, sweat, and blood.

“I’m sorry, okay? I know you wanted and expected better of me, and I am sorry I couldn’t be that for you. I’ll keep trying. Instinct overrode my rational mind, I guess.” I don’t believe my own words, but I know she needs to hear them.

I do not regret what I did. It was necessary; it was just. He attacked me first, and I could not let him get away with that. But my friendship with Max hinges on her believing that I do regret my actions.

Fat, brutal tears fall down her face, making paths in the layer of dirt that has collected throughout our journey. Slowly, she nods and finally makes eye contact with me again. “I know your parents fucked you up, and I have always loved you

despite it. Please, for me, try to keep yourself grounded in your humanity.”

Chapter 11

Zeph

The din of the tavern, loud and raucous, surrounds me as I head towards a table in the back of my regular haunt. With a name like The Harsh Butcher, you'd think this place was full of mercenaries and the dregs of society, but that is surprisingly not the case. All manner of fae clamor about, loudly discussing the only topic anyone can think about today - the Race. They're shoved between tables crowded with wooden chairs, perched on barstools around the marble slab bartop, and some even sit on the stage that hosts live music when the Race isn't on. A few shimmering fields of connections show different views of the participants within the terrain of the Summit. Those not engrossed in the events before them loudly discuss them with other patrons.

The scent of roasted meat from the kitchen fills the air, reminding me of how very little I've consumed today. I should eat, of course, but I have a bit more of a liquid diet in mind for this evening. The floor sticks to my boots with every step,

remnants of the sloshed ale from drunken arguments coming with me.

A drunkard stumbles into me as if on cue, and I jump back, narrowly avoiding taking an early bath of mead. He looks as if he's about to yell angrily, but his eyes widen when they lock on me. "I'm so sorry, Zeph..." he begins, taking several steps backward.

I clap his shoulder, laughing, "No problem at all, friend. Everyone is getting a little merry tonight!"

I curve around the man and slip away from the conversation, nodding in acknowledgment of Bracken, the Geomancer behind the bar. He gives me a quick nod, a silent acceptance of the order of my regular, and I finally spy Plume at our standard table, sitting across from Loris the Bliksem. Plume and Loris are the only people in the world I would be willing to talk to after a day like I've had today. We grew up together, learning to handle our powers as young fae. Loris always seemed to be a step or two ahead of Plume and me, but he needed more discipline if he wanted to rise through the leadership ranks.

He seems to be okay with where he's ended up, though.

I slide onto the bench next to Plume, and my mouth waters with the need for something stronger than the mead that almost decorated my shirt. Plume slides a glass of clear liquor in front of me, and I pick it up and toss it back at once. A headache blooms in my temples; rubbing them does nothing to staunch it.

The denizens of the Harsh Butcher are shouting about the Race, placing bets on competitors, and discussing their highlights of the day. I hear squabbles breaking out, neighbors in impassioned arguments about their favorites to win. However, one event leads the charge as the one on the most lips.

“I cannot believe she just slit his throat,” Plume says, clearly in the middle of a conversation with Loris before I arrived.

Loris shakes his head and laughs a little. “I know, right? And he was on his knees. Just fucking ruthless.” Miss Mistflow certainly made an impression on the citizens of Ytopie today.

When we saw it happen on the connection, the air was sucked out of the room. We all fell silent, watching the young man die in real-time. It was eerie how calm and quiet Mistflow was, watching his blood flow from the smile she carved on his neck. Mousy screamed and cried in the corner of the hollow outcropping. It was unlike anything I’ve experienced in my time with the Race.

There have been murders every year, but this one felt different to all of us. When the altercation began, Cirrha had the Tempests increase their spell so the sound would travel through the air to the connections easier, and we all drank up the argument. We heard the story the man wove about Mistflow’s parents, about the grief he had endured and his desire for vengeance, his trauma reduced to entertainment for a spoiled society.

The claim her parents murdered his was almost as shocking to me as the fact that Mistflow took the man to her bed before the Race.

All of Ytopie heard the man called Amio surrender, Mousy pleading for mercy for him. Mistflow, Viola, Vi, whatever she was called, had the severe upper hand in the situation. And still, she was relentless.

The connection followed the pair for a measure longer than it typically spends on one competitor. We watched as she tried to justify what she had done, eventually manipulating Mousy into forgiving her and continuing on.

Maybe it wasn't manipulation and was genuine remorse. It's hard to be certain of someone like Mistflow. She's showing that she'd do anything in her power to win.

If she only knew what we did to the winners.

The sadness on her face while comforting Mousy was evident, as was her affection for her companion. All of it churned my stomach in a multitude of ways I could not explain. Mace was the first to speak after it happened, his voice still reverberating in my brain. "Well, well, Miss Mistflow. How very fae of you..." It was quiet and said under his breath, but I knew that tone - admiration. It seems Viola Mistflow has a fan.

What type of woman is she if the likes of Mace is drawn to her?

“I recognized her,” I say, lifting the glass of liquor that Bracken had silently slid in front of me. I cannot shake the brutally beautiful woman with blood on her hands from my brain, no matter how hard I try.

“You did?” Plume questions, turning her head towards me.

I attempt to gather my thoughts, chasing away the nagging feeling that Viola Mistflow churns in my gut. I sip from my cup, slower this time, letting the burn of the alcohol cleanse me. “She’s the one whose parents left while she was sleeping a decade ago.”

Loris bobs his thin head in a semblance of a nod. I have always thought he was a strange-looking fae with his pointed chin and nose. He reminds me of a bird, with his thin legs and arms looking brittle and delicate. He stretches at least a head taller than most fae, including myself, and I often wonder how he stays upright. After getting to know him, though, I’ve learned that Loris is as ruthless as anyone I’ve ever met. He is just more subtle about it.

“I think you’re right. Her hair is longer, and she’s a bit older and stronger, but now I see it. It makes sense, too. If her parents were that merciless, imagine how she was raised.” He shakes his head as if there is a thought that he can’t quite place.

I wrack my brain, trying to remember that year of the Race.

We watched on as a man and a woman climbed out of their cave in the early morning hours and continued up the mountain, where they were very close to reaching the arena.

Not long after they had gone, their trail washed away by light rain, a young woman stumbled out of the cave. I watched as her head whipped about, looking for her loved ones. And all of Ytopie watched as she sank to her knees and quietly cried into her hands. She allowed herself five minutes of grief, gathered her things, and was on her way up the mountain.

It is unusual for parents to leave their child in the Race. The love for a child should rise above all else. It's unfortunate for Viola that wasn't the case for her.

It was a hot topic of conversation that year throughout Ytopie, especially since her parents finished at the top of the Race. They were mobbed at the champion's gala, and questions on how they could leave their daughter were all anyone wanted to talk about. The father was quiet, reserved, and barely spoke. The mother, though, loudly said to anyone that they had done their job raising her well, and it was up to her now. All the winners of the Race get sent to a "winner's village" on the other side of the Summit after the gala, and none were sad to see the couple go. Once in the village, the fae know that humans can never return to the city of Ytopie but are well cared for in their new homes.

At least, that's the narrative that's pushed by Mace. I'm not sure how they would react if they knew what actually happens to the winners.

When Mistflow picked herself up and continued, I admired her strength to keep going. It's one of the reasons the squabble she had with Amio has not sat right with me in many ways.

I've never seen anything like the mask of cold that swept over her face. She was like a completely different person, possessed and charged when she spilled his blood for the first time.

I knew it would be an ugly fight the moment he pressed his body against hers, but I did not foresee the events that would unfold once she stabbed her blade into his side. Maybe the sight of the blood spilling woke up a base survival instinct in her, or perhaps she is just rapidly descending into madness.

Regardless, something woke up in that cave today.



All but empty, the Harsh Butcher is shutting down for the evening. The connection is cycling between groups of sleeping Racers and those who are attempting to gain ground during the night. Unfortunately for them, some of the more talented members of the Spring Seasonale, Plume included, have decided to stir the beasts living within the Summit. Most expected to see a drastic reduction in Racer's come morning, having become a meal during the twilight hours, but I had shielded some comfortable resting spots in hopes of saving a few. But still, none of it made for particularly exciting viewing. The human element lurking in the shadows is always much more entertaining.

Plume had long since left Loris and me sitting at our table to go into the command center and watch the fruits of her labor unfold. While the opportunity was there as the women of Ytopie searched for a bedmate, I am not in the position to take

someone home tonight. Viola Mistflow grudgingly occupies my thoughts, weaving her way into my mind despite my attempts to focus on the Race. She excites and unsettles me. She's attractive, though not the type that turns heads on the street. She possesses a quiet beauty hidden behind a mask of cold. I can't help but wonder what drives her.

I want to crack open that brain of hers and see the thoughts chasing one another.

Maybe it's time for me to be done drinking.

My friend is gazing at me over the top of his ale, his brow furrowed in contemplation. "Loris, why are you looking at me like that?" I feel a touch paranoid about the direction of my thoughts. I wonder if he can hear the strange feelings Mistflow has conjured in me.

"I'm just wondering what you have planned, is all."

"Planned?" I say, knotting my brow in confusion.

"Yeah, for putting an end to the Race."

My eyes widen and dart around the room to see who could possibly be listening in. Apart from the bartender, Bracken, who is carrying barrels of drink in from a storeroom, the only other person here is a ruddy-faced drunk who passed out on his stool. Still, one can never be too careful when discussing treason. I stand and motion for Loris to follow me out the door.

We step out into the balmy summer evening, the air thick on our skin as if it had been painted on. A smattering of stars

pepper the sky with a soft silver sheen, and the orange glow of the moon lights our paths. I begin walking down the path towards the Palace of Patricians. Loris only has to take one step for every two of mine and catches up with me quickly.

I shoot him a sidelong glance and lower my voice, “What have you heard?”

His face splits with a rakish grin, and he bumps his shoulder into mine. “Nothing, seriously, but I know you, Zeph. I’ve known you for a long time now, and you would not have joined the Patricians to just let this continue the way it does. Plus, you’re so damn jittery.”

The weight of the secret lifting off my shoulders makes me feel as if I’ve gained some height, but it’s still not enough for me to look eye to eye with Loris - he’d always tower over me.

“You’re right, but please, this is between us, obviously. If Mace hears...”

“I know, I know. If Mace hears all of Ytopie is going to feel his wrath. He’s majorly attached to this Race.” Loris shoves his hands in his pockets as he looks up at the sky. “I just wonder why.”

I shrug, looking up at the Palace as it comes into view. It’s a beautiful building with its stone columns and colored glass windows, and I’m glad my home has a view of it, but its beauty is all but shattered once you know what goes on inside it. “I’ve always thought Mace was very particular about the way things had to unravel in the Race. For the longest time, I could wave it away as his need for control and power

overriding his good sense. But now I think it's something more."

Loris makes the turn towards my home in the tower before I even invite him over. At this point, invitations are a formality. Frequently, I'll come home to Loris stretched out at my table, his spiked boots resting on top of it as he eats my food or drinks my drink. I've never minded much - he's become more family than a friend over the past few years, and the affection I feel for this Bliksem is one of my fondest relationships.

He doesn't say much as we climb the steps and enter my home. I cast fire into my lights, bringing a rosy glow to the cozy room. He snorts. "I'll never understand why you won't use the grid."

The grid is powered by Bliksem day in and day out, the storm magic running through it enough to keep most homes in relative comfort.

"I told you, it has a sound, Loris! And I don't want to see the spell particles."

His laugh is a burst that reminds me of a bird call. "The grid does not have noise, and you could only see the particles if you focused on them."

I unbutton my overshirt and hang it on a hook by the door. A round sitting room filled with overstuffed furniture that hardly ever gets sat on is all that stands between us and the balcony where we spend most of our time. With all the Seasonale here, we can keep the weather mild and precisely as we need it year-

round - why wouldn't we take advantage of that and enjoy the evening outside?

Loris takes a detour to the kitchen, snags a bottle of amber liquor, and then joins me outside, taking a deep swig directly from the bottle. "I've wanted to step in and stop the Race for a while. There are plenty of resources - we live in luxury here. With the combination of powers held by the Seasonale and their lesser magics, we can have a thriving society where humans and fae can live in harmony. I cannot fathom any reason for the Gods to insist that it continue except to control the masses and maintain their addicting power dynamic."

I nod encouragingly at this, relief that he feels exactly as I do spreading through my body and loosening me enough to allow me to slip into a seat at the outdoor table.

"So many here are happy to allow it to continue, just for the entertainment factor," I say, motioning for him to join me at the table.

He doesn't, keeping his back to me and looking out at the Lowlands and the Summit, where untold numbers of Racers fight for the right to live as we do every day. "I just don't understand why the Gods haven't stepped in and said enough, Zeph. They cannot possibly need sacrifices and recharging like we tell the humans. Our power is directly from the Gods, and we don't need that."

It is killing me not to tell him what I know - that the Gods are gone, and signs are pointing to magic waning. If word got out, it would be pandemonium, the very fabric of our society

falling to tatters. The alcohol has my head fuzzy and my inhibitions lowered, so I can't help myself when the words tumble out. "About the Gods..."

Loris sighs deeply before turning back to face me, running his fingers through his hair. When he does that, it sticks up at odd angles, giving the impression of electricity running through the tips. His dark eyes glower at me, and I feel the power radiating from him. "What about the Gods, Zeph?"

I grimace, losing my nerve to tell him the truth. My mouth feels full of sand when I swallow and say, "I don't think the Gods really care about our affairs anymore. I doubt they even care about the Race."

"So, what are you going to do about it, Zeph?"

I motion for the bottle, and he hands it to me, but not before taking a huge gulp of his own. I upturn it into my mouth, the harsh burn lighting a fire down me. "I'm going to burn it to the fucking ground, Loris."

Chapter 12

Viola

We have been walking for what feels like ages, though by the position of the moon in the sky, it cannot have been more than three hours. By my estimation, we are roughly sixteen hours into the Race, and those hours have been more eventful than I had ever imagined. In past years, we maybe would have stumbled across a creature to evade or a physical barricade of overgrowth to fight through. Apparently that was too easy because this year, we've graduated to murder.

I still struggle to accept that what I did to Amio was murder, but when I remove myself from the situation and look at it from a bird's eye view, the truth of it is very apparent.

While Max and I were targeting just a little under eight days to complete the Race, it could continue for up to fourteen. Many competitors take a leisurely trek, confident the invalids will be the only ones marked as expendable. We have not encountered anyone else on our journey thus far, so my hopes are not thoroughly trashed that we can win.

What started so simple - run the Race with Max, get into Ytopie, see my parents again, live a happy life there for the rest of our days – has morphed into something I feel like I can barely contain.

I am beginning to question what my true desires are. Do I want to make it to Ytopie? Why is it so important that I do? Of course, my parents told me my whole life that it was all that mattered, but I can only blame my choices on my parents for so long.

Ultimately, my journey is my own, and the Gods will rain their judgment on me alone.

I try to push the recent deception of Jaz, manipulation of Max, and murder of Amio to the back of my mind, longing to compartmentalize the decisions I've made that have led me here.

I'll have plenty of time to process my mistakes and faults when I'm safely in Ytopie.

I look back at Max and see her struggling to keep the pace. It's getting late, and while we have stopped to get some water and eat a handful of wild berries, we really need some rest after this day.

The star-flecked sky above us is stunning, incongruent with the horrors of the day. Warm air swirls around us, beading sticky sweat at my hairline. Maybe stopping isn't such a bad idea.

I reach back for Max and pull her abreast of me. As the night gets darker, I am not comfortable with her lagging behind, easily picked off by whatever manner of creature lurks in the shadows. As children, she protected me. But since I have joined her in the Race, I am the one who seeks to protect her.

The slump of her body against me and the pace of her breath tell me Max will not make it much farther before she collapses on the spot. Though I could continue if needed, I scan my eyes over the terrain in hopes of finding a suitable place to rest for the evening.

My eyes land on a small, clear spring, feeding into an enclosed alcove of plush grass that looks designed to provide comfort and safety. There is only one entrance into it, the other sides covered by thick rocks or trees, so it is an easy area to defend should the worst come - but I cannot imagine what would be much worse than Amio at this point. It's odd that twice today, comfortable and safe shelter has made itself available for us when we need it most.

But who am I to question if I am carrying the luck of the Gods with me? Maybe they've finally decided to extend their favor to someone other than the fae.

I drag Max into the alcove, thrilled with my discovery. "Let's get some rest now."

"Thanks, Vi, I didn't want to say it, but..."

"I know. You need rest, it's fine. Let's get set up." We drag logs over into the clearing to rest our backs against. Lounging back, we open our packs to pull out whatever we can for a

makeshift dinner. We both produce our canteens, and Max takes mine with her to the stream to fill it up. I pull out the package of dried meats and one of my tinctures for pain reduction.

My father taught me how to forage for medicinal herbs, and a local woman used to have me study under her to create tinctures and salves. It was one of the only times my mother let me do something that wasn't directly connected with the Race.

Luckily, my medicines are some of the best in the region because this gash in my thigh hurts something fierce.

When Max hands me my canteen, I pour some water onto a strip of cloth and use it to clean all the cuts I sustained during my fight in the cave. I wince at the feeling of the cold water on the tender flesh, and I do not relish the sharp feel of the rough cloth against it. Infection can be a bitch, though, so I must clean and wrap the wounds. I place a few drops of the pain-relieving tincture on my tongue, wincing at the bitter taste. Once I feel sufficiently healed up, I look to find Max staring at me, mouth agape.

“What?” I say, my eyebrow raised.

She purses her lips. “Dried meat? Where'd that come from?”

“I traded a handful of eggs for some, thought we could use it.” I really need to get this lying to Max under control. I know everything I am doing is best for us, and when we get to Ytopie, she will surely see it that way. But the journey there may destroy her opinion of me for good.

She lowers herself onto the soft ground and grabs a piece of the meat, chewing it slowly as she looks at me. “You know what, Viola? I’m done asking. I feel like I don’t even know who you are anymore.”

My shoulders slump dejectedly, and I know she has me figured out, so I choose to say nothing. Instead, I stretch out and rest my hands behind my head, looking up at the bright moon that casts an orange tone throughout the land. Once she finishes chewing the meat and drinking her fill from her canteen, she surprises me by stretching out next to me, eyes turned up towards the stars.

We lay there in comfortable silence despite the traumas of the day. My mind drifts back to past Races. Some years, Max and I fought against the elements; other years, we fought large, aggressive creatures. This year, it would seem our most significant threat is other humans.

Other humans, and me.

I reach over to stroke Max’s hair from her eyes as she begins to drift to sleep, but my hand stops in midair, an involuntary response to the crashing sound of someone falling through the trees around our clearing. We both sit up swiftly to see a young girl, clearly in her Ascension year, with wild, terrified eyes and pieces of the forest in her hair. Her pants, previously what looks to have been an off-white color, are now brown with mud and have cuts and slashes in the legs. Her pack looks mostly empty, and scratches cover both of her bare arms. She

looks at us, and her shoulders droop, relief sweeping through her body.

“Hi, hi, wow, I am really glad I found someone. I... I’m on my own in here, and I have no idea what I’m doing or where I’m going, and I just...” She starts to cry, fat tears sliding down her chin and pooling in her shirt collar.

Max is on her feet quickly, wrapping an arm around the girl and bringing her over to the logs to sit down and rest. “Honey, what’s going on?” She coos, her voice a study in gentleness and maternal comfort.

The girl snuffles and rubs the back of her dirty hand across her nose. “My brother and I, it’s our Ascension year, we’re twins, yeah? And we were doing this together. He’s always been a planner, Twig has, oh Twig, that’s my brother’s name, and well, he’s the planner... I said that, right?”

She is disjointed, distraught, and making hardly a lick of sense. Still, Max nods reassuringly and hands the strange girl one of our canteens. She takes a greedy pull from it and then hands it back, pulling her shirt up to wipe her mouth with the inside of her dirty collar. “I’m Tulip, by the way.”

I feel myself losing patience with this interloper and trusting her less by the minute. Rationally, I know this is not fair to the girl, but after the encounter with Amio, my body is humming and on edge. “Get on with it, then.” Max shoots me an icy glare that makes me wither a bit, and I cough, adjusting my voice as I say, “I just mean, tell us what happened, Tulip.”

She nods, her eyes fogging with tears as she speaks. “We were doing okay, really. Our parents are dead, so it’s just us, you know? And the thunderstorm came, and we thought, what’s the harm? It’s just a little thunderstorm, yeah? So, we kept going. Twig said there was a path we could take over some hills that would cut us up right to the side of Gallant and help us get there that much faster. And we were doing fine, really. Until we were on one of the hills - and why is it called a hill, by the way? It feels like it’s just a pile of rocks, and shouldn’t a hill be green? I just think that if it’s a hill, it should be soft, with grasses and flowers and...”

Max rubs her hand between Tulip’s shoulder blades. “I think you’re a bit hysterical, dear. Take a deep breath and tell us what happened.”

With a shuddering inhale, Tulip continues. “We were on the hill, and lightning struck right in front of us. It sent debris flying, and we slipped, sliding down the side of it. I managed to stop myself from going too far, catching myself on some rocks that were jutting out, but Twig didn’t. He just couldn’t get a good handhold. So, I watched him slide, his body getting beat black and blue, ya know? But I thought he’d be fine. He was, really. But when he stood, he was face to face with a seps.”

My jaw goes slack. I knew there were dangerous creatures here in the Summit, I’d fought my fair share of them, but a seps? Max’s face was a mask of confusion. “What’s a seps?” she says, looking at me.

Of all the books my parents had to prepare me for entering Gallant Summit, “Creatures of Krillium” gave me the most nightmares. “A seps is a type of serpent. It’s not very large, but it’s quite aggressive, it’s known for...”

“Liquifying its victims with its poison, yep.” Tulip finishes solemnly. It hits me that she must have seen that happen to her brother. The way seps consume their prey is brutal to think about, much less see.

One bite from a seps and its venom courses through its victims’ veins. It completely liquifies bones and muscles, allowing the serpent to easily consume the entirety of its victim without so much as a chew. I suppress an involuntary shudder.

My eyes rake across the young woman’s slight figure, from her shaking shoulders to the way she twists her fingers within each other. The image of her brother being consumed by a seps will live with her for the rest of her life, and that thought shoots a pang of grief into my chest for Tulip.

Max’s eyes widen, and she places a hand between Tulip’s shoulder blades, rubbing smooth circles. “I am so sorry to hear that, Tulip. That’s just awful.”

Tulip nods, sniffing back some of her snot and tears in an attempt to regain a modicum of composure. “Yeah, it was a nightmare. But I can’t just give up, you know? I had to keep going. So, I did. And I got all kind of turned around trying to get back going, and I think I’ve been going in circles, so

seeing you two here is just the best thing I could have hoped for. I am so relieved it's two women and not..."

I shudder, knowing exactly what could have happened to her if it wasn't us she stumbled upon.

Still, my hackles are raised because I know what is about to be asked of me. I cannot let Tulip join Max and me. For one, it's always been just us - that's the plan. Secondly, Tulip is, without a doubt, going to slow us down. Even though something within me recoils at the thought of leaving this girl alone, some things must be done in the name of self-preservation.

I look at Max with wide eyes, and she jerks her head to the side of the clearing. "Tulip dear, give us a moment," she says while standing. I follow her slowly, and Max speaks first as we reach an area just out of earshot.

"We're going to let her stay with us tonight. Let her rest, share some of that meat you obviously stole from Jaz, get her some water, and then we'll go our separate ways in the morning."

"Absolutely not, Max. We cannot trust her. This could be some elaborate ruse. I say we kick her out, threaten her so she does not return." My words, while firm, taste like lies on my tongue. My instincts battle my rational mind, but my instincts haven't been wrong yet.

Max's eyes narrow, and she grits her teeth. There is a fire in them that could rival the sun, and I steel myself in preparation for what she is bound to decree. "You want to show me that

business with Amio isn't who you really are? I know there is good in you, and you're in survival mode right now, so I'm going to give you a pass for not immediately jumping at the opportunity to help someone who was left to fend for herself. Considering what happened to you, I would think you'd have more sympathy for her situation."

That low blow from Max has the desired effect. When I woke up to find my parents gone all those years ago, I allowed myself a moment to mourn the loss of the relationship I thought I had with them, and I gathered my things and continued, more aware than ever of the dangers that lurk within the Summit. I'm sure had I stumbled across someone as Tulip had, I would've asked for help. My resolve weakens, and I nod.

"You're right, as always, Max," I say, casting my eyes down in the appearance of shame. I turn and head back to where Tulip waits for us, gnawing absentmindedly on a piece of the dried meat that was still out. I grit my teeth at her intrusion on our supplies but push past it. "Hey, Tulip," I began.

"Oh, sorry, I helped myself, I'm so sorry, I haven't eaten since last night, and it was..."

I hold up a hand to stop her. "It's no problem, really. We'd like to have you rest up with us for a bit, and we'll get you on your way at first light." Her face lights up, and I can see, beneath the dirt and tears, that she is quite cute with her straw-colored hair and wide mouth.

"You mean it? Oh, that's wonderful, thank you."

Max beams at me, nodding enthusiastically. “Sure thing, honey. Go ahead and drink up from that canteen there and get comfortable. Viola here will take the first watch. I’m Max, by the way.” Tulip shakes Max’s hand and scoots into the grass to get comfortable. Max stretches out as well, and very quickly, they both drift off to sleep.

Chapter 13

Viola

I should have given up my watch long ago, but I do not feel tired enough to justify waking Max, and I do not trust Tulip to oversee while I sleep. I busy myself digging through my pack, searching for the stone talisman my father had given me. The conversation with Max and Tulip's arrival has triggered some less-than-spectacular memories of my parents, so I need some comfort.

My fingers brush across the Witch's Ladder, and I feel it buzz like it comes alive at my stroke. I glance around, double-checking to ensure my companions are still sleeping and see the shadows stretching long as the moon journeys across the sky. The hum of power radiating from the Witch's Ladder crawls up my arms, a chill encasing me despite the thickness of the summer air.

I stretch it out on the dirt in front of me, fingers tracing over the knots and feathers stretching its length. Each feather is a different color, and I cannot help but wonder what each spell

within them contains. I wrack my brain back to the book on Seasonale my father had, trying to remember some of the Winter powers that could be included in these feathers.

Some of the powers Winter Seasonale possessed were more obvious, like ice and snow manipulation, most likely contained in the bright blue feather. I suspect the solid black one contains the magic of shadow shifting. There could be some use to those, but I cannot think of a situation immediately. I do remember reading about some of the more rare and heavily regulated forms of Winter – curses and blood magic.

Curses and their effects are well known and documented, but anyone with curse magic remained hidden away - it's hard to walk the streets when your very word can doom someone.

Hardly any literature exists in human libraries on blood magic. I've heard rumors that one drop of your blood could have your future told, your past exposed. If a single drop of blood could read the past and future of a person, imagine what they could do with a knife.

Much is still unknown about the Seasonale's magic and those of their lessers. It was in the nature of the fae to hold some of their powers to their chest. The God's powers were known, and the fae contained lesser versions of that power. But does a God reveal all their secrets?

Somehow, I sincerely doubt it.

The secrecy is especially true of Winter magic. Himureal, known as the Frostweaver, was notoriously private, and there

had not been a practitioner of Winter in centuries. Even the lesser magics under Winter disappeared without a trace. But if the history books are correct, all practitioners of Winter magic were highly secretive due to the dark nature of their power.

In addition to the blue and black feathers, I see a solid white one, small and delicate, a smokey gray that is inflexible and rigid, and a curved feather, the color of twilight, soft and as gentle as a breeze. My fingers linger on the final feather, and I cannot bring myself to remove my hand from its smooth surface. It isn't very long, the vane about the length of my finger, but its calamus was a sharp point of shining obsidian almost as long as my hand. The plumes were dark red, with veins of black creeping through them as if it were an infection. Something about the feather calls to me, and I drag my fingers down the shaft of it, relishing the downy feeling of the afterfeathers.

I'm immediately struck by an overwhelming urge to untie the feather and see what happens when I release whatever spell is contained within. The feeling is all-encompassing, singing directly into my soul, and my body is responding.

I flashback to the hollow rock outcropping, filled with Amio's blood and the dank, stale air that is left after a storm. My memory hitches, lingering on the moment I stood in the puddle of his deep crimson blood, and it lapped against my shoes. I knew I should feel unsettled, but instead, I felt a calmness steady me. I could feel in that moment the weight of Amio's animosity for me, the lengths he would have gone to

destroy me had I let him live. It bolstered my knowledge that I made the right call to end his life.

My fingers stroking up and down the shaft of the feather, I can almost hear the blood rushing in my ears and coursing in my veins. I shudder involuntarily and drop the feather, which quickly douses the heat within me. I pick it back up, and its siren song pulls me in once more.

Father's books detailed the risks of using magic and the toll it took on the spellcaster's bodies, and that's when they knew what they were casting. What could await me if I untie an unknown spell and release it into the world? There had to be a reason Jaz's family kept this Ladder all these years, and it could not be because the spells conjure a gentle snowstorm.

I have almost convinced myself to untie it just to see what magic it can provide me with. The rationalizations I go through could make my back hurt with the stretches I make. I tell myself that casting one when I am on my own is safer because I would be the only one affected. But that inkling in the back of my head, honed from years of looking over my shoulder, tells me I need to save this for a time when the dangers of the Race come for me.

When Max stirs awake, I swipe the Ladder behind my back, shielding it from her view. I cannot explain why, but I don't want Max to know I have this. Max has always distrusted the Seasonale, and it is not a misplaced distrust. They have never been anything but adversaries in all our lives. But she has held a reverence for the Gods that I never understood. The Gods

have forsaken us, but she continues believing that they are looking out for us.

She would force me to get rid of the Ladder - especially if she realizes I stole it from Jaz. This feels like a betrayal of all the promises I've made Max, and I wrestle with that decision to keep this from her. The familiar weight of hiding something from my best friend settles itself back onto my shoulders, welcoming me home to a place I never wanted to put down roots.

But the Ladder calls to me as if its magic needs me.

Max rubs sleep from her eyes, rising to a sitting position to peer at me. "First light doesn't seem that far away, Vi. Why didn't you wake me?"

I shrug as I swiftly pack my things back up. "You seemed like you needed it. You can take over now, I was just organizing my bag to make it easier to carry."

She nods and stretches her limbs out as I head over to the grassy area where she had been sleeping moments before. The grass is still warm from her body, and tiny Tulip is snoring away, blissfully unaware of the dangers the world holds for us. Using my pack as a makeshift pillow, I lay down, willing myself to sleep.

Rest does not come easily, but eventually, I drift into a fitful sleep filled with images of blood flowing down Amio's chest, threatening to drown me.

Chapter 14

Zeph

I step slowly into a clearing within the forest, my senses alive with the surrounding tranquility. A small grotto nestled between rocks and trees creates a sanctuary before me. Moonlight and stars cast their ethereal glow, illuminating the space with a delicate shimmer. Although I'm certain of my solitude, an inexplicable sensation that I am not alone creeps up my spine.

On one side of the clearing, fragments of magic linger in the air, calling to me to gather them. They draw me in, and I am unable to resist their call. I extend my hands, and they respond, forming a swirling pool within my grasp. Drops of crimson and delicate flakes of ice dance together, a beautiful mixture swirling in my palm.

But as the magic permeates me, my own powers stir, a tumultuous roar of conflicting desires. They urge me not to consume these elements, a revulsion against the calling of my mind. I gaze at the magic as it threatens to spill out of my hold.

I long to indulge, to take this magic into my body and mingle it with my own. It feels destined and like it belongs to me. My magic thrashes within me in response, revolting against the very idea.

In a moment of reckless abandon, I surrender to my yearning and greedily drink down the magic in my palms.

I wake with a start, a pounding in my head from my consumption of alcohol last night. The lack of food in my stomach is threatening to cause a revolt. I try to focus on the odd dream that is slowly drifting from me. My body aches at the feeling of inevitability that was in that magic. It felt so real.

And as much as I longed for that magic, my own told me it would spell my ruin.

I groan and throw my legs over the side of the bed, palms supporting me on the soft blankets as I sway with the effects of last night. Loris and I continued drinking and discussing plans and ideas for bringing an end to the Race, and it turns out I cannot hold my liquor as well as he can.

If I am to exist at all today, I must get some food. Making my way to the kitchen, I'm shocked to find Loris there. He sips from a steaming mug of tea. Unlike me, he shows no ill effects from our night of consumption. "Morning, sleepyhead. I see the beauty rest did you no good," he jokes. He grabs another mug and shoves it in my hands. I gulp the tea down, savoring the heat that scorches my throat.

“Gods, I cannot believe I feel so awful, and I have to work on a rebellion like this.”

His laugh is a staccato that rumbles low in his chest. “Yeah, well, I told you to eat something. Here.” He tosses me a loaf of bread and a hunk of hard cheese. I tear into them like a wild animal.

Through a mouthful of food, I say, “I had the strangest dream.” He raises an eyebrow, holding out a hand to get me to continue.

The dry hunk of food does not go down easily. “I was in this forest clearing, and even though it was empty, I know someone else was there, just... not there if that makes sense. The forest was calling to me like a siren. I had to be there. Eventually, I see this magic lazily floating in the air, so I gather it up. When gathered in my hands, drops of crimson and flakes of ice swirled together - I’ve never seen those before. It was like the magic in my veins was itching to get out and avoid mixing with the spell I’d found. It told me that magic would only spell ruin and to not combine it with my own.”

His curiosity piqued, Loris leans closer to me. “What’d you do?”

“I consumed them.”

His grin is wild, and the energy of his excitement is palpable. “Hell yeah, you did. What happened?”

“I woke up.”

He throws his mug at my head; I duck to narrowly miss it as it shatters on the wall behind me. “Asshole! Got me all excited for nothing,” he grumbles.

My belly laugh could be heard from the Lowlands. “Why so excitable, Loris?”

He further musses his bedhead. “You really don’t see it?” I shrug, running a hand up my bare arm. “That was Winter magic.”



Hearing that my dream was Winter magic left my body chilled, so I soothed it with a shower, the water heated to scalding by my magic. Stepping out, I slide into my trousers and opt for a stormy gray shirt that catches my eye. As I pull it on, a fleeting image of Viola Mistflow approaching the man in the cave flashes in my mind - the piercing intensity of her icy eyes, the same shade as the shirt my subconscious chose for me. It momentarily distracts me, leaving me disoriented by the lingering thoughts of someone I barely know.

I need to dismiss the puzzling fascination with Viola, but she continues to push stubbornly to the forefront of my thoughts. I wonder if she made it through the night or if one of Plume’s beasts devoured her during the night.

A vice grips my chest at the thought of not seeing her again.

As if sensing my distraction, Loris pokes his head into my room, noting the bewildered expression on my face. “Man,

what's going on?" he asks, his tone filled with curiosity.

I'm trying to make sense of it myself, so an outside opinion could not hurt. "Just thoughts about Viola Mistflow," I respond, keeping it vague.

Loris nods knowingly, leaning against the doorframe. "Yeah, she's been on my mind too," he admits, his voice tinged with something not unlike irritation. I raise an eyebrow, sensing there's more to his words. "There's something strange about her, don't you think?" Loris muses, his gaze distant.

Curiosity piqued, I ask, "What do you mean?"

He hesitates before continuing. "It's just how she handles herself, the conflicts she smooths over. It is out of character for a human."

I furrow my brow, considering Loris's observation. "What do you mean, out of character?"

He waves me off. "Forget I said anything. I just get a peculiar feeling from her."

That makes two of us.

Loris and I head out, down the winding stairs from my loft to the ground level. I turn towards the Palace of the Patricians, ready to part ways with Loris for now. He's on his way to do some spellwork on the lightning grid that powers our infrastructure. With his help, we may be able to bring the grid down enough to cause some chaos later during the Race. At this point, anything that could make Mace's job harder will be welcome.

The Palace is bustling with activity, people milling about as they prepare for their day. The scent of tea and roasted nuts waft over me. I follow my nose to the command center, where Plume is just exiting. “Hey, Zeph!” she calls out.

I wrap my arm around her in a half hug, enjoying her skin’s warmth against me. “Long night?” I ask, noting the deep purple under her eyes.

“Incredibly. We woke up the seps, a griffin, and Wendigo.”

I shudder. Seps and griffins are bad enough, but Wendigo? “Isn’t all of that a bit overkill?”

Plume nods, rubbing her eyes as she stifles a yawn. “Yeah, Mace called for it this year. I think it’s a little much to send out a malevolent spirit that makes humans want to eat each other.” Bile rises in my throat. I’m too hungover to think about humans eating each other.

She cuts a furtive glance towards me, looking to see if anyone is around to hear us. I instinctively take a step closer. “Zeph, I could barely control them last night. Normally, when I take control of them, it’s easy, but they kept shaking me off. I don’t know what’s going on.”

These beasts are a threat to everyone, even fae, and losing control of them could be catastrophic to us all. “How many did we lose during the night?”

She sucks her teeth in thought. “I think around ten. I did the best I could, but that was more than intended.”

I know those deaths will weigh heavy on my friend. Typically, we only see that many deaths throughout the whole of the Race. This was just the first night.

Plume steps away from me, a yawn stretching her face. “I have got to get some sleep. Can we catch up tonight?”

I watch my friend walk away, and my eyes drift down the curves of her waist and rear. As far as I knew, Plume had never taken a suitor home. Her options have been there, so it must be a lack of desire. Or maybe she’s just not interested in any of the fae here. “Rest well,” I call after her retreating form.

I snag a paper cone of roasted nuts from the counter of the command center and slide into my seat next to Nimh, who greets me with a wide smile. Her wet blue hair is piled high on the top of her head, and her long, slender ears glint with multiple rings down their lengths. Mace stalks in shortly after I finish my snack and takes his spot at the head of the table.

“Last night went very well, team,” he starts. “The beasts culled the herd a bit, and those who survived have proven themselves a worthy contender for a place in our beautiful city.” He’s wearing fighting leathers today, straps and buckles wrapping around his torso and upper arms. As the leader of the Patricians, he feels the need to portray a very aggressive image. It’s a little much if you ask me.

The group buzzes with excitement, discussing their plans for the day, each focused on our tasks to ensure the Race’s entertainment and flawless execution. As I glance at the connection and the images of the Racers cycling through, I

can't help but yearn for a glimpse of Mousy and Mistflow. Yet, they remain elusive, with no sign of them as they continue their journey. Without an interesting show on the connection, my mind wanders, the room's noise fading into the background.

The memory of my dream still hangs over me, a continued haunting of my magic. The protestation from my own magic has lingered, never woken up by a mere dream before. Loris's insight that it could be Winter magic resonates, and as try as I might, I can't ignore it. But why would Winter magic invade my dreams? And why did it manifest in that forest clearing?

Once subdued and under control, my magic thrashes within me, awoken without my consent by that forest clearing. It prickles at my fingertips, a relentless buzz that I haven't experienced since my youth when I grappled to tame its power. I try to recall the last time I directly combined with another Seasonale, but my memory remains frustratingly blank. The allure of merging this unfamiliar magic with my own power tugs at me.

Winter magic has always been so rare even books on it are limited. Centuries have passed since anyone has been known to wield it, and yet, my dreams were full of it last night. Worse yet, it called to me, begging to be mixed with my magic.

The Summer magic in my veins is like a caged animal, roiling beneath my skin in an effort to burst out. I've got to let some magic out before it bursts from my pores.

With barely a thought, I bring a flame to life in my palm. It flickers and turns as if it's a sprite. Very few people from the table even look up at my display of power. I see sparks of magic flying from the flame, floating lazily in the air for someone to grab and combine with their own. Flame magic is a blinding red smolder, like the cracklings of a wood fire drifting aimlessly through the room.

That small amount of magic helps push the unsettling feeling left by the dream out of my system. The beast within me calms and curls up to sleep.

“Zeph, what is your plan for the day?” Cirrha asks, shaking me from my thoughts. I startle, wave the flame away from my hand, and look up at her. Her rich mahogany skin is barely covered with a gauzy dress, and her hair is tightly curled around her face.

I briefly wonder if Mace has slept with her, too.

“It's going to be a scorcher.” I smile widely, rubbing my hands together. “I'm going to raise the ambient temperature throughout the Summit, slow the Racers down some.”

Cirrha nods approvingly, and Nimh squeals with excitement. “I'll let the selkie know that they'll have a lot more visitors to the waters today.”

As I listen to the plans of the entire team, it becomes clear that the day will be relatively quiet for the Race. Considering the intensity we've brought to the initial stages, it is a welcome change. Mace wanted to start strong, building excitement throughout the city and capturing the attention of

our citizens. Undoubtedly, they're now glued to their connections, eagerly following every twist and turn.

I observe Mace as he pushes away from the table, his demeanor devoid of expression. He wasn't always like this. I remember a time when he had good intentions for the partnership between Ytopie and the Lowland's citizens. Memories flood my mind—him meticulously crafting his first dozen Races with the utmost care, minimizing casualties. But now, it feels like he's driven by pure destruction.

Unnoticed, Mace slips out of the room and heads down the hallway. Curiosity gets the better of me, and I follow behind, doing my best to avoid detection.

Mace takes the long way through the Palace, meandering through the hallways and stopping to chat with people as he passes. It's clear the citizens and workers who mill about the area have affection towards him. I hear stories about how he's helped their families, causes he's dedicated time and magic towards, and thanks lavished upon him for his work as a Patrician. I've long since known he puts on a public persona, but it still shocks me that he isn't reviled throughout the city.

He may have everyone else fooled, but not me.

After what feels like ages, he slips into the library. The door is left open a smidge, allowing me to see and hear pieces of his conversation. Surrounded by the musty books and low lighting that is home to all the history and knowledge of Krillium, Mace seems surprisingly at ease. I wonder how much time he spends here.

Concealed in the shadows, I hold my breath and listen to a hushed conversation unfolding before me. Mace, his voice barely above a whisper, exchanges words with a man whose face remains hidden. A nagging sense of familiarity tugs at the corners of my mind. Who is this man, and what is he doing having a clandestine meeting with Mace? Any covert action from Mace is enough to put me on high alert, but the addition of an unknown person has alarms blaring in my mind.

My heart quickens as I strain to catch fragments of their conversation. I hear mention of finding a “right fit” and constant references to a vessel. This vessel is obviously essential to the two of them, and my first instinct is to destroy it.

What isn't clear to me is what this vessel could be or why they need to find it. It must have something to do with why Mace seems to be wound particularly tight regarding this year's Race.

The sun shifts from its position overhead, shining light through the colored window in the corner of the library. Flakes of dust drift into the sunbeam, floating like magic around the men. I adjust my stance, dropping to a crouch to ensure the light beam does not capture me. I manage to sneak into the library at this point, and I rest behind a low bookshelf. My mind flashes back to hiding in my father's office and overhearing Stone revealing the truth about our society all those years ago.

This conversation will have the same weight on me. I can feel it. It's a good thing I've always been adept at going unnoticed.

“The vessel is in the Race this year. After all these years, the Race has finally revealed what we were searching for.”

My gut clenches. They're searching for a human? What could they possibly have planned with a human? I rack my brain to any knowledge about a vessel. I briefly remember something Stone once told me as a child: that the old Gods used items as vessels to help them channel their magic, similar to how Seasonale gathered the other magics to combine them for complex spells.

How could a human be a vessel, though?

As their conversation continues in hushed tones, uncertainty gnaws at the edges of my thoughts. What have I stumbled upon? I always thought the Race continued on to control the humans and keep them from asking questions about the Gods. Hearing that the Race was orchestrated to find a vessel makes my stomach churn at the deception.

For months, I have been planning the Race to end all Races. Through the weakening of infrastructure and careful terrain design, my hope has been to guide as many Racers as possible to the arena during the winner's ceremony. With the full force of the Lowlands pouring into the arena, I want to reveal the truth about the old Gods being missing to all of Krillium. They would not stand for it if they knew that the Gods were not demanding these sacrifices.

The barbarism of the Race could finally be over.

Hearing that Mace has someone he's seeking out within the confines of the Race, I can't help but question if my path is the right one for the situation at hand. Have I been blind to the true scope of Mace's intentions?

Do I even allow the Race to continue? Should I attempt to stop the Race before the vessel is revealed? Even though it has never been necessary, the motivations that drive Mace to champion the Race have always been twisted and corrupted. Whatever he is planning feels deeper and more dangerous than the Race.

My thighs ache from crouching out of sight, and the conversation between Mace and the man is getting harder to hear as their tones continue to drop. I quietly retreat into the hall, the stiffness of my muscles slowing me down. As I walk, I shake the tingling out of my hands and then shove them into my pockets.

My mind is consumed with thoughts of the conversation I overheard. I always knew the Race wasn't what we said it to be, but the way the mysterious man spoke leads me to believe it was orchestrated to find this vessel.

Have I chosen the wrong course in seeking to end the Race? Is there a greater truth I have yet to uncover? Could my plan help Mace in his or thwart it?

And is my plan even the right one? What if finding this vessel is a good thing, not a bad thing?

It boils down to trust. Do I trust that Mace has good intentions? It is hard to separate my feelings towards Mace from what this could mean for Ytopie. I know I cannot be unbiased when it comes to him. There is so much history and bad blood between us. It has been a long time since I saw the good in him.

Stepping outside into the courtyard behind the Palace, one of my favorite places in Ytopie, I lean against the wall and let the warm sun hit my face. The feeling of sunlight recharges me and grounds my thoughts in reality. The lingering questions about Mace's motivations and potential outcomes tell me I can no longer handle this alone.

Chapter 15

Viola

Something about her must've worn me down while I slept because I don't know how they managed to convince me, but Tulip is now traveling with Max and me. What started as us just "Getting Tulip out of the clearing, that's all!" became Tulip joining us through the Summit and turning our group of two into three. Despite my training screaming at me that I cannot afford to trust someone other than Max, I find myself rapidly warming to Tulip. Max loves her, saying she reminds her of one of the girls from the village. As long as she doesn't slow us down, it seems like it can't hurt to keep her around.

As if she knows I'm thinking about her, Tulip turns her head back to look at me, a wide grin splitting her face.

She's so small, her body slight, young, and of short stature. It's a stark contrast to my muscled limbs and height. I twisted her hair up in a braid this morning, hoping it would not get in her eyes or caught on wayward branches. It looks nice that

way, like a crown on her head. She'd be a fae princess with Spring magic, a comfortable bed, and devastatingly beautiful clothes in another life.

But that's not the life any of us were blessed with.

We've navigated through the dense forest and are now trekking through a valley that stretches for ages, leading directly to Gallant Mountain. The bright sunlight makes me feel vulnerable, a sitting duck in danger of being swooped up. But Max and Tulip seem unfazed, laughing and joking about something that I am too far behind them to hear.

I'm doing my best to push against the instincts ingrained in me by paranoid parents. I cannot find it in myself to believe that Tulip would bring danger to me.

Maybe it will come back to bite me in the end, but right now, the joy on Max's face at having Tulip with us overshadows that worry.

Last night, I had a dream where I won the Race. Max and Tulip were right there, celebrating the victory with me. My parents were present, cheering us on. The joy I experienced in that dream was so real it was almost painful to wake up. It's not lost on me that my brain automatically pushed Tulip into my dreams, as if she was meant to be a part of this with me all along.

"The first thing I'm going to do when I get to Ytopie is take a hot bath!" Tulip exclaims ahead of me. Max's melodic laughter fills the air around us. In our village, fresh water is a scarce resource. Baths are a luxury we rarely have. We're used

to either swimming in the ocean or making do with rudimentary washing methods.

“I have to admit,” I say, picking up my pace and trying to join the conversation, “a steaming hot bath sounds amazing. I want the water so hot that my skin turns pink.”

“Yes! See, Max? Viola understands!” Tulip nudges Max’s shoulder, and a curious pang of jealousy surges through me, almost knocking me off balance. What have I been missing out on, spending my days avoiding people and rejecting fun? My pace levels out, allowing me to walk abreast of the two of them.

As we walk, Tulip makes up songs, a nonsensical jumble of words that I tune out until I hear her weaving my name into her babbling. “Violaaaa, Olaaaa, Lolaaaa... Lola! Hey, I’m going to call you Lola!” I stumble over my feet at Tulip’s unknown use of my childhood nickname. The memory of my father, in the setting of the Race, causes emotions to bubble up. I tap my fingers over the hilt of my blade, counting to five before I give Tulip what I hope is a kind smile.

“Sure, you can call me Lola, Tulip.”

The sun begins its descent below the horizon, signaling the approaching end of the day. Considering everything, we’ve been making good progress. It has surprisingly been a quiet day. The weather is hot, but nothing we can’t handle. I even managed to catch a rabbit for dinner tonight. It’s slung over my shoulder, leaving a trail of blood behind me.

When I first slit its throat, a vivid memory of Amio bleeding out in the cave flooded my mind. It took a moment to push that image aside and see the rabbit for what it was—an innocent creature. As I cradled its bleeding, dying body in my hands, its history unfolded in my mind like a fleeting vision. The small burrow it would hide in, surrounded by pretty yellow flowers. I felt its fear as I chased it.

Killing Amio seems to have heightened my empathy, as strange as that may sound.

As twilight descends, I discover a cave nestled just outside the valley. It's a stark contrast to the first cave Max and I stumbled upon. This hollow feels cozy, surrounded by lush greenery. It's like a little oasis in the Summit, almost deliberately crafted for a respite from a difficult day. I couldn't have asked for better if I had to design a resting place. I feel so fortunate about our sleeping locations these past two nights. Although we can't stay in one place for long, it's crucial that we take breaks to avoid exhausting ourselves to the point of injury, and a comfortable place makes that so much easier.

Max heads off to gather wood for a fire, leaving me to skin the rabbit. Tulip sits beside me, her soft eyes and frizzed hair giving her a deceptively simple appearance, but it's clear she possesses more intelligence than meets the eye. It could be a crafted look for survival.

I can relate to that.

“Max says your parents left you in the Race,” Tulip begins, her voice gentle. A lump forms in my throat. No matter how

much time passes, the pain still lingers. “Mine died when my brother and I were younger, before our Ascension,” she continues. “Mom first, and then Dad the following year. I think he just couldn’t bear to continue without her, you know?”

Grief tugs at my heart. Tulip has endured the loss of her parents and now her twin brother, Twig. How does she manage to keep going? “Tulip, that’s awful. What did you two do?”

She shrugs, dragging a stick through the sand in front of her. The lines she’s tracing begin to form the shape of a tree. She avoids eye contact, but I can see the tears welling up. “We were taken care of by a few members of our alliance pod. But in reality, it was just the two of us.”

“An alliance pod is not the same. I understand that intimately,” I say quietly. Something in me yearns to comfort her, so I pause in my task to rub her back gently, careful not to get any blood on her clothes. “I know it’s not the same as losing a sibling, but I’ve lost someone in the Race too,” I say quietly.

She tilts her head to the side, looking at me intently but not speaking. “His name was Link,” I tell her. “I... we were in love. As in love as you can be as teenagers in a world where you can be ripped away from one another in the Race.”

“It’s hard to love when you think you may never see them again. What happened?”

I suck in an inhale, dropping my elbows to my knees. “We don’t really know. He left on his Ascension year to Race. I was

fifteen, so I was left behind. He just never returned.” The last two words stick in my throat, caught on the grief I have long since suppressed. Tulip nods, the silent acknowledgment that her brother and Link have met the same fate.

I clear my throat and, with it, the memories of Link, and ask, “Which village were you from?”

Tulip is kind enough not to call attention to my swift subject change. “Pran.”

Pran, a small village on the eastern border of Krillium, was primarily a fishing village known for the craftsmanship put into its fishing nets. Popular opinion is that nothing can escape them once ensnared. Its inhabitants were among the poorest, even by Lowlands standards, with hardly anything worthy of trade outside of the nets. I’ve heard tales of multiple families squeezing into a single home, surviving on whatever they could catch from the ocean.

“Max and I are from Dalery,” I tell her.

While Dalery is far from a wealthy town, we fare better than the smaller Lowland villages. Additionally, we don’t face the disadvantage of having to travel for extensive periods to reach the Summit each year for the Race.

“How come your family never moved closer to the Summit?” I ask as Tulip looks up at me.

She shrugs as if the thought never occurred to her. “It’s home. We have plenty of food even though we don’t have

much else. It's not so bad sharing a home with other families. At least I've never gone hungry."

I couldn't say the same for myself. Dalery is crowded, and we've rapidly expanded towards the Tella desert, so food is getting harder to come by. You can only pluck so many fish out of the ocean before they learn not to come to your shores.

Though our paths to being alone are starkly different, the result is the same. Both Tulip and I find ourselves alone but together.

Max returns with the wood, and we start building the fire. We roast the rabbit and lazily consume it, our gazes fixed upon the starry night sky.

As the crackling flames cast eerie shadows on our weary faces, Tulip leans forward, a mischievous glimmer in her eyes. She breaks the comfortable silence with a challenge. "So, what do you two know about the Gods?"

Max and I exchange confused glances. What is she on about? "Just, you know, everything," I laugh.

Max joins me with a titter, "Yeah, the Gods bless the land and help us thrive and eat, the fae get their power from them, the Race is to recharge them... You know. The standard stuff."

Tulip's lips curl into a wicked smile, her voice lowering to a conspiratorial tone. "Oh, that is hardly all there is to it. The Gods are not the benevolent entities the fae try to convince us they are. After all, would you consider the life we live thriving?"

“Oh, you mean the magic beings who require us to die in order to feed their power may have ulterior motives?” I drawl sarcastically.

Tulip laughs, nodding. “I know, right? It seems obvious when you think about it. Lucky for you both, I happen to know quite a bit about the Gods and the history of our world. Namely, how they have abandoned us.”

Max and I both freeze, exchanging furtive glances. “What do you mean, abandoned us?”

A rakish grin drifts across Tulip’s sweet face. She circles the fire, enjoying our undivided attention. The flames cast a ghostly flicker upon us, creating an eerie atmosphere that encourages the hairs on the back of my neck to stand up.

“My family is descended from a high priest of Solarius, the Summer God. Stories of that time have secretly been passed through my family for centuries, from mother to daughter. Growing up, I would hear stories from my mother of how in the age of Krillium’s infancy, the four gods reigned supreme, their dominion held by the devotion of the worshipers.” Tulip’s story is a performance; the dirt of the cave is her stage. Max and I are enraptured from the first line. Our attention never wavers.

“But as the humans’ hearts began to stray from their divine rulers, a tempest of fury stirred within the godly realm. Humanity was united in their desire for autonomy and control over their fates and dared to challenge the Gods. You see, the Gods would grant favors and magic to the most pious people,

allowing them to ascend to greatness unimaginable by the rest. Fueled by jealousy for the selective blessings bestowed upon the most pious, a brave coven of humans harnessed the ambient magic of the land to cast a banishment spell upon the four deities.”

I raise an eyebrow and look at Max, who just shrugs. Neither of us has ever heard of humans being able to cast magic. “But humans do not have magic, Tulip,” Max says, her brow furrowed.

“That’s what we’ve been led to believe. But there is magic everywhere, and humans are just as capable of harnessing it as fae.”

My mind flicks to the Witch’s Ladder hiding in my pack. That is Winter magic I should, theoretically, be able to harness as a human.

“But this formidable spell demanded a steep price—a solemn pact forged between the Gods and the four noble families. Himureal built into the spell that each family would pledge a descendant to serve as a vessel, a conduit for the Gods to wield their power in the world once more,” Tulip continues, pacing around the fire.

“Wait a second, Tulip,” Max interrupts. “If the Gods were so bad that humans wanted to banish them, why would they agree to put a path for the Gods to come back in the spell?”

Tulip shrugs, chewing her lip in thought. “The only thought I have is that the Gods knew that it was inevitable they would

be banished, so they went willingly on the condition of a way to return eventually.”

“It’s not a bad theory,” I say. “The Gods are cleverer than all of us. Why wouldn’t they build a fail-safe for themselves?”

“It certainly sounds like something Himureal would do,” Max says with a fearful shudder.

Himureal, the Frostweaver, was the monster parents threatened their children with to make them behave. His frigid touch could turn blood to ice and freeze the very breath in your lungs. He commanded shadows that could manipulate the way you see the world. But worst of all, he could see your past and future in blood. A single drop was all he needed, and your entire path was revealed.

His magic was used to curse people, to trick them into servitude towards him. Children would be told that if they didn’t listen, Himureal would come and prick their fingers while they slept. He would take that drop of blood and bind it to him, causing the children to be forever tied to his whim.

Looking back, I realize what a horrific thing it is for parents to threaten their children with.

“Anyways,” Tulip continues, interrupting my thoughts of the Frostweaver, “the powerful spell tore the Gods from their celestial thrones, thrusting them into a pocket realm beyond reach. Stripped of their power, the Gods’ essence seeped into the land, bestowing select humans with the gift of magic. Thus, the fae and the Seasonale were born, embodiments of the Gods’ legacy.”

I choke on the sip of water I've taken from my canteen. "You mean to tell me that fae are just humans who happened to absorb some God magic?"

"Yep, that's exactly what I'm saying!"

I laugh, shaking my head. "That makes no sense. They're so different from us!" My mind drifts to Mace Nightroot, with his otherworldly beauty. His slender figure and pointed features. He looks unlike any human I've ever seen.

Tulip ignores me, engrossed in her own performance. "But with this new magic came a virulent curse. Not all humans could bear the weight of this ancient power and perished under the weight of it. The land bore witness to a tide of resentment as those untouched by magic blamed the fae for the loss of their loved ones. This is the true origin of the supposed virus that swept Krillium all those years ago.

"In the heart of Krillium, the fae found sanctuary in the city of Ytopie. Yet, humans' rage and inability to accept the fae's gifts still smoldered. Desiring to reclaim the Gods' power and strengthen their influence, the fae devised the Race—a trial designed to test for innate magical abilities in humans and identify vessels that would help bring the gods' return. They hoped to find anyone with any hint of magic in them and bring them to Ytopie for testing in hopes of finding those promised vessels."

Max scoffs, leaning back on her elbows. "Yeah, like the humans would go along with that," she drawls.

“Well, of course not,” Tulip answers, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “The humans were not willing participants. Persuasion to participate came with the aid of Autumn’s subtle influence.”

“Fucking Autumn,” I mutter under my breath.

Those countless stories of the horror that was Himureal never affected me much growing up. Autumn and their god, Avidor, was always the more sinister of the Seasonale to me. Decay, influence, and prosperity could all be utilized to bend just about anything to the wielder’s will.

Tulip moves around Max and me, putting on a show that I do not doubt she’s done before. “The influence the first Autumn Seasonale utilized caused the early humans to forget their role in the Gods’ banishment. Instead, the fae wove a tale of sacrifice, proclaiming that the Race’s purpose was to infuse the land with courage and strength, boosting the power of the gods and the Seasonale.”

A chill runs up my spine. Could that be possible? Is the reason we compete in this Race year after year not truly for the Gods but for the fae to find a way to bring them back and further bolster their own power? The more I think about it, the more sense it makes, and the tighter the knot in my chest wrenches. The realization sends my gut churning, and the rabbit I consumed earlier threatens to reappear.

An animal howls in the distance, making all of us start. “There is a prophecy in my family,” Tulip continues, quiet and somber. “It says that the vessels will bring the Gods back to

destroy the world as we know it. They're essentially anchors to the land for the Gods, and once they're identified, nothing can stop the Gods from utilizing them however they want."

I scrunch my nose, a shiver running down my spine. "Is there any way to keep the Gods from returning?" She shrugs and snatches my canteen from me before draining it.

"Yeah. You kill the vessels."

The fire's crackle takes on an eerie note, and the wind whispers through the trees like ghostly echoes. This story of the origin of our land has left me more unsettled than I was from killing someone. How is that even possible?

We huddle closer together, the darkness of the night pressing in, and I know without a shadow of a doubt that there has to be some truth to what Tulip says. This cannot just be a folktale. Something within me came alive as she was telling her story. I cannot deny that it feels right.

The ghostly presence of the Gods lingers in the air, and I find myself glancing about as if I will see them at every turn. The knowledge that they may no longer be with us has got my defenses on high alert, and my anger toward the Patricians is at an all-time high.

"Have they been lying to us for centuries?" I whisper, my hands clenched tightly.

Tulip nods solemnly, "My family always believed so. Many of them hid every year before the Race, hoping to avoid

detection and not have to make the pilgrimage. Before they passed, my grandparents hid for several years.”

I shake my head, fury rising through my body like bile. “We’ve got to put a stop to this. This is even more proof that we need to win this Race. Let’s get to Ytopie and take it down from the inside.”

Tulip’s face cracks into a wide grin, and she pumps her fist in the air, all solemnity from her storytelling gone. “Hell yeah, Lola! That’s what I was hoping to hear.”

Max has been shockingly silent. I look towards her, and she’s picking at the skin around her nailbeds, eyes downcast.

Before I can say anything to get her attention, she stands up and brushes off her pants. “Well, that’s enough fables for the evening. How either of you could believe any of that is beyond me. I’m going to take the first watch. You two get some rest.” With that, she strides to the front of the cave and leans against the opening, her eyes trained on the land beyond.

Tulip shrugs and makes her way to the makeshift cot of her pack and flora from the area. I stretch out beside her, my mind reeling with her stories. I vacillate between thoughts of the Gods themselves and the four families that banished them.

As my eyes drift closed, I could swear I feel an icy breath blowing across my face. But when I open my eyes, all I see is the winking of ice-blue stars.

Chapter 16

Zeph

The sun begins its descent, casting a warm golden glow across the city as evening sets in. Nervously, I pace the courtyard, wearing a path in the grass beneath me. I drink greedily from the mug of ale I've brought with me, needing some assistance for the conversation about to unfold.

One by one, Plume, Loris, and Nimh join me in a quiet corner of the yard, away from prying ears and eyes. A motley crew of fae faces me. A Spring wielder that embodies the brightness and rebirth associated with her magic, a sharp-edged Bliksem with a ruthless streak, and a wisp of a Nereid that longs for more.

“Listen, there’s something important I need to share with all of you,” I begin, my voice apprehensive and quiet even to my own ears. Plume looks at me, her eyes filled with concern, while Loris waits expectantly for my words. Nimh, hardly someone I could consider part of my inner circle, just looks confused at her inclusion.

“For the past several months, I have been laying the groundwork to end the Race, once and for all.”

Loris grins widely, and I know he is proud of me for bringing others in to help. Nimh bounces on the balls of her feet, excitement seeping off of her in waves. However, Plume’s brow is furrowed with worry, “Do you mean to tell me you’re planning a rebellion, Zeph?” she whispers.

“We’ve been a part of this system for so long, it’s hard to imagine a world without it,” Nimh sighs. “What has been happening?”

I recount my efforts so far. In convincing Geomancers to assist me, I have made the terrain less treacherous, providing ample secluded spots for rest and fewer opportunities for rockslides. I personally weakened the shield around Ytopie in hopes that Lowlanders could enter the city proper from the arena. I even tell them about my plans to utilize wildfires to push Racers away from some areas and into others.

Loris, not one to let his contributions go unnoticed, pipes up, “Oh, and I’ve weakened the lightning grid, so if we need a distraction, I can cut that and cause some chaos.” I clap him on the shoulder, pleased at the effort he’s put in since learning about my plan last night. “I just need to convince a Tempest to help take down the connection mesh if we need it.”

“My ultimate goal,” I continue, “is to get as many Lowlanders as possible into the arena simultaneously. If we can get them all there and then reveal the truth of the Race and

what happens to the winners, we can cause a massive uprising and change the way this city functions for good.”

Plume shakes her head. “This is insane, Zeph. The Race is everything to Ytopie. It is the only way to recharge the Gods and bolster their powers. Without the Race, we’d be powerless.”

I reach out and squeeze her hand, understanding her trepidation. “I know you believe that Plume. This was not an easy decision for me to come to. But we’ve seen the corruption, the manipulation. Do you really believe that the Gods need the Race?”

Loris, his expression serious, pipes up, “I’ve been with Zeph on this from the start. We’ve seen the suffering, the unfairness. It’s time to unite Krillium. Fae or human, we all can provide something to the land.”

Nimh, primarily silent through this conversation, grabs my hand in hers. “I’m in, Zeph. It’s about time someone fought for change.”

Just processing what I said moments before, Plume asks quietly, “What happens with the winners, Zeph? Don’t they go to the human village?”

I inhale sharply and shake my head.

I explain to my friends what I know about the death of the winners from overhearing it in my father’s office all those years ago. Horrified looks flash across the faces of the others,

and Plume turns a sickly shade of green. “This is horrendous, Zeph.” She whispers, tears brimming in her eyes.

Loris nods grimly, “We’ve got to stop this.”

I steel myself and turn towards Nimh. She nods, encouraging me to reveal the biggest secret of the Race that could topple Krillium as we know it.

“You need to know... the Gods are... gone,” I say softly.

Plume’s hands cover her mouth, stifling a gasp, and Loris’ eyes grow to the size of saucers. “What do you mean, Zeph?” he says, his voice quiet but solid.

Nimh slides her hand into mine and speaks for me. “When Ytopie was created, it was because humans were upset with the fae, right? That’s what history books have always said. And the Gods, angry at the treatment of the fae, sent a plague through Krillium, which dropped their numbers. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that that is the truth.” She moves to sit cross-legged on the ground, hand still in mine, reluctantly pulling me down to join her in the grass. “Many of us believe that humans banished the Gods, unhappy with the control the Gods had over their lives.”

I squeeze her hand, grateful she’s taking this part of the conversation from me. “The theory goes that when the Gods were banished, their magic had to go somewhere. It spread throughout Krillium, infusing humans with magic. Not all humans could support the magic, and they died. The ones who could handle it became what we now call the fae.”

Plume, her face twisted with confusion, shakes her head. “No, the fae are an entirely different race. We’re not humans.”

I drop Nihm’s hand and run mine through my hair. “We’re probably descended from them, though. The magic has changed our bloodlines, but our ancestors were humans.”

Loris is uncharacteristically quiet before he says, “Are there other theories on what’s going on with the Gods?”

I shrug, raising my eyes to meet him. “Maybe they’ve just abandoned us. Maybe they’re just bored with us, so they don’t get involved in our problems. Regardless, no one living has ever spoken to them or seen them.”

I gaze between the three people I’ve trusted with information that could get me killed for revealing. “I want to tell all Krillium that the Gods are gone. They’ve abandoned us. We can stop the Race because we’re sacrificing only to the ego of Mace.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Nimh wince. “I don’t think this is all on Mace, Zeph,” she says quietly.

“He’s the head of the Patricians, Nimh. He has more information on this than anyone else, and he chooses to let it continue. He holds the power to stop all of this, and he sits there silent.”

Loris nods in agreement while Plume nervously twists the ends of her hair between her fingers. “Okay, so the Gods are gone,” Plume begins, her voice so soft I strain to hear her. “And at this point, it’s doubtful they’re coming back. Yet we

still sacrifice not only the bottom of the Race but also the top?”

“That about covers it, yeah.”

She braces herself, meeting me in the eyes for the first time in several minutes. “Then we must stop this. We have to assume that the Gods are angry, so they abandoned us.”

Loris agrees, wrapping his arm around Plume’s shoulder. “Agreed, this isn’t just about fucking over Mace. This is bigger than that.”

Nimh squeezes my hand in encouragement, and the smile on her face buoys my mood immediately. “There’s one more thing,” I say. The group looks at me once more, bracing themselves against my words.

I recount my encounter with Mace, the clandestine meeting in the library, and the snippets of conversation I managed to overhear. The mention of the vessel and their search for someone who can contain an unknown power. It’s clear we’re dealing with something far more significant than just the Race, and I need guidance on how to handle it.

With the encounter laid out in front of us, we search for answers. “What do you think this vessel could be?” I ask, running through the possibilities in my mind. “And how do we proceed? Could Mace trying to find the vessel be a ... good thing?”

Loris strokes his chin, deep in thought. “The vessel could be someone with extraordinary potential, unique abilities, or

qualities that could benefit the city. But without more information as to why he wants a vessel, it's hard to say for sure what his motives are."

Plume bounces her head up and down in response to Loris' words. "I agree, it's impossible to know at this stage. All I know is that I no longer trust Mace. He's kept this information under wraps and even continued and upped the stakes. He's continuing to increase the number of expendables year after year. I can't believe that any decision he makes comes from a good place."

I could not agree more.

"As for our next steps," Loris continues, "we need to gather more intelligence, dig deeper into Mace's plans, and find a way to disrupt them."

Nimh's eyes gleam with excitement. "I can access the underground networks and connect with the rebels who have long been dissatisfied with the Race. They might have information that can help us. We need allies, Zeph."

Plume chews on her lip, her gaze focused. "We need to be cautious. If Mace suspects our intentions, he may lash out, fearing what we know. We have to tread carefully and stay one step ahead. And we have to find out what was in that book."

I absorb their insights and suggestions happily, every bit of me confident in the formidable team I assembled to drive change within our society. "And do we abandon our plan and work towards thwarting Mace? Or do we just let him continue and hope we finish our task before he does?"

The group voices their unanimous support to continue the plan to dismantle the Race.

As the sun dips below the horizon and the sky deepens into shades of purple and blue, we exchange determined glances and prepare ourselves to face the challenges that lie before us.

“Let’s reconvene tomorrow, same time and place,” I suggest, the weight of responsibility settling upon my shoulders. “We’ll gather any information we can and strategize our next moves.”

Plume, Loris, and Nimh all agree, their resolve glittering in their eyes. We disperse, each heading our separate ways for the night, our minds buzzing with thoughts and our hearts filled with a mix of determination and uncertainty.

As I retire to my quarters with yet another glass of ale, guilt grips me like a vice. The weight of my inaction thus far is an albatross around my neck, growing heavier with the realization that my closest friends know I have known about the Race’s dark secret for so long.

How could I have remained silent all these years? How could I have allowed the suffering to continue, the loss of countless lives?

The thought of the blood on my hands sends shivers down my spine. Is my desire to dismantle the Race born out of genuine concern for the well-being of humans? If so, why has it taken me so long to step up and fight for a change?

Or is this merely a desperate attempt to thwart Mace, to prove my superiority over him? The lines between

righteousness and self-interest are so blurry it makes my head spin.

The ale probably doesn't help.

Before today, I may have let my personal vendetta cloud my judgment. After overhearing Mace in the library, my determination to make amends and put an end to the senseless cycle of death and deception is renewed.

I slip out of my clothes and slide into my bed, willing sleep to come. My mind is buzzing with thoughts of the journey to expose Mace's true intentions and uncover the vessel's role in all this. Juggling that with my own plans to end the Race will not be easy. I am determined, however, to succeed.

As I drift off to sleep, I find myself hoping to return to that clearing of last night's dreams. Despite my magic's insistence that it is not the place for me, I cannot help but feel drawn to it.

Chapter 17

Viola

As we trudge onward, fatigue settling heavy on our shoulders, Tulip's frustrated groan cuts through the air. "I can't take much more of this," she complains, her voice filled with weariness and exasperation. Everything has blurred together, and the arduous journey has taken its toll on all of us. We've been pushing ourselves relentlessly, scarcely pausing for rest, driven by the urgency of the Race and our own desire for retribution against Ytopie.

We all were excited when we believed we discovered a shortcut through the mountain range. What appeared to be a promising path turned into an impenetrable wall of vegetation, taunting us. Each strike of our blades only seemed to invigorate its growth, entangling us further in its grasp. Frustrated and defeated, we had no choice but to retreat and take the longer, more grueling route.

Max is looking a little worse for wear. Her spirits are dampened. After Tulip's campfire tale, I have been spending

more time with her, asking questions about the vessels and planning for our inevitable arrival to Ytopie. At this point, we treat our winning as an inevitability and spend most of our time fantasizing about everything we will do once we reach the city and learn what is actually going on within those walls.

I tell her all about my parents with stories from my childhood. We both agree that they will join our cause to expose the truth about the banishment of the Gods and destroy the vessels to prevent their return, if it comes to that.

Max distances herself from our conversations, walking in solitude at the rear of our group. I attempt to bridge the gap, seeking to engage her in our conversations, but her disinterest is palpable. The more we talk about Ytopie, the further away from us Max seems to grow.

At one point, when Tulip slips off to go to the bathroom, I pull Max aside. “Max, what’s going on? You’ve not been yourself.”

I’m unsure if I’ve ever seen that look on her face. My loving, fierce friend seems defeated. Her shoulders slump, her short and wild hair limp around her face, her fingers having run tracks through it. Her eyes, which have always reminded me of moss growing on the north side of a tree, are watery and hollow.

“Viola, I...” Max sighs, leaning on me for support. “I don’t know. I haven’t felt like myself lately. I am really not enjoying you and Tulip rambling incessantly about Ytopie.” I raise an eyebrow, silently urging her to continue. “I just feel this

incessant crawling under my skin, a voice begging me to stop, to slow down. I don't know if I want or even can reach Ytopie anymore. I just want this Race to be over so I can go home."

Her words hit me with unexpected force, and I take a small step back to meet her gaze. "Wait, you don't want to go with me to Ytopie anymore?" I ask, knitting my brow with confusion. She nods, casting her eyes downward. My heart tightens at the thought of continuing without Max by my side. She is all I have left, and the notion of leaving her behind feels like an unimaginable loss.

Our conversation is interrupted as Tulip stomps toward us, angrily wiping her hands on her linen-clad thighs. Her hair is tangled with twigs, and her face is smudged with dirt. "Stupid fucking rabbit," she grumbles, glancing at us.

Max shifts her attention to the young woman, and I do my best to communicate with my eyes that our conversation isn't over. "What happened?" She demands.

"I was taking a piss when a rabbit jumped out of the brush and scared the living daylight out of me. I jumped, forgetting about my damn pants around my ankles, and crashed," Tulip recounts with an adorable fury. "You didn't hear me?"

Suppressing a chuckle, I exchange a knowing glance with Max. "No, we didn't hear a thing. Wish we did, though, just to witness the aftermath," I reply, clapping Tulip on the shoulder. She grumbles, combing out branches and leaves from her hair.

"Well, at least if we didn't hear it, hopefully, nothing else did either," Max supplies.

My eyes track the sun beginning its initial descent towards the horizon, casting pinks and blues across the sky. “Yeah, good thing nothing heard you - it’ll be dark soon. We have to get a move on.”

By nightfall, we make it to the base of Gallant Mountain. All of us cast our eyes up toward the top. We cannot see it from here, but the arena is there, nestled in the mountains, just outside the city of Ytopie. There is no sign of other participants of the Race other than tiny flickers of campfires. There are no rules about what side of the mountain you approach from, so we must have taken a less traveled path.

Without warning, the air around me stales. A chill runs up my spine, and my skin stiffens and pebbles. The sun is gone now, and a beautiful twilight blankets the land. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a shadow, flickers of movement in an otherwise still landscape.

It’s then that I hear a wet, raspy breath crawling into my notice like a blanket of fog. Max and Tulip have noticed my stillness, shooting me confused looks with intentions to move towards me when I hold a hand up, urging them to cease their movements. I hear the rustle of branches and trees coming from my left. Training my eyes on the spot I heard the sound come from, I spy the most gruesome thing I’ve seen yet.

Lumbering out of the brush is a tall, hulking creature, its skin paper-thin and grayed. Bones from its chest and face break through the thin skin, a ghastly design that pushes acid up my throat.

A part of me, deep in the recesses of my mind, acknowledges that it was once a human, but what I see before me is far from it.

Long and curved antlers, with multiple points reminiscent of a deer, grow out of its misshapen and decaying head. Its wet mouth seems to split its face in half, showing a plethora of sharp teeth.

The creature stretches its hands out towards me. Hands is not the right word, I realize. Talons, curved and sharp, dripping with dark gore, reach for me. Tulip and Max spot the creature lumbering towards us and bite back screams.

I spent my entire childhood preparing for the Race, devouring any books that had yet to be destroyed. I know what I'm looking at, even if my brain does not want to believe it.

Wendigo.

The creature in front of me, the Wendigo, possesses an insatiable hunger, a fact I see reflected to me in its eyes, which glow brighter like coals at the base of a firepit as it stalks closer to me. The scent of decay wafts off it, a sickly-sweet mix of rotten meat and earth. My eyes dart between a frozen Max and a trembling Tulip. I silently attempt to get their attention so they can see me sliding my knives from their straps around my thighs.

Max seems to understand and slowly moves to pull hers as well. We've only got one real shot to catch the creature unaware. Right now, it sees us as easy prey and is taking its time,

feeding on our fear. I grip my knife in my palm, steadying myself with the feel of its hilt.

I inhale deeply, and rot fills my lungs. I swallow back a gag as my free hand taps across my collarbones, counting down from ten. Before I can talk myself out of it, I move my arm up and throw my knife toward the Wendigo.

It strikes true, burying itself in his chest.

The roar of the creature shakes the clearing. Max responds with a dagger in kind to the monster. It lodges in the eye socket.

The Wendigo's growls reverberate through the air, its good eye glowing and fiery. Sticky, dark liquid drips from around the hilts of our blades, and an unfathomable revulsion at how very corrupted it is seeps into my soul. The monster lunges at me with astonishing speed, claws slashing through the darkness. I narrowly dodge the initial attack, feeling the gust of its movements whip past me.

The creature's aggression is relentless, every strike more forceful than the last. It's crazed, swiping blindly toward the three of us in a manic attempt to corral us together. We don't take the bait, forming a crescent around it, so it has to decide which of us to pick off first.

The Wendigo's attention shifts to Tulip, who remains frozen in fear as it lumbers towards her. "Tulip! Get out of the fucking way!" I shout, breaking her trance.

The Wendigo stretches a claw towards her, ready to slice her face open. Grabbing my whip from my belt, I crack it towards the creature, where it wraps around the arm and pulls it to a stop. Tulip takes advantage of the interruption and drops to the dirt, fumbling for the dirk she dropped in fear. Her fingers close around the hilt, and clutching it tightly, she lunges forward, striking the Wendigo's leg.

In my haste to assist her, I almost trip over my pack. The impact makes my body hum, a feeling of ice flowing through my veins as I watch the Wendigo drip its putrid blood onto Tulip. It is precariously close to her, and my only thought is that I need to get to her.

Instinctively, I thrust my hand into my pack and pull out the Witch's Ladder. I wrap it tightly around my wrist and lunge toward the Wendigo's back, landing on the creature's bony frame just before he can grab Tulip by the neck. I scramble up its back, feet pushing through the flesh around the spine as I struggle up its body. My whip hangs uselessly from its arm, and Tulip's dirk is embedded in its leg, but still, it does not seem deterred.

I grip its antlers tightly, pulling its head back with all my strength. It swipes blindly at me, its claws striking true and digging into my bicep. "Max!" I hiss urgently, not needing to say more. She swiftly throws another stiletto into the Wendigo's chest to little effect.

I'm working my blade across its throat, slowly cutting through the muscle and sinew, my free hand tightly gripping

the bucking creature. A calmness comes over me as I realize that death certainly is on the horizon for me. There is no way I can survive this. My mind tunnels, my only focus being to weaken the monster enough for Max and Tulip to escape.

The Wendigo, seemingly just realizing the combined threat from us, becomes more desperate, lashing out with renewed fury. Its roars reverberate through the night, even the trees trembling at its presence. Bucking and thrashing beneath me, the creature fights to dislodge me. My strength is slipping, and I feel myself losing my hold upon its back.

Max and Tulip launch every attack they can think of, but it's not enough. We lack ranged weapons, and they fear getting too close to the monster threatening us. I hang from its neck like a rag doll, unable to regain enough purchase to continue attempting to slice its throat.

My eyes dart to my wrist and the Witches' Ladder that hangs there. All of the stories I read about Ladder's said pulling the feather would release the spell. I suppose it's time to find out.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I pull the first feather I can find. It is black as night, with veins of blood red tracing through it. As soon as it's free, I drop it and watch it lazily float to the ground. A trickle of fear and exhilaration drips down my spine like sweat.

It's fully dark now, and with shadows creeping around us, an eerie, otherworldly look is cast onto the battle unfolding. Our grunts of effort and the squelching of blood mix with the roars of pain and anger from the monster.

Tulip takes a claw to the face, marring her young, beautiful skin with a thick slash across the cheek. Max has been knocked down more times than I can count. I find myself praying to Himureal that the Winter magic embedded in the Witch's Ladder comes to life but seeing no sign of it yet.

As if in answer to my pleas, the shadows edging our clearing move, controlled by an unknown force. This must be the spell the feather released. I watch the shadows crawl towards me, wrapping around the creature's legs and climbing its body like a deadly snake.

The Wendigo stumbles, falling to its knees. It lashes out its claws and catches Max on the hip. She yelps in pain, dropping to the ground. Her blood fills the air, and our shared history flashes before my eyes. I want to go to her to be sure she's okay, but I cannot let go of the creature even if I want to - I am glued to it by the shadows.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Tulip launches herself at the creature's exposed flank, striking with precision. Her blade slices through the Wendigo's decaying flesh, drawing a gush of blackened blood that coats her chest. The beast emits an otherworldly screech, its thrashing growing even more frenzied.

The shadows continue to creep upon us, wrapping around me in turn. I feel them like bracers on my forearms, and I almost purr at the sensation that washes over me at their contact. The warmth they impart to me melts the ice in my

veins. I watch as the shadows render the Wendigo immobile, its limbs pinned to its side in an impenetrable vice.

One of the shadows slips off my forearm and winds itself around the throat of the Wendigo, tilting its chin to the sky. The decaying flesh stretches taut, gashes from my knife shimmering in the moonlight. I resume sawing at the muscle and sinew as quickly as possible before the shadow spell wears off. The thick, infected blood of the creature drips down my arms, and the remaining shadow bracer seems to relish it. It writhes around my arm, rolling in blood in satisfaction.

“Tulip, help me with its throat!” I call out, unable to get through the neck as quickly as I’d like. I have no idea how long the shadows will assist me, and I am not looking forward to fighting this thing without them.

Tulip is by my side swiftly, working her dirk into the exposed flesh beneath what used to be a chin. Max pulls her daggers from its body and joins us, wincing with each step. I glance down at her hip. The exposed flesh is jagged, dripping, and dirty from her fall. She works through the pain admirably.

Together, the three of us slash and chop at the Wendigo’s neck like frenzied warriors. Blood splatters across my face, hot and thick, mingling with the sense of exhilaration coursing through my veins. The creature’s fear and desperation fill the air, overwhelming me with determination to end its life.

This Wendigo was not born, it was creature. Some say it’s a corruption of humanity, how twisted our lust and greed can make us. But I can smell the truth.

The Wendigo ate a person and doomed itself to eternal hunger.

Finally, we sever the last of its flesh, leaving the creature's head hanging by fragile bones. The once formidable monster lies still, defeated. The shadows go slack around his body. They seem pleased with our efforts. One by one, they slither like snakes back into the tree line.

I look down at the shadow, still bracing my right arm. I'm going to be sad to see it go, I realize. I stroke my finger down it, and it vibrates with acceptance. "Thanks for coming to our rescue," I mutter down to it. It releases its grip on my forearm and slithers down my body, following its companions through the carnage.

I turn to my blood-soaked friends with a mixture of exhaustion and pride. Tulip and Max, now drenched in the creature's gore, stand by my side, their resolve unyielding. They look disgusting.

But they also look so powerful.

With a deep breath, I place my foot on the Wendigo's neck, gripping its antlers tightly. With a mighty tug, the bones crack, disintegrating into dust beneath me. I cast its head back into the forest, a final dismissal of the horrendous monster.

Swiping my hand across my forehead, I feel the blood dripping dangerously close to my eyes.

And I have never felt so alive.

Chapter 18

Viola

The gore removed from our bodies in a small stream, Max, Tulip, and I find refuge in yet another cozy cave nestled on the mountain's face for the night. Exhaustion weighs heavily upon us, dragging our bones down with its relentless grip. We lie side by side, our bodies too weary to remain vertical. With a sigh, I reach into my pack and retrieve the last of the dried meat I stole from Jaz, passing a piece to each woman on either side of me.

The rhythmic sound of our quiet chewing blends with the wet dripping of the cave, enveloping us in a cocoon of calm. We savor the salty jerky, the taste only enhanced by the weariness in our bodies. We cannot speak for a while, the horror of our battle playing at the forefront of our minds.

Max's voice is the first to break the silence, its timbre laden with curiosity and a touch of skepticism. "What was that with the shadows, Viola?" Her question hangs in the air, demanding an explanation I knew was inevitable. Slowly, I shift my

position, sitting up and pulling my pack closer. I retrieve the Witch's Ladder from its hidden compartment and stretch it before us. Max and Tulip rise in tandem, their eyes fixed on the unassuming string adorned with feathers.

"This is a Witch's Ladder." I pause, allowing the weight of the revelation to settle. "The night I stole from Jaz..."

Max interjects with a low and knowing tone, "I fucking knew it!"

I choose to ignore her interruption, focusing on delivering the explanation instead. "The night I stole from Jaz, I found this in their pack. I had read about objects like this before but had never seen one in person."

Tulip's brows knit together in confusion as she reaches out to touch the ladder. "Just a bit of string and feathers?"

Shaking my head gently, I trace my fingers along the intricate pattern of the feathers, feeling the faint hum of their latent magic beneath my touch. "It's more than that. Winter Seasonale have the ability to infuse their magic into these ladders, turning each feather into a spell."

Tulip's eyes widen in astonishment. "But there haven't been any Winter Seasonale in ages."

Max interjects again, her voice laced with venom that has become devastatingly common during our time in the Race this year. "So, you stole a cherished family heirloom, passed down through generations without encountering a Winter Seasonale for decades, if not centuries." I nod, acknowledging

the truth in her words but feeling no remorse for what I did. I remain unable to tear my eyes and fingers away from the mesmerizing Witch's Ladder.

“Can't you feel the magic emanating from it?” I mutter softly, the pleasant buzzing from the ladder spreading up my arms like a subtle current of energy.

Tulip and Max exchange uncertain glances before shaking their heads in unison. “No... to us, it's just feathers.”

Finally tearing my gaze away from the ladder, I meet Max's narrowed eyes. Her scrutiny doesn't waver. “You stole that from Jaz, knowing it must have held significant value in their family,” she accuses. A flicker of guilt in my gut barely registers.

“I did, and I would do it again. It saved us, Max. Did you not see the shadows ensnaring that creature, buying us time?”

Max's gaze softens slightly, and she replies, interest finally overtaking her anger towards me, “I saw the shadows, yeah. But it seemed like the darkness itself was growing. I couldn't quite discern what they were doing, only that they exploded from you.”

Tulip, who until now has been silently absorbing our conversation, grasps my arm, her touch a reassurance in her gratefulness. “I'm glad you stole it, Lola.” The use of my childhood nickname, a remnant of my father's affection, warms me. I knock my shoulder against her, a grin spreading across my cheeks.

Max still doesn't look convinced, but her face slacks, and ultimately, her curiosity gets the best of her. "Do you know what the other feathers do?"

"I didn't even know what that one did!" I say through a laugh. "I just knew we needed some help. I'm lucky it didn't backfire on me." Tulip's face turns up to the stars in the sky.

"Himureal must've felt benevolent today."



Just as the sun starts to crest the sky, we pack the last of our things and prepare for the day ahead. My limbs are stiff, residual aches from the confrontation the day before, making them feel like lead. I must not be the only one feeling that way because Tulip groans loudly, stretching to loosen her limbs.

"What are you groaning about, Tulip?" Max calls out, checking the dressing on her hip. "You only got a cut on your face!"

Tulip sticks out her tongue at Max. "But it's such a pretty face, and now it's ruined!"

I glance down at my bicep, barely registering the pain anymore. My tinctures are good. I remind my companions to take another dose, placing small drops of the bitter liquid on their tongues, and then we head out of the cave.

We find a rocky, narrow pathway up the mountain, interspersed with moments of climbing the face of the mountain. On a break, when we catch our breath from a

grueling vertical summit, Tulip asks, “How many more days until we get to the arena?”

Max wracks her brain, thinking back to how many sunsets and rises there have been. “I think three, maybe four if we keep up our pace.”

Tulip dramatically flops herself to the ground, an arm draped over her eyes. “I cannot continue at this pace anymore. We’re out of food! What kind of food are we going to find on the face of a mountain?”

Max gives me a look of agreeance, and I shrug. “Not sure, Tulip. But what choice do we have?”

She pulls her arm down and whines like a child as she says, “We could find the elevator.”

Max huffs out a laugh, and I crouch down, eye to eye with her. “That’s a myth, and you know it, Tulip,” I implore.

I haven’t thought about the elevator in many years. It was a story told to children, and that’s all it was. I remember Link, the only man I’ve ever loved, telling me he knew where it was.

I’ve always told myself he found the elevator, but that’s my own stubborn refusal to accept that he is dead.

Tulip shrugs and waves her arm. “Look around us, Lola. Everything’s a myth. The origin of the fae, Wendigos, seps... they’re all myths. And what have we learned over the past few days? Myths can come true.”

I sit back on my heels, absorbing her words. The cut from my brawl with Amio nearly healed thanks to a few choice

salves, tightening with the flex of my muscles. There is no doubt some truth to what Tulip says. Since she told me of the origins of Ytopie, it's been like an open wound in my gut, gnawing and thrashing for me to recognize its validity. I look to Max, who stands stark still. "What do you think, Max?"

Her arms uncross from their position across her chest, and her shoulders slump. "I think we continue upon our path, Vi. We've made it this far. The elevator doesn't exist, and at this point, it's unlikely we'll even make it into the other ten. Let's just finish the Race and go home."

"You don't even want to get to Ytopie anymore," I say quietly. While her words have some truth, I still have trouble processing them. The fatigue that weighs our bodies down could pull us under if we let it, but I know I have more fight within me.

She shrugs at me with a pained glance. "Yeah, you're right. But I have to finish the Race anyways." We sit in a steely silence, broken only by our breaths and the soft song of birds.

I reach into my pack and pull out the carved talisman from my father, running my fingers over its smooth surface as my free hand taps a calming rhythm on my thigh. My stomach is churning with indecision. I rub my fingers vigorously along the stone's surface, part of me wishing it could reveal what we should do.

My nerve endings are lit up with the inexplicable urge to go for the elevator. It's like I can see a clear path to it in my mind,

lit up with promise. I whip my glance between Max and Tulip, each waiting for me to say what I believe we need to do.

Max, my past, the woman I have spent more time with than anyone else in this world. She has always been my conscience, my guiding force. We've grown so much together, and she's seen me at my absolute worst. I'm still not great, but I'm getting better. I attribute so much of that to her.

And Tulip, a new friend I never asked for. I did not want to bring Tulip with us at first, and now I cannot imagine not having her by my side. I feel so much attachment to her in such a short amount of time. In my life, I have always actively focused on avoiding attachments and connections with people. But Tulip barreled through trees and latched herself onto me, my defenses forgotten as swiftly as she arrived. She's a beacon of sunshine everywhere she goes, and though I prefer to live in the shadows, she still pulls me into the light.

I slide my talisman back into my bag, and my fingers brush across the Witch's Ladder again. It whispers to me, curling in the recesses of my brain.

I know what to do.

"We're going to the elevator."

Chapter 19

Zeph

The past few days have been a whirlwind of covert operations and carefully planted sabotage, cementing in my mind that I was right to bring others into my plan. Plume, Loris, Nimh, and I have toiled tirelessly behind the scenes, orchestrating a series of interventions to level the playing field for the human Racers and ensure their collective arrival at the arena. The more people in the arena when we reveal the truth of the Race, the better.

Nimh, drawing upon her Gods-granted power as a Nereid, has ingeniously manipulated the water levels and created an abundance of streams to follow towards the mountain. In a particularly clever moment, she enlisted the help of the selkies, who have been appearing to Racers to subtly guide them in the right direction should they veer off course. The fact that the selkies are willing to work with her furthers the rumors of her heritage.

For my part, I have been harnessing light to expose lurking dangers hidden in the shadows. On several occasions, I have used wildfires to clear paths through dense underbrush, guiding Racers away from perilous routes and toward the safety of other groups.

But my utmost priority has been to divert Mace's attention from our endeavors, ensuring our actions go unnoticed.

I believe the most invaluable asset in our endeavor has been Plume. Her mastery over vegetation has proved indispensable. She has cultivated overgrowth strategically, blocking off dangerous areas and subtly guiding the Racers toward safe resting spots and sources of water. She orchestrated their movements when requested to increase creature activity, herding groups of Racers together to face the creatures as a united front. This has forged unexpected friendships and alliances among the participants, strengthening their chances of arriving in the arena in time for my announcement.

So far, our efforts have gone undetected by Mace. In fact, his preoccupation with the Race has narrowed, and his mood has grown increasingly volatile. I have shadowed his every move, attempting to eavesdrop on covert meetings, but he rarely strays from the command center. It is as if he has become entirely consumed by the Race, fixated on its outcome like never before.

That's where I find him today, slumped and exhausted at the table. His long, thin legs are stretched out, crossed at the ankles. It's nearly twilight, and the Palace is mostly empty.

Still, I was not expecting to find him in the command center, eyes glued to the connection.

The connection shimmers before Mace, its luminescent glow casting a bleary light across his fatigued eyes. The sun has long set, and Racers settle into their well-deserved rest. Plume is already controlling the movements of creatures, skillfully steering them away from groups of sleeping Racers.

Seizing the opportunity, I slide into the seat beside Mace and pass him a mug of steamed wine, hoping to offer him some respite and loosen his lips. He takes a slow sip, expressing his gratitude without meeting my gaze. His once-familiar face has transformed, bearing the marks of exhaustion and strain. He appears gaunt and pale, as though sleep has eluded him for days. “Mace, you need to get some rest,” I implore, my voice laden with concern.

He waves me off dismissively and remains silent. My eyes remain fixed on him until an unnatural roar emanates from the connection. My head jerks towards the image, my breath catching in my throat as I witness the impossible—Viola Mistflow suspended from the back of a Wendigo. Shock reverberates through me, my heart twisted in fear for this woman. Mace straightens abruptly in his seat beside me, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees.

“She jumped on a fucking Wendigo!” he whispers, more to himself than to me. I can only nod in disbelief, my mind struggling to process the audacity of her actions. We watch in

awe as she and her companions launch a relentless assault, battling to subdue the monstrous creature.

Every time Viola is struck, it is like I am as well, and I find myself gripping my shirt over my heart in fear for her.

And then she drops a single feather to the ground, shadows erupting from her being.

I sink back into my seat, eyes wide with astonishment. Mace's gaze meets mine, mirroring my shock and confusion. "That was a Witch's Ladder," I begin, my voice barely a whisper, "and that was the magic of a Shade." Shades, or shadow wielders, have not been seen in centuries, a long-extinct subset of Winter magic.

Mace slumps back in his seat, his hands running through his increasingly disheveled black hair. His piercing green eyes lock with mine, and I try to search for answers amidst the maelstrom of thoughts swirling in his mind. "How did she come across a Witch's Ladder?" he mutters, a note of bewilderment cracking his voice.

I shake my head, my confusion mirroring his. "Perhaps it's a family heirloom," I suggest, my attention drawn back to the connection before us as Viola yanks the head from the creature and throws it.

"But Witch's Ladders needs a magic source to work," Mace whispers.

When I turn to question Mace about his statement, I find the room empty.



The morning after the brutal Wendigo massacre, Plume is still visibly distraught over the role she played. Her voice quivers as she expresses guilt, “I couldn’t control the Wendigo. I couldn’t force him. It felt like my magic was missing.” Plume’s Spring magic allows for not just manipulation of beasts but control over the dead in quick bursts of reanimation. But being neither alive nor dead, it does not surprise me to hear that the Wendigo is not susceptible to it.

I offer a comforting pat on her shoulder, attempting to ease some of her tension. “You should have seen it. It was incredible. You’re okay,” I reassure her softly. Her sniffles are audible as she breathes.

“I need some sleep,” Plume mumbles, her gaze drifting across the still-empty command center. The sun has barely joined the sky, and most Patricians have yet to arrive. I’ve been here for several hours, wanting more insight into Mace’s state of mind, but there has yet to be a sign of him.

The connection flickers through the Racers, capturing their awakening moments as they prepare for the day’s challenges. At this stage of the Race, the citizens of Ytopie have clear favorites, and soon, we will be closing in on someone reaching the arena. Among the favored Racers is Viola Mistflow, who has garnered a substantial following and attracted significant bets in her favor. I can only imagine the buzz that will ensue in

the taverns today following her impressive encounter with the Wendigo.

While helping myself to a mug of tea and a sweet, flaky pastry, I watch Mace enter the room.

If it is possible, he appears even worse than he did the previous night. His clothing remains unchanged, his eyes bloodshot, and his shaggy black hair stands up at all angles from the persistent raking of his fingers. Sliding into the seat beside me at the head of the table, he barely even registers my existence. Stone, the ever-attentive advisor, takes a seat on Mace's other side. He whispers in Mace's ear, and Mace visibly relaxes, his shoulders moving from their seemingly permanent spot near his ears.

Silently, I exchange a panicked glance with Stone, conveying the unspoken question, "What the fuck is wrong with Mace?" Our eyes meet, and he responds with a barely perceptible shrug. He rises to fetch Mace a cup of tea out of a paternal concern. Mace drains the cup hastily, his gaze fixed unyieldingly on the connection.

The connection abruptly shifts from showing a group of fifteen Racers eating around a smoldering fire, laughing and enjoying the Race for the pilgrimage it should always have been. When the vision settles, my eyes land on Viola Mistflow and her companions, Max and Tulip. They are navigating the treacherous mountain face, their steady progress putting them within the possibility of winning the Race.

Initially, I do not pay close attention. It is a mundane feed of them scaling a vertical rock section, and truthfully, I'm unsure why it's lingered on them for so long. Despite my inexplicable connection to her, I have tuned the feed out to observe Mace. The same cannot be said for him, as he's resting his chin in his hands and not breaking his stare from the trio, absorbing their movements as if there is nothing more he'd rather do today.

From the connection, a phrase catches my ear, compelling me to focus on the women.

“Look around us, Lola. Everything's a myth. The origin of the fae, Wendigos, seps... they're all myths. And what have we learned over the past few days? Myths can come true.”

Mace stiffens beside me, his back rigid in yesterday's black button-up. Glancing at his hands, I notice his nails digging into his palms as he clenches his fists. He's frozen on the connection, his bright eyes unblinking.

Tulip's words resonate with me, as I, too, have seen the myths come true. The Gods *were* cast out. And no one knows how to bring them back.

I cast a sidelong glance at Mace, who remains rigid and unyielding, unaware of my scrutiny. His hands tremble ever so slightly, and his focus remains eerily unbroken, glued to Viola as her dominating form commands the screen.

Mace's draw to Viola must be a perversion of my own. I feel the need to protect her from him and help her grow as a person. At this point, I am starting to believe she is a promise made to me.

Mace clearly sees her as an object to be used for his whims. When he looks at her, it's with hunger and obsession. I'm still trying to figure out what he wants to use her for, but it cannot be good.

I don't want to use her. I just want to keep her safe and near me. I'm not sure when she transformed from a thought that popped into my head randomly to a calling, but I know now that's what it is. Something inside me must protect her at all costs.

Even if that means going up directly against Mace.

I strain to catch the words of the travel party, but Viola's voice cuts through the din of the command center.

"We're going to the elevator."

The phrase hangs in the air, carrying a weight I cannot fully comprehend. Mace's eyes widen, his previously clenched fists unfurling, revealing reddened palms. His body slacks, the unseen and heavy weight removed from his shoulders. The realization dawns on me that Mace is wound tighter than I've ever known him to be. That one phrase spreads over him like cool water on a hot day, erasing the tension that was there just seconds before.

His eyes haven't left the connection, and a smile crosses his face. It is so starkly different than how he looked just moments before, and a foreboding shiver travels up my spine.

He looks on the verge of madness, a wicked glint in his eyes.

I am suddenly more worried for Viola Mistflow than I have ever been.

Chapter 20

Viola

My proclamation that we are going after the elevator does nothing but worsen Max's already deteriorating mood. She has been steadily spiraling downwards, her cheery demeanor eclipsed by a dark cloud. Not only is she irritable and seemingly depressed, but her body moves slower than usual as if her heart is no longer in this endeavor.

"Okay, so say we find the elevator," Max sneers sarcastically. "Doesn't the story go that you die if you're not the first? And there are three of us."

Tulip turns to look over her shoulder at Max. "What? I've never heard that death part before. Maybe it's just a campfire story." She shrugs nonchalantly. "Besides, even if it's true, we're all entering together, right?"

I nod emphatically, for the first time acknowledging something I was sure could never happen. "We're a team. We're going together."

The tension in the air is suffocating. Max has pulled me aside several times, questioning why I trust someone I didn't want to join us. And though it feels so starkly different from how I have treated anyone else in my life, I don't have a good answer to that. There's something about Tulip that exudes safety, and I am powerless to ignore it.

I have always relied on my intuition; this time, it tells me to deviate from my usual solitary path.

"Well, how are we going to find it, then?" Max hisses, keeping her voice low so Tulip cannot hear.

I shrug, "I figure it will speak to us. I'm not sure, honestly, Max. I just have this feeling that there's no way we can lose if we do this."

After the battle with the Wendigo, I have kept the Witch's Ladder in my pocket for easier access, sometimes pulling it out just to feel the pleasant buzz on my fingers. The Ladder seems to come alive in response whenever we mention the elevator. On more than one occasion, we encountered a fork in the path, and I relied on the Ladder to guide our decision in a split second. Clearly, there is magic in the elevator, and since this area is so devoid of it, the Ladder must be responding to what it senses in the distance.

I have not pulled out a feather since the fight, but I would be lying if I said I didn't have an intense curiosity. I ache to know what all the spells contain. The shadow spell was so comforting, its tendrils wrapping around me with care. What would the rest of the Ladder's magic feel like? I imagine a

flurry of ice spinning around me, a cocoon of white. Would it feel cold, or would my body, as the spell caster, be immune?

This must be why humans do not have magic. It feels almost addicting.

We reach another split in the mountain path. Our options are to go straight up toward the arena, where we see multiple resting spots but anticipate a long and grueling vertical journey, or to take the winding path along the side of the mountain, which will also lead us to the arena but at a much slower pace.

Tulip turns to me, her eyes questioning. “Which way do we go?”

I scan the area, my hand in my pocket, gently stroking a feather. This time, there is no pleasant remnant of magic in response. “I don’t think we’re in the right spot,” I mutter, stepping around Tulip to better look at our surroundings.

Max sighs heavily, frustration oozing from her pores. Ignoring her momentarily, I walk along the winding path, searching for anything that calls out to me.

“You know what, Vi? I can’t. I’m done.”

My head snaps up, locking eyes with my oldest friend.

“You can’t what, Max?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

“I cannot sit here and watch you use a piece of string to decide our path. I’m not staking my future on a fucking feather!”

Her words strike like my whip, leaving a stinging mark on my flesh. I reflexively grab at my waist, fingers falling on my whip.

“I’m taking the face path, climbing the mountain,” Max declares with resignation. “Come with me, Vi.”

I shake my head. “No. We had a deal, Max. We do this together. You said you’d follow me to the end, and I know this is the right way to go.”

Tulip, bless her, remains silent, distancing herself as much as possible to afford us some semblance of privacy. “Yeah, well, I said that when I thought we were just going to Ytopie. Now you’re talking about killing a vessel and dismantling society. I do not want to spend my life in a fight. I want to settle down and just exist.”

“I know our plans have changed, Max,” I say softly. “But this is what I was meant to do. I feel it in my bones. We have to stop the Race once and for all. By destroying the vessels, we can ensure the Gods do not return. If there is no hope of the Gods returning, they’ll have to stop the Race.”

Max scoffs, shaking her head. “You’re so naive, Viola. For someone who likes to pretend she’s devoid of emotion, you sure are letting your need for vengeance drive you.”

I wrinkle my brow, confused. “Vengeance? What do I have to be vengeful for?”

“If the Race didn’t exist, your parents would never have left you.”

It's like she slapped me, and I move backward, craving distance from her harsh words. "This has nothing to do with my parents!"

Her laugh, mocking and loud in the empty air, cuts me down. "It has everything to do with your parents. Everything you do is because of them. They neglected your emotional well-being, so now you cannot open yourself to love. They left you in the Race, so now you're going to fight to dismantle the fabric of fae society. All of it can be traced back to your parents."

I find myself tapping my fingers along my collarbone while I attempt to process what Max has said. "I can open myself up to love," I say quietly. "You say that like I'm broken."

The look on her face churns my gut. "You are broken, Vi. Since Link..."

Anger bubbles inside me, and I lash out. "Do not mention Link!"

"Don't pretend this sudden need to find the elevator is anything but you wanting to prove to yourself that he didn't die out here, Viola! He did, and we all know it. There was no elevator for him to find."

Tears well in my eyes, a foreign feeling. I try to remember the last time I cried but come up empty. "I have to believe he found it, Max. And we will, too." I dip my head, trying to subtly wipe the tears from my face. "We have to," I add, voice barely above a whisper.

Tulip crosses to me and takes my hand in her own. The gesture is one that I welcome, a comfort that I used to imagine only a sister could provide.

“I thought after all you’d been through, that one day you’d change, Viola,” Max says, her voice tinged with sadness.

“And you want to change me?” Anger pushes the grief from thinking of Link from my body, threatening to engulf me.

“Honestly? Yeah, Viola. I do. You’re impulsive, bitter, and rude. You’re angry at the world for something your parents did to you, refusing to place blame where it belongs. Not everything can be attributed to the Race, Vi. Not everything can be traced back to your shitty childhood where you didn’t even get a chance to be a kid.” The vitriol spewing from her mouth like poison changes this woman I have known my whole life into a stranger.

She fights the tears that are so close to spilling while my veins turn to ice, and a fire burns in my stomach. “There’s no need to change me, Max. I’m fine the way I am. And yes, I may have mentioned after killing Amio that I needed to change, but you know what? It was a fucking lie. Everything I’ve done has kept all of us alive, and I will not apologize for it.”

“How do you sleep at night, Viola, knowing you’ll never find satisfaction? Even if we reach Ytopie, you’ll still be miserable.”

Tulip, unable to quietly absorb our escalating voices, intervenes. “Max, where is this coming from? I may not have

known you long, but this doesn't seem like you."

Max redirects her anger toward Tulip. "You're right, Tulip. You don't know me. Since you brought up killing the vessels, I've debated whether to stick around with you two. I've been stewing on it, trying to understand why it unsettles me so much. I still can't figure it out, but I do know that I can't stand to be around you anymore."

Max's venomous words bring tears to Tulip's eyes. Sweet Tulip, who has lost her parents and brother, and somehow still manages to remain a bright little sun. I suddenly feel fiercely protective of her, as if she were my family.

"Max, that's uncalled for. Tulip hasn't done anything to deserve your anger. Your frustration is clearly directed at me, even if I don't understand why." I try to placate her, raising my palms in a gesture of peace.

"I can't do this anymore, Viola," Max whispers, her voice barely audible. She takes a step away from me.

I move toward her, but she recoils as if I will scorch her. "Are you coming with me, Vi?" Her voice is pleading, desperate.

I shake my head. "I... I can't, Max. I need you to come with me. I know this is the right thing to do. I know we're on the right path."

Max adjusts her pack and looks at me, sadness in her eyes. "I can't, Vi. I just can't." She turns to start her ascent up the face of the mountain.

With increasing and out-of-character panic, I cry, “Wait! What about our deal, Max? We promised to face this together and live normal lives in Ytopie. You promised!”

She turns to look at me, shaking her head with sadness. “Promises can be broken, Viola. And you’ll never be happy with a normal life, we both know it. I’ll see you around, I hope.”

Darkness engulfs my vision, and I drop to my knees. My blood runs cold, and an unbearable pressure weighs on my chest. Tulip is behind me, her hand on my back, rubbing small circles. “Lola, I think you’re having a panic attack,” she murmurs. I shake my head, inhaling deeply. “No, I’m fine. I just... yeah, I just lost my footing, I guess.” When I look at my hands, they both press a chaotic pattern on my thighs.

I glance up at Max, who is already scaling the face of the mountain. She has always been a swift climber and is already nearing a small outcropping with a rest platform. Tears once more stream down my face, the salty taste lingering on my parched lips as I watch my friend’s retreating form.

Max turns her head to look back at me and reaches blindly for a rock as a handhold.

The rock shifts, sliding out from the mountain face. She struggles to find another handhold, and in her panic, her feet start to slip.

Rocks shower down around us as Max thrashes above.

I am immobilized, unable to help.

She's too high up.

She's too good of a climber.

Finally, her hands slip completely, arms flailing behind her as she tumbles backward down the face of the mountain.

Helplessly, I watch her body fall, a silent scream contorting my face, mirroring the very real screams escaping her mouth.

For a split second, I think I see shadows attempting to grab hold of her and pull her to safety. But it is nothing more than wishful thinking.

Max's body crashes onto the ground below, limbs splayed in unnatural angles.

And my world goes dark.

Chapter 21

Zeph

Ever since Mace heard mention of the elevator, he has been on edge.

The elevator rumor, woven by the Patricians long ago, was designed to ignite hope and anticipation among humans. It whispered of a chance to transcend the Race, an escape from the reality of the pilgrimage.

I've always been surprised that humans even understand the concept of an elevator. In Ytopie, we utilize Storm-type magic in a grid to address minor needs. Around the clock, a small team of Bliksem cast their spells to keep it fully charged. I prefer using flames more, but only some have Summer magic, so the grid is exceedingly helpful to our society. Our particularly tall buildings may have an elevator. This small box rises and lowers throughout a building using a crank and lever, which the grid can usually help operate. It's especially beneficial for our elderly population or those fae with mobility issues who may struggle with the stone stairs. Fae may live a

long time, but we're not immune to the bodily effects of old age and injuries.

Humans, however, do not have such luxuries. They heat their water over fires, use outhouses, and have candles to light their homes. An elevator is as foreign of a concept to them as what it is like to utilize magic. Nevertheless, the rumor seems to have stuck.

It's hard to believe that a simple myth whispered around circles was responsible for the ruination of a friendship and the loss of life.

The silence in the room is suffocating, each breath heavy with grief and loss. It is only punctuated by Nimh and Cirrha's soft cries, grief over someone they would never meet. I had not realized until this point how attached everyone had grown to this trio of women. I knew the connection focused on them frequently, but part of me believed it was just me noticing every time it was on them. The room's reaction tells a different story about the affection developed for this group.

Cirrha, in her kindness, broke the spell amplifying the voices of the travel party, sparing us the heartbreaking screams of a woman falling to her death. The utter silence of the connection is eerie. We can see Tulip, the other of Max's travel companions, her face contorted in agony and grief. We cannot hear the wails of desperation that undoubtedly envelop Gallant Summit.

Viola is deathly still, tears flooding down her blank face. I know she must be thinking the same thing I do - that there was

no reason for Max to have fallen. She was a proficient climber, having already scaled tougher portions of the mountain.

Unable to look at Viola's stoney face any longer, I push from my chair and move to the window. Looking down at the city below me, I see bustling people, thriving businesses, and shimmering buildings. The sun is high, casting warm tendrils across the square. It is a stark contrast to the melancholy that permeates this room.

Grief strikes my chest. Viola has undergone such trauma, and this is one more for the list. My compulsion to protect her is visceral. Watching her these past however many days has grown my affection for her considerably. It feels like I've known her forever, and we were fated to meet.

But she isn't. Or rather, she shouldn't be. My loyalty is supposed to be to Ytopie, not to a human woman in the Race, and I am uncomfortable with how often I need to remind myself of that.

I turn my back to the window and gaze at the connection, where a stoic Viola comforts a distraught Tulip. Viola's face is a mask. There is no emotion behind her eyes, only darkness and resignation. I watch as she takes a sip from her canteen and turns to Tulip, wiping the girl's face with a rag from her bag.

The only person who seems to not be upset by Max's death is Mace. When Max fell to the ground as she scaled the mountain face, he was on his feet, moving closer to the connection. His restlessness consumed him, his fingers flexing

and stretching absentmindedly. As he fixated on the connection, his eyes gleamed with a disconcerting mix of anticipation and fascination as Max fell to her death.

Mace's restless energy infects the room, his customarily composed demeanor replaced by an uncharacteristic agitation. He paces back and forth along the side of the room, his steps echoing with an unsteady rhythm. The mutterings that escape his lips are a jumble of fragmented thoughts, disjointed like he cannot make sense of his own mind.

I observe him intently, my curiosity piqued by this unusual display. He is a storm of anticipation and uncertainty. His Autumn magic has always geared more towards prosperity and influence, but the storm magic rolls off him now. The air crackles around his fingertips, and I spot fragments of magic floating around him.

I never cared much for Mace; there is too much bad blood there, but I feel a twisted sympathy for him. Whatever is going on with him has destroyed his demeanor. I look around the room, searching for anyone else who notices the change in his behavior. Most of the Patricians and advisors are too absorbed in their own processing of the untimely death of Mousy.

Abruptly, Mace's agitated pacing halts, and he exits the room, his long legs allowing him to quickly disappear around the corner.

The typically snarky and cold head of the Patricians is spiraling. My gut tells me it has something to do with the

vessel he's seeking. There must be a reason why this is so important to him.

I wait for a beat and follow him, hanging back so he doesn't notice me. He heads down to the basement level of the Palace. It's quiet, but I have always been light on my feet. Still, he must be heavily distracted to not even notice me.

Once I realized where he was going, I was able to take a different route to avoid his notice. When I reach the basement, I perch on the stairs and see Mace pacing in front of a shadowed figure. The hum of storm magic from the grid emanates from a single light hanging from the ceiling.

This basement, generally used for storage only, has been cleaned out recently. Replacing the floor-to-ceiling boxes of Solstice decorations and supplies for the workers in the Palace is an apartment of sorts. I can see two sleeping chambers off one side and a sitting room with an ornate rug, a few comfortable chairs, and several floor lights spread about. Someone made a significant effort to make this place habitable.

Mace is excitedly pacing, practically bouncing on the balls of his feet. "It's her. She's the vessel. I knew it would be her."

"Are you sure?" the figure says, voice barely above a whisper.

"Positive. She's shown plenty of signs throughout her life, but her friend just plunged to her death for breaking a promise to her." Mace's voice is shuddering with excitement. It's an inappropriate reaction to having just watched a woman die.

“Curse magic, then,” the shadowed figure says as Mace nods emphatically.

“I started to pay closer attention when she killed the man in the cave.”

“I noticed that,” the figure says. His voice is so familiar, but I cannot place it. “It seems like she may have some blood magic within her.”

Mace’s profile is silhouetted by the light, and I see a grin stretching across his face. Suddenly, he looks excited, devious, and more like the ruthless fae I know.

“She’s a Winter. She’s the vessel we’ve been waiting for.”

I have to fight back a cough, sputtering a bit. It’s clear they’ve been talking about Viola Mistflow, but she cannot be a Winter Seasonale. It simply is not possible. She’s a human. Besides the fact that humans do not have magic, Winter magic is extinct.

The idea of her not only being a Winter but also the vessel, something to be utilized by Mace, churns my stomach. Whatever all of this means, Mace’s interest in her does not feel like a good thing for Viola. I am overwhelmed by the need to keep her from this brutal fae. What used to be a hum of requirement has become a roar of need.

Suddenly, nothing else matters more than keeping her safe.

Mace moves to a chair, sitting down and running his hands through his hair. It’s in poor shape and badly needs a wash. More energy pulses through him than I’ve seen in the last day,

his eyes waking up and returning the sneer that used to permanently adorn his face.

A chill slithers down my spine as the shaded figure finally reveals himself, and Stone steps into the dim light, his face etched with a gravity that matches the weight of the revelation. My heart plummets as he speaks quietly, “Then it is time to remove Miss Viola Mistflow from the Race.”

Chapter 22

Viola

My grief is waves crashing against me, breaking and falling but always returning.

My grief is a living, breathing animal trying to burst from my chest.

My grief is a broken bird struggling to get back in the air.

My grief is guilt and self-loathing.

My grief is consuming me, pulling me under a blanket of despair.

Chapter 23

Zeph

I've got to get to her first.

That's the only thought in my mind as I slip from the stairs of the dark basement, seeking the warm summer light to calm me. It's pushing out any other thought I have. I know in my bones that I cannot let Viola fall into Mace and Stone's hands.

Stone.

Stone is the figure that has been plotting with Mace this whole time.

How could he? How could he keep this from me?

I don't have time to process the impact of that betrayal. I must figure out how to get to Viola before Mace does. If she truly is a Winter Seasonale, she is as valuable a weapon as I have ever seen.

I start to dissect everything I've seen from Viola over the past few days through the connection, and pieces start to fall

into place.

When she spilled Amio's blood, something awoke in her. It was plain to see. She handled him and his death as if something inside her had finally spread its wings.

No one knows the extent of blood magic Winters are capable - how could we? To my knowledge, there hasn't been a practitioner of it in living memory, and we have only one book on it. But if I assume for even a moment that she has it, she is carrying a power blessed by Himureal himself.

Then there are the shadows. She may have pulled a feather to conjure them in the fight with the Wendigo, but they came from *her*. They erupted from her body, and she had dominion over them.

Fuck.

The pieces click into place, solving a puzzle I didn't know I started.

Viola Mistflow is a Winter Seasonale.

Viola Mistflow is the last Winter Seasonale.

And Mace Nightroot is about to have her in his possession unless I can stop him.



After catching Plume, Loris, and Nimh up on what happened in the basement and with Viola, they stare at me, gaping.

“I’m sorry, what?” Plume says, shaking her head. “There’s no way - she’s a human. She cannot be a Seasonale - it doesn’t make sense. We would’ve seen it before now.” Loris, oddly silent, holds his face deep in concentration.

We’re standing in a small corner of the courtyard behind the Palace. The sun is recharging me, the incessant buzzing of my power beneath my skin calming with its rays. The beautiful day is harshed by the revelation of Mace’s plans and Stone’s betrayal.

Nimh is wracked with sadness. “A Winter...” she sighs, wrapping her delicate tawny arms around her chest. “I can kiss Nereids becoming a Seasonale goodbye, then.”

Loris snaps his head up, concentration breaking. “THAT is your reaction to this, Nimh? Everything Zeph just told us, and you’re concerned about your political standing?”

She rises to her full height, which isn’t saying much. She’s barely past Loris’ naval. “Yes, that’s what I’m concerned about. I have my people to think of. With a Winter in play, the loyalty of Water can go to either Winter or Summer. This means we will be divided as a group because even within us, we have our own theories. We cannot guarantee that they will make the correct choice.”

“What even is the correct choice?” Plume says, barely above a whisper. Her shoulders are slumped, and she looks around the group pleadingly.

“Obviously, with Summer,” I interject. Nimh shoots me a glare.

“Viola Mistflow is an unknown with already questionable morals. If Mace gets his hands on her, we cannot be certain if her decisions will be the right ones,” I implore my friends. While what I say is true, I work to disguise my true motivations towards the woman.

Loris is pacing now, running his hands through his hair. It’s sticking up, looking like he touched the lightning he so often wields. I swear, occasionally, I see sparkling power running under his skin. “I’ve almost got enough Bliksem’s support to cut the grid, darkening Ytopie.”

I raise my eyebrows. “You’re going to throw Ytopie into darkness?” This is news to me.

He nods curtly. “If you drop the shield at the same time, the Racers can rush the city from the arena. Plume can block exits with vegetation.”

I’m slack-jawed, in awe of Loris’ plan. “Wow... that’s a really great plan.”

He shrugs, his cheeks tinging pink. “Thanks. But it all hinges on you getting the shield down. You’re the only Summer powerful enough to do it alone.”

He’s not wrong. Just as Mace is the strongest Autumn, I am far above the strongest Summer. But if I am dropping the shield...

“What about Viola?” I ask, locking eyes with Loris.

“What about her?”

“How will I get her away from Mace if I’m here breaking the shield?”

Plume puts her hand on my shoulder, commanding my attention. “You wouldn’t, Zeph. We’d have to let Mace get her and deal with that later. If we want to give the humans any chance at getting into the city so we can tell them what is really going on, we have to take it.”

I am overcome with desperation. I cannot let Mace have her. Everything in my body screams that I need her. “We cannot let her fall to him,” I say quietly, pleadingly.

Nimh reaches out, snaking her hand into mine. “Zeph, you cannot save everyone. I don’t want Mace to have access to a Winter any more than you do. Sometimes, you must sacrifice the one for the many.”

Fear and anger grip my chest, threatening to burst. “We cannot sacrifice her! If he tries to harness her power, she could die. She clearly has no control over it. It killed her best friend!” I give a gesture of finality with my hands, punctuating my thoughts.

Confused looks flash across the faces of the only three people I can reveal this to. “She didn’t get Max killed. Max fell,” Nimh says quietly.

I shake my head, stepping away from the women who flank me. “No, that’s the thing. Stone and Mace mentioned curse magic. I thought that was them grappling to see what they wanted to see.” I take a deep breath, picking at the skin around my nails. “And then Viola said, ‘We had a deal’ before Max

climbed up the mountain, and Max said it was broken. And she fell.”

Loris inhales sharply and turns me to face him. “You’re sure that’s what the women said?” he asks frantically, grabbing me by the shoulders.

I nod rapidly. “I’m positive.” He swears under his breath and lets me go, resuming his frantic pacing.

“What’s gotten into you, Loris?” Plume asks, confusion lacing her tone.

“I have studied the Seasonale and Gods my whole life,” Loris says, not looking at any of us. I’ve never seen him agitated like this. “Himureal could trick people into bonds with him. It was called Soulbinding. He could tie their souls to his with promises. There was no ritual, no consent, only his intention. If someone promised him something, he could ensnare them.”

“That makes sense then if Viola is a Winter. That must’ve been what happened to Max.”

Loris stops pacing, fixing me with a brutal stare. “You misunderstand me, Zeph. Himureal could do it. Not Winters.”

I take a moment to process what he’s saying. Plume and Nimh share a look that must mirror mine, a confused sort of horror. “What are you saying, Loris?” Nimh whispers, her voice like a mist of rain on the wind.

“I’m saying she’s not a Winter. I’m saying she’s a God.”

Chapter 24

Viola

“**V**iola, snap out of it. We have to get out of here.”

Tulip’s voice is underwater, barely audible over the rushing in my ears. I turn to look at her, struggling to get her beautiful and dirty face into focus.

“What?”

The hot summer sun casts brutal brightness across the tear tracks on her cheeks. She’s nearly chewed a hole in her lip. Her chest is splotchy and red underneath her tattered pink blouse. Is that what I look like?

I reach to wipe tears from my face and find my skin dry. I look at my hands, but it’s like they belong to another. They’re shaking, clenched tightly in fists.

“This is my fault, Viola.”

My eyes snap up to Tulip, momentarily shaking me out of whatever trance I’m in with her words. When I respond, my

throat feels scratchy, like it's gone unused for decades. "No, it's not, Tulip. How could you think that?"

She casts her eyes down as tears threaten to spill again. Maybe they never stopped. "I'm the one who suggested the elevator, and that's what split us off. Or maybe it's me joining up with you two at all. Either way, it comes back to me."

This young woman has endured so much in so few days. Seeing her beat herself up like this snaps something in my chest. I push my grief down, burying it beneath a layer of denial to unearth later. Maybe the pressure of my refutation will turn it into something beautiful and valuable.

It seems unlikely.

"Tulip, it was an accident. A brutal, horrific accident. But an accident all the same."

Something churns in my gut, my body protesting against my proclamation. Every part of me longs to take the blame, the credit, for her death. I shake my head, trying to dislodge those disconcerting feelings from my brain.

I know I am not to blame.

Am I not to blame?

In the Race, there are no friends. In the Race, there is no family.

I have known this my whole life. It was cemented the day my parents left me on my own.

I thought I was strong enough to follow that missive they gave me so long ago.

But I wasn't.

Max was my friend.

Max was my family.

And because I was not a good friend to her, I was not a good family member to her, I let her go. And she died.

Maybe my gut is right. This is my fault.

I look around the small, level ground of rocks we still stand on, unsure what to do now. My eyes land on my dust-covered boots, rooted to the same spot they were when Max left.

We need to continue looking for the elevator. If we don't find it, Max died because I could not let a myth from my past go.

The sun continues to beat down on the back of my neck. I tap my fingers along my thighs, counting quietly to myself. When I was small, my father would do it for me, using counting to help me align my breathing with my brain.

When the thunderstorm in my brain pulls out, I drop my hands loosely by my side and finally step toward Tulip.

I pull the Witch's Ladder from my pocket, wrapping it loosely around my fist. My body comes alive with the touch, the Ladder calming the storm of grief that thrashes against my walls. The hum that climbs my limbs is familiar and soothing, and I briefly wish for the shadow snakes to come and wrap

around my arms for comfort. Taking a deep, cleansing breath, I point towards the slowly sloping path up the mountain. “We go this way.”

And so we go, leaving Max’s body on the ground below us to become one with the earth.

After several long minutes of walking in silence, the Ladder warms, almost burning my skin. I quickly drop it on the dirt where I stand with a yelp. Tulip whirls towards me, panic and paranoia lacing her face. “Lola, what’s wrong?”

I shake the pain from my hand and glance at my skin. It’s dirty but not red from the heat. “The Ladder ... it burned me.” Her eyes brighten, “We must be close then, right?” Hope fills my chest. I cast my eyes across the sparse landscape, looking for anything amiss. The forest lay below us, shadows and branches holding our grief and the bodies of those we love.

“What is an elevator?” Tulip suddenly asks.

I pause. “I don’t think I know.”

We stare at each other, mirroring expressions of incredulity on our faces. At once, we both burst into hysterical laughter. We have not had the chance to even begin to process our grief, and it is bubbling up in laughter, an inappropriate emotion that somehow feels right. “We’re looking for it and don’t even know what it is?” I gasp out, bending over with my hands on my knees, hardly able to catch my breath from laughing so hard.

“I thought you knew!” Tulip responds, tears springing from her eyes at the force of her laughs.

I shake my head, inhaling deeply to calm my body. “I never even thought to ask. It felt so foreign, like just some sort of magic. I cannot believe we don’t know what we’re looking for.” The idea is ludicrous. Max died for something we do not know if we will recognize when we find it.

I shake my head as Tulip comes down from her hysteria and move to grab the Witch’s Ladder.

It’s gone.

I sweep my eyes across the rock face, trying to find it. “Tulip, where’s the Ladder?”

Confusion flickers across her face, followed swiftly by fear. “We lost it? How will we find the elevator now?” I drop to my knees, moving rocks and debris to search. I see a flash of black down the mountain face several feet below us. There’s a small platform on an outcropping of rocks.

“Is that it?” I ask, pointing down to the darkened section of rock.

Tulip scrunches her nose, squinting to see. “I can’t be sure.”

Without thinking, I swing my legs down and drop to the platform. The landing rattles my bones, my teeth knocking together, the force leaving me tasting copper.

Tulip inhales sharply. “You could’ve killed yourself, Lola!”

“I didn’t.”

I go to move the boulder over the smudge of black I saw, and when I do, I see ...

“IS THAT A DOOR?” Tulip shouts, excitement bubbling up inside her. I look and see her jumping on her toes, childlike excitement in her eyes. A wide grin stretches my face.

The Witch’s Ladder is curled around the handle of a hatch in the rock face like a proud cat.

Chapter 25

Zeph

I must find her.

I left Plume, Loris, and Nimh. They tried to stop me, of course. But I have no control over myself when it comes to her. Of course, they're disappointed in my decision and are trying to find a few Summer Seasonale who will work to dismantle the shields so the plan can continue without me.

I cannot let Mace have her. I don't know what will happen when he has her, but if Loris's statement is true, that she's a God? He cannot be allowed to command that level of power.

My brain twists and stretches in an attempt to fathom what he's truly capable of. I've known him all my life, and we've never gotten on well. Is my desire to thwart him a personal vendetta, or can I trust my gut?

Intuition is causing me to abandon everything I've planned to free the Lowlands from the oppressive rule of Mace and the other Patricians. Can I even trust it anymore? A flicker of

doubt crosses my mind - it's not too late to abandon Viola to Mace and Stone and go back to assisting my friends.

The moment the thought enters, it leaves, and I feel a pull from my center, urging me into the Palace to find Mace.

What are Mace and Stone even planning to do with Viola? I try to push down the feeling of betrayal that rises like bile every time I think of Stone. I cannot let that betrayal weigh me down until I know what's happening.

What kind of vessel could Viola even be? What would she be used for? My mind flashes to an image of Viola tied up and contained in a cage, held captive until she agrees to do Mace's bidding.

I would kill him.

How have I missed all their plotting? This year cannot have been the start of it. It must have gone on for ages. And is this the first time they've extracted someone from the Race? Viola is a city favorite - how will they explain where she went?

My boots slap on the Palace's stone floor as I run to the command center, eyes wildly searching for Mace. The room is empty save for Cirrha, who trains those rich brown eyes on my panicked face. "Woah, Zeph, what's going on?" Her tension is evident in the torn-up pieces of paper that litter the table in front of her.

"Where's Mace?"

If I can't trust Stone, I doubt I can trust Cirrha. She's always worked well with Mace. Still, the desire to tell her what he's

up to swirls in me. I compartmentalize it away, saving it for later when I may need her on my side.

Her eyes roll at me, and she turns back to balling and tearing paper. “He and Stone left a few minutes ago. Something about heading to the arena to set it up for the winner’s ceremony.”

That’s clear across town.

I’m out the door in a flash, running through the streets of Ytopie to get to the arena. Citizens jump out of my path, looking at me as a man possessed. The streets are too firm for my boots, which were not made for running, but I push through. I don’t know what I’m looking for, what Mace and Stone could want at the arena, but I have to get there.

I leave the confines of the city and see the arena not far ahead. The stands built around it from wood and stone, carefully erected by Geomancers, sit empty. In just days, they’ll be filled with people from the city, excitedly waiting to welcome their victors.

I see Mace and Stone in the distance, the sun casting long shadows off their bodies. Outside of the city, the landscape is less manicured and wilder. The grass beneath my feet is plush, muffling the sounds of my footsteps. But I do not care if they hear me at this point. I just need to keep Viola out of their hands.

Stone and Mace enter a door at the arena’s base, and I catch it before it slams shut to slip my body through it. My chest is burning with the exertion, no doubt made worse by my rapidly increasing alcohol consumption lately. I watch from behind a

corner as the two slip into a door that leads to the tunnels under the arena. Racers use these tunnels to enter directly into the field.

Bypassing the door they used, I run directly onto the field, aiming for the arena-level ramp that leads down, hoping to cut them off. I take the winding ramp as fast as I can. The lumbering footsteps of Mace and Stone on the stairs hit my ears. They're not far from me now.

The tunnels are narrow and unlit, my intentions igniting flames in the sconces along the walls as I pass them. Racers enter from the top of the mountain to run through it in these tunnels for the win at the end of the Race. They're only meant to hold one person across, so no one can enter with another. The musty smell of decay assaults my nose. No one seems to have cleaned the tunnels out since last year, so the exertion of dozens of Racers has permeated the walls. I can barely hear the scuttling of rats' feet over my own heavy breathing.

I reach the end of the ramp and see the hallway to my left that leads outside to the mountain. But straight ahead of me, I see a tiny flicker of light between two stones in the wall. I squint, attempting to determine the source of brightness, but I cannot see past the glare. Steadying myself, I call upon the light magic within my veins. Even though it is not my primary magic focus, it comes easily to me in this time of need. The light between the rocks grows, pulsing with my magic. Small specks of bright white float around the edges of the light.

Revealing what was once hidden, my magic outlines a door. I run for it, pushing along the rocks. It opens with a small amount of force. Sliding inside, I shut it behind me as silently as I can. I look for anything to prevent it from being opened from the outside, but I'm at a loss. As a last-ditch effort, I cast a shield around it, hoping for the best.

I take the well-lit tunnel down further beneath the arena. There is a dripping sound, remnants of its history as a living cave forced into a manmade pathway. The skittering of small mammals over my feet almost causes me to lose my footing a few times. It feels like this path goes on for days, but I believe it is just my anxiety to get to Viola.

Abruptly, the path opens, and I'm standing in a vast, chilled room. It has several tunnels branching from it, high ceilings, and a rich carpet taking up a portion of the floor. One side holds a raised stage, and sconces line the walls, buzzing with Bliksem magic. It appears to be its own command center. There is a connection up on the wall and several tables and chairs throughout the room, laden with paperwork and empty glasses. The connection shows a steady stream of a rocky platform, currently devoid of life. Shelves and bookcases line the eastern wall, stuffed with old texts and pages. There is a mustiness of decay and cobwebs in the corners of the ceiling.

This area is on no maps of the city or the arena I have seen. There is no telling how long it's been here or what it's been used for. I search for any sign of who's been here, knowing in my gut it's Mace and Stone.

The sound of Mace and Stone entering the tunnel fills my ears, and I know they'll be here any second. I am still trying to figure out where to go or how to get to Viola, and I'm running out of time.

My eyes land on an open book on the table, its pages yellowed with age and delicate to the touch.

It's a book on the banishment of the Gods.

I flashback to the conversation I overheard Mace having with who I now know is Stone in the library. This must be the text Stone mentioned. I try my best to speed-read the pages open before me. "Blood pact.... connection... vessel... Fuck. This is why they want Viola," I whisper to myself.

I look up and see Viola and Tulip entering the platform highlighted by the connection. Despite the grief that hangs over them like a storm cloud, they look pleased with themselves. I see Viola bend up to pick up her Witch's Ladder.

Understanding the urgency Mace and Stone have had to get to her now, I swing my vision between the tunnels. None of them speak to me, so I throw myself forward, hoping I make the right choice.

Chapter 26

Viola

Tulip stands beside me, her body trembling with excitement. I retrieve the Witch's Ladder from where it lay, wrapped around the handle hidden in the rock face. I stroke a feather, whispering thanks as if it's a living creature before I put it in my pocket for safekeeping.

I turn to face my travel companion. I grab her cheeks between my hands, and she looks up at me. "Tulip... I didn't want you to travel with me at all."

She grins widely. "I know. I saw how much I annoyed you."

I nodded, hands still on her face and my eyes locked on hers. "I don't know how, but you've grown on me so much. You are a bright light, forcing me to relinquish parts of me I felt were embedded in my soul. I feel like I was always supposed to find you. Who knows what the purpose was when you stumbled into that clearing."

She smiles at that, her eyes sparkling.

“What I’m saying is, thanks for being here.” She wiggles from my grasp and bumps her shoulder against mine in a familial way.

“Thanks for letting me tag along. Now, let’s find out what an elevator is.”

My laugh surprises me, and I grab the rusted handle and pull with all my might. It scrapes my palms, drying the skin. I cringe at the feeling.

“I’ll need some help here, Tulip.” She also clutches the handle, and we strain to open the cover. The hinges are rusted, sealed tight in the rock face from years of disuse. With a groan and a lot of effort, we manage to open it a few inches.

“Can you hold it open for just a second, Tulip?”

She strains, legs firmly planted. “Sure, I can do this all day,” she puffs out. I search for anything to hold the door open, but before I can even start, she drops the door, and it slams shut loudly, ringing through the area. A few birds take off from their perches in the treetops. “Shit, I’m sorry. It’s just so damn heavy.”

I absentmindedly scratch at the base of my neck, trying to think of a way to prop the door open enough for us to slide in. We’re so close to salvation that I can taste it. If only we can figure out how to open this Godsdamned door.

The Ladder in my pocket heats again as if trying to get my attention. Maybe I’m losing my mind because this Ladder is starting to feel like a pet. My mind suddenly flashes to Hilda,

my chicken back home. I made it to the elevator. I really will never see her again.

I pull out the Ladder, wincing at the contact. Scanning up and down the feathers, I try to remember what spells Winter can do. The last thing I want is to just pull a feather and cast an unknown spell, but what choice do I have? Tendrils of cold creep across my hairline, and my eyes are drawn to an ice-blue feather.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I pull the feather and feel a gust of frigid air vortex around me. A surge of overwhelming power fills my chest, my body buzzing with the spell. Cold drips down my arms, and I look down at my hands. My fingers are frozen, the tips turning white with the cold I do not seem to feel. The gusts of air around me solidify into tendrils of ice. They snake out from the whirlwind, climbing up the metal of the door. Tulip yelps and backs away as the ice lays across the hinges, freezing the metal. Underneath the casing of ice, the hinges look so delicate.

My toes press up against a large rock, and I heave it with both hands. Using all the strength I can muster, I throw it at the door. It hits with a deafening ringing that rattles my teeth. The ice shatters easily, taking the hinges of the door with it. "Tulip, get way back!" I yell, jumping to the side. She moves, and the door teeters and falls to the ground with a roar.

The gyre of ice around me slows and drops to the ground in a mist of water. It's cool and refreshing on my sun and exertion heated skin. Dust that flew up with the impact of the

boulder and door drifts away on a cool breeze. We cough and sputter, dirt filling our lungs and watering our eyes. As it clears, we squint against the sunlight to see behind the door.

There, on the side of the mountain, is a small room with a cage on the front. And inside it is a lever. I look to my left to see Tulip, eyes wide with excitement that I have no doubt is reflected in my own.

“So that’s an elevator,” Tulip muses.

Chapter 27

Zeph

A sequence of loud crashes sound down the tunnel, several feet ahead of me. My chest tightens, and anticipation crawls up my spine. This must be Viola. My skin is alive, crawling with anticipation the closer I get to the source of the noise.

Hearing Mace and Stone behind me in the rounded underground command center, I'm frantic. They seem nonplussed about the noise, expecting Viola to just enter their veritable seps den.

As I run, I strain my ears in hopes of hearing any other noise from the face of the mountain. In the distance, I swear I can make out the sound of a feminine voice.

My heart beats with excitement.

Could that be her?

Am I going to finally get to meet Viola Mistflow?

Something in my bones yearns for her. I have no idea who this woman is, and I have never met her, but I know I was always meant to be with her. It feels fated.

I skid to a stop before a small gate closed over an empty corridor carved straight up. Sunlight streams in from cracks around a dark square. The square lowers slowly, and the sounds of voices become louder and clearer. I cannot make out exactly what they're saying over the noise of the elevator lowering.

It jolts to a stop in front of me, and I whip the gate open. I look into the frantic eyes of Viola Mistflow, grey and stormy, her face contorted in shock. I don't miss that her hand sits on the hilt of her dagger, ready to attack. Tulip is frozen, her body half-hidden behind Viola's, where she clearly was shoved.

Viola is tall – as tall as me, it would seem. I don't know how I missed that while watching her all this time. She's dirty and wild-looking, her body clearly weighed down with grief, exhaustion, and fear. Tensed and ready for a fight, strength radiates off her in waves. I briefly scan my eyes over her figure, a picture of refined brutality, and I suddenly realize just how different she looks from the fae women I've known my whole life.

I am immediately reminded that while I may know not only her but the connection we are bound to share, she has never seen me before, so her senses are on high alert for danger. I must look agitated and disheveled from my journey underground.

Attempting to throw on a winning smile, I reach my hand to her.

“Come on, we have to get you two out of here before you’re found.”

Chapter 28

Viola

The small elevator lowers us down slowly. We're heading into the mountain. Tulip is giddy with excitement, bouncing on her toes and saying, "I knew it" repeatedly. As excited as I am that we found it, the loss of Max continues its unrelenting stabs into my heart. She should be here with us.

An overwhelming sense of unease washes over me, and I shove Tulip behind me. "Wha-" she begins, and the elevator makes contact with the ground.

In front of us is a fae male with a scruffy beard, bright green eyes, and auburn hair. He's got a large black tattoo wrapping up his neck, peeking out of the collar of his untucked and rumpled shirt. He's insignificantly taller than me, and his shoulders are so broad he radiates strength in a lethal way. Despite my nerves being on edge, my eyes cannot help dragging down his sharp jawline.

He would be exceedingly handsome if he didn't look terrified.

Fear strikes through my gut. This isn't how it was supposed to be. He looks frantic, glancing around his shoulders like he's being chased. His breathing is labored, and I recognize him as someone running from something.

He stares at me with a familiarity that unsettles me. It's like he can see through me, into my very being. It sends a shiver down my spine, the unnerving sensation causing my fingers to tighten around the hilt of my dagger.

He reaches a hand to me, and I automatically take a step back.

This is *not* right.

This isn't how it's supposed to be.

We made it to the elevator. Someone here should be celebrating us, treating us to the sparkling mead given to the winners in the arena. Instead, our welcoming party is a solitary fae man with unmistakable fear in his eyes.

Why do I get the distinct impression that we're not supposed to be here?

My worries are confirmed as the man slaps on a forced smile and pleads with me, "Come on, we have to get you two out of here before you're found."

Part 2 - Ytopie

Chapter 29

Mace

Everything I have tirelessly worked for is finally coming to fruition.

For what feels like my entire life, I was groomed for this. Stone always said I was destined to bring back the Gods.

To save all of Ytopie.

And finally, we found our vessel.

Several years ago, we thought that the boy Link, who stumbled into the garrison from the elevator, had some affinity for magic that could prove useful. While there were moments of promising sparks, what really interested me was the stories he told about a girl from his village.

Of course, he didn't willingly give up that information. But sleep deprivation and starvation loosen tongues.

Initially, he begged to be let go, to return to the girl he loved. The times he spoke of her were when flickers of magic within

him flared to life. It was subtle, but I saw it. His soul was bound to hers. She had her tendrils in him, even then.

Since she reached the age of Ascension, I've watched her progress in the Race. I've never let Stone in on the depth of my suspicions. Of course, he suspected she held potential, being descended from one of the original four families, but she was an intimation, not a sure thing.

But if he saw what I did, he would've grabbed her during her Ascension year. I wanted her to have time to mature and grow with her magic. I didn't want to risk grabbing her too early or making the wrong choice.

She felt like my secret. And she proved to be more than I could ever imagine this year.

As her magic grew more and more apparent, I slept less and less. Something inside me is drawn toward her, an invisible cord that makes it impossible to exist without knowing if she is okay. Stone noticed my growing interest and expressed his concerns that I would become too attached to her.

After all, what is the likelihood a vessel will survive once its host God returns?

I am not attached to her. I am drawn to her power and her usefulness.

When I first joined the Patricians, Stone explained the importance of a vessel and how we had to get the Gods back. With the Gods' return, magic can spread across the land again,

rejuvenating waning fae magic and heralding the end of the Race once and for all.

Despite what some may say about me, I'm not a fan of the senseless killing that comes with the Race.

But we all have our parts to play, and unfortunately, this is mine.

Stone says that all will be forgiven when the Gods return. They'll understand why we increased the number of expendables repeatedly and why we executed the winners.

Maybe they will. Perhaps it will be water under the bridge, and they'll understand that everything we did was to protect the secret of their banishment and work towards bringing them back.

I only hope when judgment is passed on my soul that my true motives are taken into account.

Crashing sounds at the end of the tunnel, and I watch on the connection as Viola Mistflow and her partner, Tulip, utilize ice magic to break open the door to the elevator. Now, all there is to do is wait for her to follow the path into the garrison below the arena.

Stone places his hand on my shoulder, and I cover it with my own. He's been a father figure to me, and I feel pride radiating from him. "It's almost through, Mace. With the return of Himureal, we can restore Krillium to the greatness it once had." My only response is a curt nod, focusing on the tunnel I expect to see Viola emerge from.

The adrenaline rush of all the pieces coming together is wearing off, and I feel my body growing weary with exhaustion. When was the last time I had a truly restful night's sleep?

A stumbling sound reaches my ears, and a smile stretches to my face as I step forward to welcome our vessel.

And I lock eyes with my brother.

Zeph is clutching Viola's wrist, and she looks mightily unhappy about it. I feel a fierce wave of protectiveness crawling up my throat. She's dirty and disheveled, her skin pale from hunger and dehydration. Her travel partner, Tulip, is just a step behind her, trembling like a leaf. Viola's eyes betray her fear and grief, and I want to reach out and grab her, pull her to me, and tell her it will be okay.

But those thoughts cannot happen.

She is not long for this world anymore.

As much as I tell myself it's for the greater good, it does not make it any easier now that I finally see her in person again.

My lips curve up in a sneer, and I look my brother in the eye when I say, "Well, hello, Zeph. Why don't you let poor Miss Mistflow go?" He bristles, attempting to shove her behind his body. For her credit, Viola does not let him. She holds no fear and meets my eyes with the same fierce intensity she did at the opening ceremonies just days ago. Her words promising she'll get to Ytopie ring in my head.

"I am not letting you take her," Zeph spits out.

I steeple my fingers in front of me, calming my face. “Now, brother, what could you possibly think I would ever do to hurt Miss Mistflow? Come along, Viola, Tulip. Let’s get you both cleaned up and fill your bellies, shall we?”

Viola and Tulip stay frozen, their eyes darting between my brother, Stone, and myself. There is not an ounce of trust in either of their eyes. After what feels like ages, Viola pulls her dagger from a thigh sheath and twirls it in her fingers. The mask of indifference she wears so well slips back over her face.

“Yeah, I don’t think we’ll be going with any of you until we get some answers,” she drawls. Her voice, which I’ve heard for days now over the connection, reverberates throughout the cavernous garrison.

It cascades over me in waves and feels like home.

I shake my head, clearing the feeling from it. Once again, I remind myself that she is part of a larger plan. Still, the confusing feelings that I have for her are dangerous. I make a mental note to tell Stone that he should be the one to handle most of Viola’s preparations for the ritual.

Tulip is trembling still, and Viola puts a hand on the small of her back. She visibly relaxes from the contact with her friend. I hold my palms open towards Viola in a sign of surrender. “Viola, Tulip, we’re simply here to congratulate you. As the head of the Patricians, I am your welcome party. You found the elevator, and you’ve made it to Ytopie. This is cause for celebration.”

She stalks towards me, knife pointing at the base of my chin. She's tall, which surprises me. I have only a head or so of height on her, significantly less than most fae women. The tip of her knife touches my chin, sending a shiver down my spine. Her eyes are light and gray, like the beginnings of a bad winter storm, and they contain a multitude of conflicts. "Something tells me not to believe you, Mace Nightrout." Her voice is barely above a whisper, and from this proximity, I can feel the warmth of it across my face.

Stone attempts to intervene, and I hold up a hand to stop him. It's not often he fully defers to me, but when others are present, we have to keep up appearances that he is just my advisor.

"Viola, get away from him! He's dangerous!" my traitorous brother shouts.

She spins on the balls of her feet and points her blade squarely at his chest. "And you! Zeph, is it? I do not know you. I do not trust you. And clearly, I am in the middle of some stupid little game you two are playing." She inhales sharply and places one hand on her hip, the other still brandishing her weapon. "Now, I want my winnings, I want to get out of this cave, and I want a hot bath."

Tulip snorts behind her at the mention of a bath, and I also stifle a laugh. Stone steps forward now to play the part of peacemaker. "Of course, Miss Mistflow. You and your travel companion have won the Race. We will set you both up with a hot meal and allow you to clean yourselves. We still have a

few days before the official winner's ceremony, but we have a place for you to stay before then."

Her shoulders drop some tension with that, but her eyes are still sharp and untrusting. "And I want to see my parents," she says softly. Her voice betrays a vulnerability I did not think possible. My heart wrenches at the thought of telling her they're dead. I glance at Stone, and his head shakes in a nearly imperceptible manner. Now is not the time to reveal the truth.

"All in due time, Miss Mistflow," I respond. "After the winner's ceremony is a gala, and then all winners will be escorted to the human village. You will be able to see your parents then." The lie tastes like ash on my tongue.

I can see in Zeph's eyes he does not trust me or Stone. I hate that I didn't bring my brother into the plan to revive the Gods, but I could not trust him to follow it. He's always been a wild card, fighting against what's best for all of us. Our father used to say that Zeph could not see past the end of his own nose. It's only gotten worse as he's aged. Combine his inherited selfishness with his penchant for alcohol, and he becomes a volatile entity.

"I'm not leaving her alone with you," he says, eyes locked on mine.

"I sincerely doubt Miss Mistflow and ...Tulip, what is your family name?"

Her eyes widen at being addressed directly, and she squeaks out, "Goldtide, Mister Nightroot."

I wave her words away. “Call me Mace. As I was saying, Zeph, I sincerely doubt Miss Mistflow and Miss Goldtide would be comfortable with you attending their baths. So, if you’ll excuse us.”

Zeph steps in front of me, showing a hint of aggression for the first time. “I know what you think she is, Mace,” he spits.

I raise my brow and attempt to apply a bored expression. “And what is that but a winner of the Race, Zeph?” He grits his teeth, frustrated at my purposeful obtuseness.

“You think she’s a vessel. She isn’t, though. That’s not what she is.”

With his words, I see Tulip and Viola visibly tense from the corner of my eye. They shoot each other a shocked look, and Viola clears her throat. “I am no such thing. I have no magic within me.”

Thanks to Tulip’s campfire stories, Stone and I knew she had some knowledge of the vessels, but we weren’t sure of the extent of their conversations since. Zeph continues his tirade, “She’s not a vessel, she’s just a girl!”

“She’s a woman!” Tulip pipes up.

Stone, ever a mask of indifference, waves Zeph away. “I’m not sure what this vessel you speak of is, Zeph, but you and I must go and prepare for the gala.” He grabs Zeph roughly by the arm and drags him out.

To his credit, Zeph fights and argues against Stone, but he only succeeds in making himself look unhinged and

dangerous. I turn an apologetic look towards the women in front of me. I have familiarity on my side since they have both seen me at opening ceremonies, but that doesn't mean it's going to be easy to get them in the position we need them to be.

Hesitantly, Viola stows her blade once Stone and Zeph are gone, and she turns towards me. I do my best to flash her a kind smile.

I don't miss the quick flick her eyes make to my lips. "Okay, Mace, we'll come with you. But this doesn't mean I trust you."

I bow slightly, gesturing towards the exit with my left hand. "I would expect nothing but the most cautious of relationships with you. But I'm sure I will grow on you."

She scoffs, "Not likely, Mace."

A wide smile stretches across my face as I watch her back as she heads out of the garrison.

This is going to be such fun.

Chapter 30

Viola

As we make our way through the underground tunnels, an arduous journey to the surface, I cannot help but take in all my surroundings. This is the path to the arena. I've been here before, last year. I was among the first twenty finishers. While I didn't make it to Ytopie, I did make it to the arena before the ceremony. I start down the path I followed last year to the arena grounds when a large hand grabs my shoulder.

Mace turns my body to the left and points with his other hand down a side tunnel. "This way, Miss Mistflow. We're not going to the arena - we're heading into the city."

I cringe at the honorific he's bestowed upon me and shrug off his hand, "Just call me Viola." He nods, his eyes sparkling mischievously.

Pushing past me, Mace leads the way down the new tunnel.

Tulip slides up behind me, grabbing my hand. "He is gorgeous! Both of those men take handsome to another level,"

she coos softly in my ear. I remember Max and I having the same conversation about Mace just days ago.

The thought of her makes my gut feel empty, a reflection of the hole left by my best friend. I cannot believe it's only been a few hours since I left her body at the base of the mountain. The guilt of making it to Ytopie as a winner without her threatens to buckle my knees. I stumble, gaining a look back from Mace that seems to ask if I am okay.

I am not okay.

And yet I grit my teeth and stand, brushing off my exceedingly dirty bottoms.

When we finally leave the tunnels and exit to the outside, I am momentarily frozen. In front of us, not more than a half hour's walk away, is the shining city of Ytopie. Tulip slides next to me, entwining her fingers in mine, and we both gape at the sight.

Buildings are erected taller than I'd ever seen, with two and three levels stacked atop each other. They're brightly colored and eclectic, with barely a thought toward functionality. Here in Ytopie, things can be created just to look beautiful.

The sun feels brighter, but not nearly as hot as in the Lowlands. Flowers bloom all throughout the grass we trek through. When we reach the city limits, stone streets are enveloped with buildings of all sorts. Mace diverts us through back alleys, but I still catch glimpses of clothing vendors, food purveyors, and even someone cutting and styling hair. Self-

consciously, I glance down at my clothing and finger my ragged braid.

Mace catches my look and stops us at a nondescript red door at the back of a building. “Your clothing is very worn. Would you allow me to buy you both a new outfit? Just something comfortable, nothing extravagant.”

I get the distinct feeling if we wanted something extravagant, he would not hesitate to open his pockets.

Tulip answers before I can, “Oh my goodness, yes, please!” She’s practically bouncing out of her worn boots with excitement.

I tighten my lips and nod before answering, “That would be fine, thank you Mace.” He smiles, and it’s charming and a bit disarming. With a quick rap of his knuckles on the door, the door opens to reveal a stout man.

“Mace, what do I owe the pleasure?”

Mace gestures at the two of us, and the shopkeeper rakes his eyes down our frames. “I need clothing for the two of them and your utmost discretion, of course.”

The shopkeeper’s lips turn up into a knowing smile. “Of course, sir. I’ll have them brought to the Palace.”

We’re going to a Palace?

I am struggling to make sense of this man. I have always seen him, the leader of the Patricians, as the enemy. But seeing him up close, he does not seem to be as scary as I once thought. He’s thin but fit, his arms and legs long and graceful.

He's got strength but nothing ostentatious. His dark hair falls handsomely over the tops of his ears, and when he's not forcing a smirk onto his face, he's got quite a nice smile.

"Why are we in the back alleys?" Tulip asks after we leave the clothing purveyor and head further into the city.

Mace stops and turns towards us, hands gently clasped in front of him. "The people of Ytopie do not know about the elevator, so they cannot know you're here in the city so early. We'll need to keep you hidden right now. Once we can get you cleaned up and dressed in some of our clothes, you'll blend in and be able to explore the city."

The explanation is sufficient enough to require no follow-up questions from either of us for now.

We make our way to the Palace, a shining building with stained glass windows dotted along it. Tulip leans over to me, her lips close to my ears, "It looks like a pastry!" I laugh at her words, trying to remember the last time I had a pastry of any sort.

"Not any I've ever seen, but I'd love to see one with such color," I whisper back.

Mace hears us, I'm sure of it. His shoulders are bouncing with quiet laughter. He leads through back doors and down multiple hallways into a basement, and my stomach clenches.

What am I doing? I do not trust this man, and here I am, following him around like a child as if he wasn't potentially

leading me to my death. My hands move to grip the handle of my blades in case the need to protect myself arises.

I fight to remind myself that this is the expected outcome of the Race. I move from living in the Lowlands to living in Ytopie, which requires interacting with the fae.

Unfortunately.

But experience shows me that everything is transactional. And I have no doubt that Mace wants something from me.

Once in the basement, I am shocked to find it's been furnished as if it's a home. Mace, who was surprisingly silent during most of the walk, turns to face Tulip and me. "This is where you'll be staying for now until more ... permanent accommodations can be arranged. Through that door, there is the bathroom." He gestures to a small brown door off the side of the room.

Tulip's eyes light up. "A bath?" she questions, practically vibrating with excitement.

I try to smother a laugh at the young woman who went through so much, finally getting the bath she wanted. He nods, a small smile twitching his pointed lips. "Yes, there is a bath in there. As well as a toilet. I can get a Summer type here to heat the water for you when you're ready."

"I'm ready!" Tulip shouts, practically sprinting to the bathroom.

That does garner a rolling laugh from Mace. I'm mesmerized by how his head falls back in mirth, the joy radiating in the

crinkles of the corner of his eyes. He catches me staring, and a preening smile stretches across his lips.

The spell caused by his laughter is broken, and I scowl. This man thinks quite highly of himself.

“I’ll send a Bayal, a fire wielder, down and return with your clothing. It should be here soon. Are you hungry?” It goes against my instincts to accept any more kindness from this fae, but when he asks, my stomach betrays me and rumbles loudly. He doesn’t wait for an answer from me. “I’ll bring some food.”

After a Bayal came and warmed the bath water, Tulip soaked in that tub for ages. As I sat outside the room, we talked about Max. About how much we missed her and how she should be here. I shared stories of our childhoods together, remembering all the incredible things Max did for me throughout my life.

It will be hard to enjoy this without her by my side.

Eventually, Tulip vacated the bath, and I quickly cleaned myself in a cold one, unwilling to request another fire type to warm it for me. By the time both of us were cleaned and wrapped in towels, Mace had returned.

I feel self-conscious standing before him with only a sheet of fabric between us. Sparing a glance at my whip and knives stored with my pack on a table, I cringe at just how vulnerable I’ve made myself.

I did not expect Mace to be the one returning with clothing and food, but here he is, the head of the Patricians, standing in

front of me with a cloth bag slung over his shoulder and a tray of food in his hands, looking as out of place as one could be. As he steps into the room, his eyes flit up and down my figure, and my stomach heats. With a quiet cough, he sets the food tray on the table. My mouth waters at the sight.

Various breads, still crackling with heat, are sliced and filled with hunks of meat and cheese. Fresh fruit and vegetables of all colors are stacked in two bowls. I also spy two mugs of ale and steaming cups of tea. But in the middle of the tray sits a beautiful pastry of cream and red berries on top of a flaky golden crust.

I stare at Mace, slack-jawed in awe of the spread, and for a moment, he looks almost bashful. “Winners deserve a winning meal, don’t you think?” he says quietly. Tulip’s eyes are as wide as the saucers the cups of tea sit upon, and she immediately rushes to the tray and grabs the mug of ale, gulping it down. Her towel is dangerously close to falling off as she moves, and I notice Mace averting his eyes and turning more to face me.

“I brought your clothing. I hope it fits and is acceptable.” He pushes the cloth pack from his shoulder to me, which I take and look inside. A rich, emerald-colored blouse is folded atop a pair of flowing ecru pants and a pair of leather sandals, a ribbon of gold with small flowers curled atop it for adorning hair. This stack is clearly for Tulip, and I set it next to the chair she has perched upon with a sandwich.

Reaching back into the bag, I pull out a silky gray shirt with shimmering pearlescent buttons that catch the reflection of the light. Underneath the shirt is a pair of black trousers made of stiff linen, a practical belt with loops for my knives, and boots high enough to cover my ankles. I have never seen clothing like this before. The fabrics are so fine I run my hands over them multiple times before looking up to meet Mace's eyes.

The look he is giving me is one of reverence and respect - not something I ever expected from a fae. But Mace looks at me like I'm a prize he's won. None of it feels lecherous, and I feel no threat to my physical well-being, but it still unnerves me. I remember the red-haired man who found us in the elevator - was his name Zeph? - shouting at Mace that I am not the vessel he thinks I am.

The idea of me being a vessel is laughable, but I will have to address that later. My stomach growls again, and I look at Mace pointedly. "Oh, right, yes. There are also two robes at the bottom of the bag for you both to sleep in. I'll leave you alone. Get some rest. You've earned it."

He retreats up the steps, leaving me swirling in confusing emotions. I pull a deep blue silk robe from the bottom, noticing a stack of undergarments for each of us hidden beneath, and slide it on before helping myself to some food. I glance up at the light hanging from the ceiling and wince at its soft buzzing. "Do you hear that buzzing?" I ask Tulip, who is beginning to dive into her third handful of berries.

She cocks a blonde brow at me and shakes her head. “What buzzing?” I gesture up at the light, and she laughs. “You’re just tired, Lola. Get some rest. We finally made it.”

Chapter 31

Zeph

Stone's grip on my arm is brutal, his fingers digging into my flesh with a ferocity I've never experienced from him before. He drags me through the underground tunnels and out of the arena, his grip on me not loosening until he shoves me onto a chair in his sitting room.

I have been to his home multiple times throughout my life, and it's almost as familiar as mine, but his expression removes the comfort I typically experience here. I grip the green velvet arms of his chair, my jaw set and clenched as I look up at him. The sneer that is affixed to his face churns my stomach. As he leers over me, I wonder what became of the man I have loved so much that I saw him as a father?

"Explain yourself," he hisses.

I grit my teeth so tightly that I feel a pain radiating up my jaw and temples. "There's nothing to explain, Stone. Viola Mistflow is not your vessel." Stone ignores my response, bending down to remove his boots. He walks across the

brightly lit room towards his dining area and pours a glass of amber liquor. My mouth practically waters at the thought.

He raises the glass to me, an unspoken offering. I nod, unable to resist the chance to calm my nerves.

Seeing Viola in person was overwhelming. She was everything I thought she would be, but somehow more enhanced. She was like a bright flare of sunlight that you did not want to stare at for too long. The strength that emanated from her was intoxicating. Even disheveled, dirty, and grieving, she was captivating.

When I had her hand in mine for that brief moment while I pulled her down the hallway, I felt a frigid shock to my core. My body reacted the same way it did in the clearing of my dream: an inexplicable urge to pull her to me despite the fury of the magic in my veins. Just a few moments in her presence confirms what Loris said at the time. She is not only the last Winter Seasonale.

She is a rebirth of the Gods.

I must protect her.

I must have her.

After both of us finish our glasses of liquor, my nerves subdued a bit, Stone leans against a table and stares me down. His hands, lined with veins and wrinkled with age, betray how upset he truly is in their punishing grip on the wood.

With a deep breath, he finally addresses me again. “Zeph, you do not know what you’re getting in the middle of here.

Mace and I have...”

“That’s the problem. You and Mace, planning and scheming, leaving me in the dark.” I interrupt.

He rolls his eyes, irritation flashing on his features. “It always has been a competition with you, Zeph. Like a petulant child, you cannot see the forest for the tree. You are not cut out for the reality of everything that must be done for the glory of the Gods.”

After our parents died, Stone took Mace and me in and helped shape us into the men we are today. But it was always clear that Stone and Mace were kindred spirits. If I hadn’t suspected it before, Stone helping Mace rise into our father’s position as a Patrician confirmed it.

“The glory of the Gods?” I sneer. “How would the Gods feel about your perversion of their will to keep the humans in line?”

His harsh laugh is hollow when it reaches my ears. “Do you think the Gods will care about a few humans when we finally restore them to their full glory? Humans were the ones that exiled them.”

I can no longer stay sitting in this chair, being lectured at by Stone as if I am a child again. I cross to his table and help myself to another glass of his liquor, using the burn of it in my throat to ground me. “Besides,” he continues to my back, “the Race is why we can bring them back at all.”

I turn, unfortunately intrigued by Stone's statement. "The Race was a cover all along, wasn't it?"

The old man shakes his head, his hands steeped in front of his body. "No, my dear boy. Haven't you ever wondered why there are no more Winter Seasonale?" I nod, curious as to where this could go. "We designed the Race so those with latent Winter magic would win. We had to eliminate them to concentrate the power of Himureal into one person - our vessel. Why do you think most of the winners come from Dalery? That is the city Himureal's high priest fled to during the banishing."

Bile rises in my throat. "What about the fae of Winter magic?" I ask, barely above a whisper. Stone shrugs as if what he is admitting to is not a horrific deed but as routine as what he ate for dinner.

"They had to be eliminated, unfortunately. We had to concentrate Himureal's power in the vessel to give him the means of returning to Krillium."

I clench my hands fiercely, my nails leaving half-moon crescents in my palm. "And the humans you deemed expendable?"

He dismisses me with a wave of his hand. "We had to have sacrifices to convince the humans that this was what recharged the Gods. A small casualty in the name of the greater good."

"Small casualty? You increase the numbers year over year!"

The smile that rips his face in two transforms him into someone entirely unrecognizable to me. “Ah yes, that was one point that Mace and I disagreed on regularly. But there is truth to the sacrifices and the Race enhancing Godly power. When they return, the blood spilled in their name will still enrich them.”

My legs threaten to buckle as I return to the velvet chair and lower myself into it. “So, what’s next? Do you plan to kill all the Summers next to bring Solarius back?”

His laughter infuriates me. “Of course not, boy. Once Himureal returns, he will be able to bring the other Gods back on his own. Winter was chosen because it was the rarest Seasonale and would require the least bloodshed.”

“It certainly does not seem like you cared to spare any bloodshed, Stone.”

The nonchalance with which he relays this information to me sets me on edge. I am half tempted to wrap my hands around his neck right here and now. But I have to know the answer to a question digging at the back of my brain.

“And what of Viola?”

He throws that sinister smile back my way, setting the hair on my arms on edge. “Ah yes, the Mistflow girl. We’ve had eyes in all the villages for years, and she was curious from the beginning. We even took and questioned someone she had a relationship with in his Ascension year for more information on her. I believe his name was Link. He seemed quite fond of her.”

My stomach is in knots. I heard Viola mention Link during the Race, and I know how much he meant to her. How will I ever tell her that Stone and Mace have done something to him?

These two have stalked Viola and those close to her for her entire life. The idea seems preposterous in theory, but the more I sit with Stone, the more I believe it. Mace knew who she was at the opening ceremonies and even called her by name. He has seemed drawn to her the entire Race.

He has been watching her entire life.

The reality of the situation does nothing to ease my fear that she is in danger in his hands.

“She will be the vessel in which Himureal leeches power to return to his physical form. It’s an honor to be God-touched in the way she is. She will be treated with utmost care until the end,” he says with reverence.

“The end? You seek to destroy her?”

“How else will we give the God of blood enough power to return?”

I’m on my feet instantly, fear and desperation coloring my face crimson. “You cannot destroy her. She is not a vessel. She’s a God, Stone. She can cast spells without thinking. She has no experience with setting intentions and yet is capable of a killing blow curse. She is pure magic.”

Now, his laugh is booming, entirely inappropriate for the discussion at hand. “Zeph, come now, you cannot believe that. She holds the power of Himureal within her - of course, her

magic will be strong. That doesn't make her equal to the Gods."

I ready myself for an argument with him again. He holds up his hand to silence me. "Zeph, stop this. What Mace and I are doing is for the good of Krillium, and we will not let you stand in our way. I was fine to turn a blind eye to your plans to reveal the truth of the Gods to the city..."

My head spins. Stone knew the plans I had all along.

"But," he continues, "this situation with Viola is too precarious, and we will not be able to complete the ritual before Race end. I will not allow you to continue your plans to sabotage the Race."

I stalk across the room, rising to my full height before him. The difference in our stature forces him to look up at me. "Or what, Stone? What could you do if I reveal to all of Krillium the lies of the Race?"

He shrugs. "I'd kill Viola. Her magic would find another host, and I would gladly wait for that host to come of age. Of course, I would hate to do that. There is no need for the Race to continue once Himureal has returned. Plus, I'm sure you've realized we've lost control of the beasts outside our borders, and that magic is waning. Who do you think will replenish it but the Gods? But go ahead. Throw your ridiculous tantrum and doom your people and Viola for your selfish plot."

His words deflate me, and I shrink back towards a wall, slumping against it for support.

I do not know this woman, and our initial interaction did not bode well for her ever enjoying my company. But if she died because of a decision I made, I could not live with myself.

Even if that meant others would be sacrificed to Gods who weren't listening.

Even if that meant winners would be cut down in their moment of joy for the sole reason of keeping them from asking where all the other winners ended up.

Something about this woman has latched onto my very being, and I cannot live without knowing why. I slide down the wall, hitting the floor and leaning my head towards my knees in Stone's sitting room. I cannot bring myself to speak. He crosses the room and pats me on the shoulder before saying, "You've made the right decision, Zeph."

Chapter 32

Zeph

My mind still reeling from my conversation with Stone, I stumble into the Hasty Butcher for another drink. At the bar top, Bracken slides me my usual liquor. “Some food with that, sir?” he asks, his voice gravely and harsh. My only reply is to sip the warmth of the liquid down.

I have to call it all off. Every bit of preparation and scheming I’ve done for the months leading up to the Race, and these past few days with Loris, Plume, and Nimh must be canceled. If I don’t, Viola will be killed. I cannot live with her blood on my hands.

But can I live with the guilt of signing the death ticket of the other humans?

I know the answer but struggle to admit it to myself.

The desire I feel to protect Viola is nothing I’ve ever experienced before. It is visceral and real, a gauntlet I never agreed to participate in. If I am being honest with myself, I felt

drawn to her starting from her Ascension year. I was in awe of her strength and resilience, traits I wish I saw in myself.

Seeing her in person amplified my admiration to a worrying level. I want to keep her to myself, out of the eyes of those who would dare to hurt her.

Loris is convinced Viola is a God, but Stone's explanation of her power makes sense logically. If she was the embodiment of all the Winter magic that hadn't taken root in ages, she'd be exceedingly powerful. If she could hone her power, she may be able to stand against Mace and Stone and...

And what?

If she is not used as a vessel and we are forever without our Gods, then Winter magic will never come back. What would I have her do? Fight Stone and Mace and hide, so no one would figure out what or who she is and use her for her intended purpose? Something tells me a woman like Viola would not be content to hide for the rest of her days.

I feel a rush of air push into the tavern and turn towards the door to see Loris stalking toward me. His face is a scowl of determination. Before I can blink his long legs have brought him abreast of me. He roughly grabs me by the collar of my loose tunic.

"What were you thinking," he snarls, "choosing a human over your own people?" I flinch, shrinking away from him. The liquor I consumed at Stone's mingled with the fresh glass Bracken gave me, leaving my head with a soft fuzz of pliability.

“I’m guessing you didn’t find any Summers to replace me with the shield,” I mutter, pulling myself from his grasp. “And I wasn’t thinking,” I continue, my voice calm and gentle. “I just knew in my gut I needed to save her.”

“Well, did you save her?”

“Not in the slightest.”



My friends gape at me, their faces slack with shock from the revelations of my day. I did my best to avoid the conversation of my first encounter with Viola, on some level embarrassed about the way she received me. Plume was the first to speak. “We can’t continue. We have to stop all the plans and just let the Race finish.”

I nod at the same time Nimh slams her hands on my dining table. “Absolutely not! One person is not worth all of those who are killed for no reason each year in the Race. Our people, fae and humans alike deserve to know the truth.” Her eyes, as blue as the deepest depths of the sea, are alight with a fiery passion.

I truly feel guilty for having to snuff it out.

“What other option do we have, Nimh? If we reveal the truth Stone will kill Viola and another vessel would be found. We’d be in this same position in a few years.”

Her eyes wild, she turns to face me, “And? In a few years, our people will have known the truth, the Race would be gone,

and we can utilize the vessel to bring back the Gods then! Why do we need them back now? We've been doing just fine without them."

"She has a point," Loris murmurs. I hope the glare I fling his way communicates just how much I disagree with him. "What? Why do we need to allow Viola in particular to be used to bring back Himureal? We don't need the Gods now, so what's the rush to bring them back?"

"Why do you think they'd stop the Race? It was created to find Winter magic. If they kill Viola they will only up their efforts to reveal another vessel! Besides, in a few years, magic will have waned so much that we will have lost our control on the beasts who threaten our borders and will no longer have the magic to sustain our people. How long do you think we can maintain the shields that protect the cities?"

Plume winces at my words. She told me in confidence that the beasts were less and less receptive to the magic of her Seasonale and lesser magics, but it is not public knowledge, and I just threw it out on the table in front of everyone.

"You cannot tell me you haven't noticed the change in the magic over recent years."

Their silence speaks volumes.

It goes unsaid, but I admit that I selfishly want time to know Viola. To have her know me. There is something undeniable there and I long to explore it.

Plume speaks softly but with purpose. “We have to trust that our Gods knew what they were doing when they enacted this plan.” Her voice is reverent, her head bowed. She was always much more pious than the rest of us, and I know the revelation that the Gods were dead hit her hard. “We need to allow Viola to be used as the vessel. We need to step back from all of this, disentangle ourselves from Stone, Mace, and yes, even Viola Mistflow.” She shoots me a pointed look, and I shrink into my chair. “When the Gods return, we can explain to our people what we did to get them back.”

Objection roars within me, and I want to shake Plume for suggesting I disentangle myself from Viola. “We cannot let Stone and Mace have control of her, don’t you get it? She doesn’t just have power, she is power! We need to save Viola from Mace and convince her to fight with us against him and Stone. We must believe her power will be enough to right the imbalance in our world.”

Loris perks his head up, looking at me with a hint of smugness. “So, you’re finally coming around to the idea that she’s a God?”

“I’m not saying she’s a God. I’m saying she has power like we’ve never seen before. Who says we need the Gods if she is around?”



It's late, too late for me to be out wandering the streets of Ytopie. The moon casts its orange hue across the cobblestones, lighting the way for me to stumble aimlessly. After what felt like hours of arguing with my friends, we were no closer to an agreement on how to proceed than when we began. With each passing hour, I consumed more and more liquor and ale, which now has me staggering throughout the city.

I find myself in the green behind the Palace, a favorite spot of mine to rest. I slide against the wall, head in my hands, trying to make sense of the tempest swirling in my head and heart.

There is little doubt in my mind that my personal obsession with Viola is encroaching upon my abilities to make sound decisions. I cannot fathom how someone who I have only watched from afar has entwined herself in my thoughts and actions so seamlessly.

A soft cough catches my attention, and I jerk my gaze up. It lands on a pair of steely grey eyes directly across the pavilion from me. The figure is cloaked in shadows, but I would recognize that stare anywhere.

Viola Mistflow rises, the shadows peeling off her like snakes, and walks towards me with purpose. Her movement is slow and deliberate, and it is impossible to miss that her thighs are strapped with glinting steel blades. Her shirt flows around her like water in a shade matching her eyes. For the first time I can recall, her hair is down and loose, gently brushing across her shoulders.

She looks like fury, a dark specter coming to engulf me.

I swallow the fear that rises in my throat at the possibility of her confronting me when I'm less than sober.

Viola doesn't relent, quickly and quietly crossing the grass to drop into a squat in front of me. She narrows her eyes, digging through my very being with just a stare.

"Zeph, right?"

Her voice is raspy like she hasn't spoken in a while and its timber lights me up. I blink away the alcohol haze and bring my eyes to meet hers. "Yep, at your service," I say, feigning lightness. "Though, I'm surprised you'd even remember, considering how brutally rude to me you were when I met you off the elevator."

She scoffs, rising to her full height. "I didn't ask for your welcome. I certainly didn't ask for you to get so handsy."

Unsteady on my feet but rapidly gaining control, I step towards her, closing the space between us. She doesn't retreat when I push the toes of my boots against hers. "Handsy? I hate to think what your experience with the boys in Dalery was like if you think that was handsy."

I immediately regret my words and the implication of them.

To my surprise, she laughs. The validation of that laugh alone will be enough to get me through many lonely nights.

The laugh is gone as quickly as it came, replaced with a disarming glare. I get the distinct feeling that she has never allowed herself joy in life.

The slump of her shoulders reminds me that she is still surrounded in grief, and it must be especially hard to be here in Ytopie without Max to enjoy it with her.

“Where’s Tulip?” I ask, changing the subject.

She shrugs and flicks her hand toward the Palace. “In the sleeping quarters set up for us in the Palace. I needed some fresh air.”

Viola is giving me nothing to work with as far as conversation goes. I ache to know her, to give reason to this draw I have to her but I will never get there if she maintains this rigidity.

I’m coming up blank on what to say, stumbling over the words in my brain to draw her into a conversation with me. Just when I think I’ve lost her, her nostrils flare. “You smell like liquor.”

I flush, glad that the darkness will hide the red rushing through my ears and hairline. “Ah, yeah. I had a few. I felt the walls of my place closing in on me and needed some fresh air so... here I am.”

She nods decidedly. “Take me somewhere with alcohol.”

I smother a cough of surprise. “The tavern is closed, so it would have to be my place.” A casual shrug and movement towards the streets ahead is the only response she gives me. I move to take her elbow to lead the way but the glare she returns to me could melt the skin from my bones.

After unsteadily climbing the stairs to my home, sobering with each step, I open the door and Viola steps inside without hesitation. My heart warms with the knowledge that she does not consider me a threat since she willingly came home with me.

Or maybe she is just really good with those knives.

I snap, fire flickering to light on the sconces along the walls. She flinches. Sheepishly, I apologize. “I didn’t think about how new magic must be to you...” With a shake of her head, she fights to regain her composure.

In the light of the flames, I can take in more of her features than in the courtyard. Her skin is weathered from time in the sun, freckles dusting her body like specks of magic, swirling with her warm flesh. With limbs that are muscular and thick, she stands out from the spoiled women of Ytopie in more ways than one. She has ample curves, but they are earned, not blessed, and that makes them even more attractive. I find my eyes trailing across her chest, her breasts small but shapely.

I wonder what they would feel like in my hands.

She complemented the silky gray shirt with rigid black linen trousers and boots. It was an understated outfit that lets the brutal beauty she possesses shine.

She runs her fingers through her dark wavy hair and for a brief moment, I catch a flash of her smooth neck beneath her ears. Every move she makes draws me deeper into her.

“I’m glad you use flames if I’m being honest. I cannot stand the buzzing of the lightning lights.” I look at her with shock.

“You can hear the magic?”

She nods, raising an eyebrow at me. “Can’t everyone?”

I make my way to the cart with liquor on it, and busy myself pouring us drinks. “No, not everyone. I mean I’m sure if they tried, they could, but most don’t think about it. In fact most of them think I’m insane when it comes to my disdain for it. I like to think I’m just more attuned to other magics.”

“Well, I’m glad I’m not alone in it.” She treats me to a half smile then accepts the glass I hand her.

She doesn’t ask what’s in it or even smell it, just tips her head back and drains the glass.

I shouldn’t be attracted to that.

Shouldn’t, but I am.

Viola doesn’t even cough as she takes in the heat of the amber liquid, and I feel my carnal attraction to her grow. “What did you mean, that you’re attuned to other magics?” she asks.

I gesture to the plush sofa in my main room and bring the bottle of liquor with me as I take a seat. She snatches the bottle from me and tops off her glass. “The magic we use isn’t just magic of our own seasonal discipline,” I explain. “Some of us Seasonale can combine multiple disciplines together for larger, more complex spells. It takes training and not everyone can combine our magic with other disciplines.”

She leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees. The glass dangles loosely between her fingers, empty again. “Can you combine magics?” I nod, slowly sipping my glass enough to keep my buzz going, but not trying to outpace her.

Something tells me I need to keep my wits about me around her.

“Yeah, it took me a lot of practice but now I can.”

“And that’s why you can hear magic?” she asks, eyes locked on mine. Her stare is intense; it’s as if she’s diving beneath my skin to see what I’m made of. The last thing I want is to be the one to break eye contact, so I lean forward, elbows on my own knees, mirroring her position. Like this, I could brush her fingers with just a small movement. I resist the temptation.

“Yeah, I think so. I have spent a long time learning to find and capture other magics, so I have a hard time turning off my senses.”

She sits back, satisfied with my answer. “So then why can I hear it when I am not magical?”

I bite my lip, unsure how to answer. Her eyes track the movement and I feel a heat blossom in my chest at her attention. “I... Viola, be honest with yourself. You have magic. A lot of it, by my estimation.”

Her back stiffens, and she shakes her head. “I don’t, Zeph. I used a Witch’s Ladder, that’s the extent of the magic I’ve utilized.” I drain my glass now, needing a bit of the courage provided by the liquor to continue this conversation.

My gut tells me she isn't going to like what she's about to hear.

"How much do you know about Witch's Ladders?" I begin. Relaxing back on my sofa she schools her face in indifference.

"I mean, they're imbued with Winter magic for the purpose of protection, right?"

"More or less," I begin. "However, you're missing a key factor. They respond to latent magic in the user. For example, a Winter can create a Witch's Ladder for a Summer to combine their magics easier. But the person who pulls the string still needs to have some magic within them, otherwise, it's just a string with some feathers."

She scrunches her nose, and I am gob smacked at how such a lethal woman could be so cute. Until now, she's been sharp edges, a dangerous beauty that I long to tame. With one scrunch of her nose, she's so cute I want to pull her to my chest and stroke her hair.

I shake the thought from my head. Where is this coming from? I've never been so utterly captivated by someone before. I am powerless to help myself. The closer I get to her the stronger the pull to her becomes.

When she doesn't speak, I continue. "When you pulled the feather during your battle with the Wendigo, did the shadows seem to listen to you?"

I watch her brows wrinkle at the mention of the Wendigo. "You knew about that?"

“Patricians have visibility of the Race,” I say, omitting that all of Ytopie watches.

“Of course you’re a Patrician,” she mutters, and the venom in her voice wounds me. Her lips thin. “When I pulled the feather and the shadows were summoned, they were like snakes, curling up my arms affectionately,” she all but whispers. “For just a moment, I thought one was staying with me just to make sure I was okay.”

Shadow magic is not something I know much of. Even when there were many Winter Seasonales, shadow magic was seen as darkness to be hidden away so the records on it are slim.

“There isn’t a lot known about Winter magic and how it manifests, because there has not been a practitioner in a long time and there were never very many. But if it is anything like the other Seasonale, a Winter will typically have major and minor focuses. The major would be one element of the magic that they particularly respond to, the minors being the other elements of the magic. Powerful Seasonale can have more than one major, the Gods having equal control over all.”

Her eyes suddenly bore into mine and I unconsciously shift forward on the couch, my knees touching hers. I feel a spark of electricity where we touch, even through our clothing. I long to close the distance even more.

“And me?” she asks quietly, leaning forward on her knees again, so close our hands brush.

“You,” I say softly, “are very special. I have seen signs of ice, shadow, and blood magic within you.” She winces and

starts to pull away. I grab her hands in my own, feeling the rough callouses across her palms.

She stills, allowing me the blessed opportunity to touch her skin directly. How can just one touch make me want to ruin her for anyone but me?

“I don’t want anything to do with this,” she whispers, her voice shaking with emotion.

I nod, my fingers moving to slowly stroke hers. “Winter magic can seem dark and brutal, but it doesn’t have to be. With control and practice you can make beautiful shadows. Did you know I’m a Summer Seasonale?”

She quirks an eyebrow. “I kind of figured it out, what with the fire and all.”

A chuckle rumbles deep in my chest. “Summer is the counter to Winter,” I continue. “We possess light magic to your shadow magic. Shields and protection to your blood. Fire to your ice. We’re meant to temper and aid one another.”

I do not know the truth of that statement, but it feels right. Selfishly, I want her to feel connected to me, help her see she needs me as much as I do her. What better way to make her want to be near me than to tell her that I am meant to help her control the magic she desperately wants to be rid of?

I feel her hands slack within my own, but I hold firm to them. Her eyes travel across my face, searching for something. Eventually, she inhales deeply and nods. “Will you help me learn?”

“I would be honored.”

So much for disentangling myself.

Chapter 33

Viola

Tulip was unhappy with me when she awoke. Her frustration stemmed from a combination of concern for me wandering the city at night alone and jealousy that I didn't bring her with me.

“What did you two even have to talk about?” she asks, helping herself to the generous spread of fruits and bread Mace had brought us this morning.

Around a mouthful of grapes, I say, “We talked a bit about magical hierarchies, and then he just asked me a bunch of questions about myself and my childhood.”

“Oooh, he likes you!” Tulip squeals, reminding me that she is very much eighteen years old. My grunt of acknowledgment doesn't deter her. “I'm just saying he has taken an interest in you. Was it a date?”

I picture the Summer fae, his scruffy beard and gorgeous red hair, the dark tattoo that snakes up his neck from his shirt collar. I admit to admiring his obvious strength, those large

arms and a foreboding figure that could crush many threats, in contrast to how the men of the Lowlands look.

There was a moment when our hands touched, but I felt nothing.

“It wasn’t a date. Maybe we could be friends one day, now that I’m not worried about friends being killed in the Race, but I am still too skeptical of everyone in Ytopie to think further than that right now.” It will take a lot of reconditioning to remind myself that I am no longer going to Race and can potentially have normal relationships.

But I’ve never been normal.

Tulip snorts, rolling her eyes as if my words are the most ridiculous thing she’s ever heard. “I want to explore Ytopie, and you went without me!” she pouts, switching focus so quickly my head spins.

I gesture towards the stack of clothes a fae had dropped off for us this morning. “Then get dressed, let’s go exploring!”

Tulip dresses in a thin petal pink jumpsuit and ties the straps across her chest. The legs billow out around her sandal-clad feet, and her shoulders are bare to the sun. The chiffon fabric is rich and expensive and perfectly tailored to her form. She looks every bit the flower of her namesake with a strap of trailing green ribbons snaked through her hair.

She shoves her hand in her pockets and spins around. “This is SO comfortable! I’ve never seen anything like it!”

Her unabashed joy for nearly everything warms my soul after so many trying days.

For me, the fae had dropped off a dress of black and silver. I have never worn a dress in my life. “Wonder why I couldn’t get pants,” I grumble, primarily to myself. I briefly consider putting on the pants and blouse from yesterday but decide against it.

I slide the dress over my head, its plunging neckline shocking me. The collar is wide, with sleeves resting upon my upper arm and trailing to my wrists with gauzy fabric. The plunging bodice is laced with a string of silver so fine it’s hard to believe it’s metal. The dress is surprisingly heavy, and as I lift the skirt to view it, I see silver metal weaved throughout, a pattern of frost across the bottom. Tiny shorts are built in under it, fitting closely to my skin and allowing me to strap my blades along my thighs.

All things considered, the dress feels comfortable and practical, albeit heavy. The weight may take some getting used to.

I slip on the boots from yesterday and turn to Tulip to gesture to leave. She looks at me, slightly slacked-jawed. “You look like a proper lady there, Lola. No one is going to recognize you at all.” I put my hand over my heart, exaggerating the wound her words caused.

“Just one thing,” she continues, rushing towards me. Her hands are in my hair, which I pulled high up behind my head. She takes it down, twisting a few pieces around my face and

then pinning them behind like a crown. “There. Now you look like the royalty you were born to be.”

I roll my eyes at her but can’t help feeling warmth at her words. “You think too highly of me, Tulip.”

Sometimes, it’s easy to forget that we’re grieving. She came to me just as her brother and Max died right in front of us. We both have traumas from the Race we have yet to begin to process. Tulip doesn’t know, but the reason I left in the night last night was because she cried for her brother while she slept. If I stayed, my own grief threatened to bubble over.

I clear the thoughts of those we lost from my head. If I focus on the loss, I may never be able to function. And I need to move, to live. Max would have wanted that.

Tulip and I tentatively climb the stairs from the basement into the halls of the Palace of Patricians. All around us, fae bustle about, calling to one another and laughing in a way so normal it sticks in my throat. The smell of roasted nuts fills the air, and as I turn to look for them, I run smack into Mace Nightfoot.

His hands grab my shoulders to prevent a further collision, and I feel the heat rising to my face. “Miss Mistflow,” he purrs quietly.

“Viola,” I correct, warmth radiating from his touch.

His pointed smile is just for me, bright green eyes locked on mine. “Yes, yes, Viola. Nice to see you out and about. What are your plans for the day?” I look at Tulip, who shrugs.

“We didn’t really have a plan. Just wanted to see the city.”

He looks at me with trepidation. “Well, do have fun. But be careful. The city cannot know who you are until after the winner’s ceremony.”

I grit my teeth, frustrated at the need to disguise myself. “Well, I’d be better prepared to strike down anyone who figured me out if I wasn’t in this ridiculous dress.” I hate to be ungrateful, but I owe this man nothing, and my frustration will help me forget the butterflies in my stomach.

When I am around him, I feel more vulnerable than I can allow. I trail my hand up the skirt, sliding my fingers across my blade to ensure it’s still there. Mace’s eyes track my hand and then jerk to mine, the corners rising in a smile that doesn’t reach his mouth.

“That is feudal fabric, Viola. There is silver from Colris weaved throughout it. It’s strong and will resist most weapons.” I falter, surprised at the information. “Like you, it should not be underestimated.”

“How can metal be weaved in fabric?” My fingers trail the dress with new appreciation.

“Geomancers can work with metals, and I am an Autumn, Miss Mistflow.”

My hand stops moving on the fabric, and my cheeks flush. “Did you make this for me?” For a moment, Mace looks embarrassed, a shy smile playing on his face as he looks towards the ground.

He ruffles the hair that barely brushes the back of his neck before answering. “I needed the practice.”

“Oh, well. The fabric is very comfortable, and the protection of it sounds excellent, thank you.” When he finally meets my eye, I can’t help but add, “I still would’ve preferred pants.”

His laugh is an out-of-character sharp burst that bounces his shoulders. “Duly noted, Viola. Will you come to find me after your outing? Say, around dinnertime? My office is around the corner here. I’ll wait there for you.”

He leaves, giving me no time to answer his request. I cut a sharp glance at Tulip to cut off the joke that I see on the tip of her tongue.



The two of us explored the city, peering through the windows of shops and talking about our lives before the Race. We even managed to discuss Max and Twig while we sat out in a flowered field. The tears we shed were hidden from prying eyes outside the city limits.

After we had calmed ourselves and were lying quietly in the field beside each other, I broached a topic I wasn’t sure how to begin.

“They think I’m the vessel, Tulip.”

She turns to me with a sad smile, propping herself up on her elbow. “I know, Lola.”

“I need you to kill me.”

The words were out before I realized I was saying them, eliciting a sharp gasp from Tulip. “What are you talking about, Viola? Have you lost it?” I move to sit up, hugging my knees to my chest.

“We talked about this. To keep the Gods from returning, we need to kill the vessels. There is a reason the humans decided to banish them.”

She locks her eyes into mine, anger in her face that reminds me of my own. “We said that before we knew it was you. I would never, ever risk you, Lola.”

Shaking my head, I bury my face between my knees, unable to risk seeing lies in her eyes. “I do not want this, Tulip.” Wrapped around my legs, my fingers strum a slow and steady pattern.

Her hand traces circles between my shoulder blades. “I know you don’t. But just as there was a reason humans banished the Gods, maybe there was a reason they created the vessels to herald the return.”

Looking into her eyes, I see how badly she wants to believe it. “You heard Zeph yesterday to Mace and Stone; he doesn’t think I’m the vessel. He thinks I have powerful magic, though. Maybe I can get out of this.”

She raises me to look at her with hands on my cheeks and pushes her forehead against mine. “Whatever you are matters not to me.”



On our way back into the city, our moods lifted by a satchel of sweets we purchased and put on Mace's tab proclaiming to be his new assistants, Tulip and I discussed anything we could think of that did not require emotional depth. The strain of the day's earlier conversation still weighed upon us.

As we passed a tavern, I slammed to a stop at what I saw in its windows. Glistening and with faces of patrons trained on it, we see a projection of what looks like people in the woods. I step back, horrified, when I realize what I'm seeing.

"Tulip," I say, fighting to keep my voice level. "That's the Race. They're watching the Race."

Tulip's eyes widen, and she presses closer to the glass outside the tavern to get a better look. She peels away and turns to me, tears springing in the corners of her eyes. "They watch the Race? They make entertainment out of our suffering? Do you think... do you think they watched Twig die? What about Max? What would anyone want to watch this?"

I pull her close, wrapping an arm around her waist and encouraging her to lean on my shoulder. "They're monsters. They take pleasure in our suffering." I reach a hand up and push some of her wild blonde hair from her eyes. "But we never have to go through that again. We made it, Tulip. We

can fight the broken system from within and make Max and Twig proud.”

My gut roils with anger that I want to hide from Tulip for risk of upsetting her more. It’s one thing to know the Race is watched by the Patricians, like Zeph said, but all the horrifying, embarrassing, private moments we have during the Race are nothing but entertainment for a society that’s never been there? That is a level of indifference I cannot comprehend.

I’m so focused on my anger that I do not notice someone approaching from behind. A light tap on my shoulder has me spinning, my blade finding my hand in one smooth motion. I hold it out to the chin of a short and curvy fae with long golden hair. She yelps and jumps back, nearly tripping over her lavender skirt. I immediately notice the flowers twisted in her hair and embroidered on her blouse. Spring magic, then.

She raises one hand, palm forward towards me. The other stays wrapped tightly around a stack of books. Her voice is a low whisper as she says, “Sorry to scare you, Viola. I’m Plume. I’m a friend of Zeph’s.”

I lower my knife but keep my stance ready for a fight. I nod, acknowledging her, but snarl, “Plume, Tulip and I are in the middle of something. So, if you’d please...” I wave my blade, shooing her away. She winces in embarrassment.

I give her a once over, my eyes tracking from head to toe. Her cheeks are round and soft, and her body is curved in

lovely places. She's not slim - she looks comfortable and sensual.

She steels herself, and then asks softly, "You were looking at the connection, right?" Tulip and I shoot each other confused glances. "The connection, it's where we view the Race," she continues. My spine stiffens at her words.

"Yeah, we were realizing what monsters the fae are for making entertainment of our suffering."

To my surprise, Plume nods. "I don't have a connection in my home. My responsibilities as a Seasonale necessitate watching some of the Race, but it has never sat right with me that we allow all to view it, if I'm being honest."

My body loosens slightly, and I feel Tulip's stance change under my arm. "Why not speak up about it?" Tulip whispers.

Plume thinks on it, sucking her bottom lip between her teeth. "Many have. It's been something that has gone on since the start of the Race. Ultimately, the fae are voyeuristic by nature, and any talks of removing it get struck down quickly."

It doesn't make me feel any better about the situation. "What responsibilities could require you to watch the Race?"

Her shocked expression tells me I asked the right question. "I can't answer that, Viola. I'm sorry. Perhaps you could ask Zeph. He has the authority to release that information, but I don't."

Surprisingly, I do not feel the trepidation towards Zeph that I did at first. After spending some time with him last night, he's

better than I initially thought he would be. He's handsome and intelligent, and there is a kindness to him that I cannot deny. He reminds me a lot of Link when I really think about it.

The connection explains why Mace has been careful to dress Tulip and me up as fae to avoid detection. Everyone here has watched us suffer.

Had Zeph watched our suffering? Had he bet on me to win?

And even worse, had Mace?

Why did neither of them tell me?

I clear my head of thoughts of the brothers and focus my attention back on Plume. She stretches the books she was holding out to me. "I brought you these. Zeph mentioned you were curious to know more about Winter magic. This is a tome on Himureal himself. And this one is a diary from the last known Winter Seasonale. Well, until you, that is."

I cringe at her label of me as a Seasonale but reach out and pull the books into my hands. "Oh, thank you, I suppose." In just a day in Ytopie, I have accepted more help than I had in my entire life in Dalery. It makes my skin tighten with fear, but what choice do I have? I am in a foreign city at the mercy of the fae, with no money, no home, and no friends.

As soon as I think that, I know it's not true. I sneak a glance at Tulip, and my heart warms.

Tulip grabs my arm and shoots Plume what barely passes for a nasty look. "Come on, Lola. I am suddenly quite tired of what Ytopie has to offer us." I allow Tulip to drag me back to

the Palace. A brief glance over my shoulder shows Plume watching me with a soft, sad smile.

Chapter 34

Viola

After what felt like ages of reading through the books Plume gave me, my body tight from disuse, I realize I still need to go meet Mace. I stand and stretch out my limbs and then slide into my boots. Tulip, her head hanging upside down over the side of her bed, smiles at me. “Are you heading to see the other half of the brooding brothers?” she cajoles.

My smile creeps across my face while I roll my eyes at her. “They’re a moody lot, and that’s coming from me,” I say.

I’d filled Tulip in on my pre-Race interaction with Mace since we arrived, but she seemed much more partial to Zeph. “Mace is beautiful, but he makes my blood run cold,” she had said.

I don’t disagree. Something about him is covertly sinister, an undercurrent of manipulation in everything he says. He makes me feel like any control I have is an illusion.

I climb the stairs from the basement up onto the main hall of the Palace, eventually finding my way to Mace’s office. The

Palace is empty, with only a few fae milling about as the day wanes into the evening.

His door is open slightly, so I knock as I slide through the opening. He looks up and pins me with his bright green eyes, twins to Zeph's. He folds his hands across his desk and looks at me. "Miss - Ah, Viola. Welcome. I wondered if you were going to come." I shrug nonchalantly and slide into a chair at the front of his desk, not waiting for an invitation.

I toss my boots onto the surface of his desk, and his eyes narrow at them. Knowing I've affected his calm demeanor gives me a rush, and I push back so the chair balances on two legs. I watch his jaw clench and he leans forward, both hands on the desktop, about to chastise me when I interrupt. "I got caught up reading a few books. Zeph sent me books on Himureal and a journal from the last Winter Seasonale to study."

Mace visibly bristles at my mention of his brother. "Spending time with Zeph, are you?"

Was that jealousy in his voice? The thought of that sends a trickle of satisfaction through my veins. "I ran into him in the courtyard last night, so we returned to his place. We talked about magic and how it works. I haven't had much exposure, and he seems convinced I have Winter magic, so... Why not learn?"

Mace's hands clench, and I know my words to stoke jealousy landed. "Feet off the desk, now, Viola." Without a thought, all four legs of the chair are back on the ground, my feet tucked

underneath it as I remove them from the desk. The swiftness I responded to his command surprises me, and a satisfied grin stretches across his face.

Mace steeples his hands under his chin, smirking. “Yes, of course, why not learn of magic from my brother? And what did Zeph tell you, Viola?”

I run my fingers through my hair, suddenly nervous at his undivided attention. The realization that I’ve never been alone with him has my fingers moving slowly against my thighs, a soft drumming that allows me to clear my mind.

“He said that I possess a large amount of Winter magic that, with honing, could be very useful for Ytopie.” Mace nods silently, rising from his chair.

As he moves, I realize how different he looks from the fae I saw in the streets today. His limbs possess a quiet strength and are so long that he towers over most. He’s clad in a pair of rigid black linen trousers and an orange button-up shirt that reminds me of the glow of the moon. A few buttons at the top remain undone, giving me a glimpse of the hair that curls on his chest. His sleeves, rolled casually to his elbows, allow for viewing of his warm skin. He is all angles, his features sharp and lethal despite their beauty. He is a picture of masculine strength that makes me gulp when I look at him. My eyes trail his body, eventually reaching his face - which is fixed in a knowing grin. He brushes a lock of floppy black hair from his eye and raises a brow at me.

A flush starts under my collar, and I cough, breaking eye contact. He motions for me to stand, and I feel compelled to listen and rise. “Come, Viola, let’s get some dinner. You seem... hungry.”

We end up at his home, a stand-alone structure almost directly behind the courtyard I met Zeph in last night. It’s well-appointed, with furniture made of dark mahogany wood and olive-green fabric. He has small lights pin pricked throughout the ceiling, obviously not caring about the buzz from the Bliksem grid. Rich tapestries of gold and burnt orange drape a few of the walls. He quickly lights a fire in the golden fireplace, but it doesn’t make the room overly warm. In fact, the room stays at a comfortably cool temperature, and I realize the fire is just for ambiance.

The fact that I have ended up in two Nightroot homes in two nights is not lost on me.

While Mace cooks, he peppers me with questions about life in the Lowlands. While initially, I was uncomfortable, a few glasses of fae wine have done wonders for my nerves. For his part, he is very courteous and careful in his questioning. I have not felt like he was demanding or aggressive.

I tell him about my Father and the talisman he worked on and carried with him all my life. “Where is it now?”

“It’s in my pack back in the room. I’ve carried it every Race since my Ascension year.”

He turns to me, momentarily abandoning the food he’s cooking. “What was that like, getting left on the Summit that

year?”

I wince, and I choose to have more wine rather than answer. Noticing how uncomfortable I feel, he apologizes. “I’m sorry, I’m sure that’s such a tough topic for you.” I sit the glass down on the counter in front of me.

“No, it’s not that. It’s just I don’t really know how it feels when I dig deep. My whole life, it was a constant refrain of ‘Get to Ytopie. All that matters is Ytopie.’. So, at the time, it felt obvious that they had chosen to leave me there to increase their chances of winning. Now that I’m here without Max,” I choke on a sob at her name, “I cannot imagine leaving someone I love behind.”

He reaches for my hand but pulls his back at the last minute. “Max seemed like an incredible person. I am so sorry you lost her.”

I manage a weak smile. “She was something else. I think you would have liked her.”

In just an hour, Mace has managed to completely disarm me. I came here tonight expecting to be tense with worry and fear of his motives, but instead, I am met with a man who seems genuinely interested in me as a person.

Against my better judgment, I let myself relax a bit. My eyes are trained on his back as Mace returns to cooking, unable to look away from the movement of his muscles beneath his shirt as he chops vegetables. As he works, we fall into a comfortable silence.

Eventually, he asks about the books Zeph loaned me without looking at me.

“Well, I had read enough about Himureal and the frost magic he was fond of at that point, so I switched to the journal,” I say after recapping what I learned in Himureal’s book.

Damaris Forekeeper was the last known Winter Seasonale, and if his journal is any indication, he was a bit of an asshole. He favored blood magic.

“Forekeeper’s journal has always been an interesting tome.”

I get distracted from my line of thought because I am utterly fascinated with the methods of cooking here in Ytopie. After searing some meat on a stone that Mace heated within the fireplace, he tosses some of the chopped root vegetables on it until they grow brown and savory. He plates the meat and vegetables in front of me and slides a bowl of crisp, fresh greens next to it. My mouth waters at the smell.

Mace turns his back to me, busying himself with cleaning up the mess from cooking. I grow the nerve to ask a question that came to mind while I read Forekeeper’s journal. “Can I ask something?”

He makes a sound of approval and waits for me to continue. “In the Race, I killed a man. I’m assuming you watched, yeah?” He has the nerve to look over his shoulder at me with a sheepish expression. “Well, when I spilled his blood, I saw... All his intentions became immediately clear to me. All his deceptions, his pain. It was all there.”

I watch as Mace's shoulders tense. I get the distinct feeling he's making up excuses to not look at me. Just as I start to wonder if he will respond, he does, his voice soft with veneration.

“When I saw what you did to Amio, I was so proud of you. It was cutthroat and brutal, and many others would not have done it - as I'm sure you realized based on Max's reaction.” My breath catches as he speaks her name.

He continues, unaware of the jolt of emotion that his words caused within me. “I saw the effect it had on you. It opened you up to your own magic. It was necessary to awaken the part of you that saved three lives during the Wendigo battle.”

“But the Witch's Ladder was responsible for saving us during that fight.”

He gives me a look that could only be described as amusement. “You could easily do magic without that Ladder. All you have to do is set your intentions and know it will come to you.”

Mace slips into the chair across from me at his table and smiles. “Dig in,” he says, gesturing for me to eat. I don't even know where to begin, but I pick up a small knife to cut into the meat. I grip it and the pronged fork in my fists and roughly cut off a piece of meat to shove into my mouth. I chew quickly, suppressing a moan at the taste.

I look at Mace, the delicate way he holds his utensils, and look down at how my hands grip them. I swallow, and it goes down like sawdust at the heavy dose of embarrassment I feel.

“I’m sorry, my table manners aren’t great. We didn’t get much meat growing up, and most of what we ate we used our hands...” I trail off. He shuts me down with a wave of his hand.

“Viola, you do not have to be embarrassed about anything around me. I do not hold you to the standards of the fae.”

My nose wrinkles. “What, because humans are so below the fae?” I push back from the table, my appetite chased away by his superiority complex. I wipe my face on a white cloth, then toss it on the table. “Nice chatting with you, Mace,” I snarl and head to the door.

He rises to follow me. “No, that’s not what I’m saying at all, Viola. Please sit.” He shakes his head, and a feeling of warmth permeates the room.

I spin to face him. “Quit trying to magic me into staying!”

He balks. “What did you say?”

I wave my arms wildly around. “I can feel your influence magic! Just like at the Race’s opening ceremonies, you’re trying to calm me down with it!”

Mace pales, moving towards me on quiet feet. He stops just short of being chest-to-chest with me, and I feel ripples of power from him, soothing my limbs and encouraging me to submit. “That’s impossible,” he growls, that calm and subdued facade finally broken. It’s surprisingly nice to see the real him, even if it’s in anger. That sort of passion is intoxicating.

A flush crawls down my breastbone, and I am painfully aware of his eyes flashing towards it.

His eyes close in frustration, his deep breaths expanding his chest closer to me still. “Influence magic cannot be detected like that.”

I step towards him, connecting our bodies, unwilling to stand down at this moment. I feel his body tense against mine, but I do not remove myself, relishing the way I caught him off guard.

I drop my voice, a breathy whisper all I can manage at such close proximity to him. “Are you telling me you’re not using your influence on me now? Because I swear to you, Mace, I feel it roiling through me, warming me, attempting to calm my body and mind. I will not submit to your whims.”

He flinches back from my words but maintains contact with my body. His jaw ticks, and his nostrils flare as he breathes me in. His hands brush my thigh as he clenches his fist at his side. I raise my brow to him in silent challenge. My nose is level with his neck, and his scent of sandalwood and sea salt overpowers the residual smells of our dinner.

“I admit I am using my magic on you. But if you feel it...” he trails off, and I see confusion flicker in the backs of his eyes. His fingers release from their fist, and he brings his hand to my chin. He brushes those callused fingertips along my jaw, and despite the roughness, I shiver like it’s a cool breeze. I’m caught in the feeling for a moment, leaning closer still into him. As soon as I realize where I am and who he is, I jerk my

head away from his hand. He lets it fall, brushing my shoulder and down my arm as he does.

With a sharp inhale I can feel through my chest, he whispers to me, “If you can feel my magic, then you’re much more interesting than I ever expected, Miss Mistflow.”

Chapter 35

Mace

I am losing myself.

What started as an undeniable urge to get to know this woman and figure out what drives her has turned into a dangerous game of cat and mouse.

What was I expecting, inviting her into my home? I could tell myself that I wanted to give her a nice meal and endear her to me to get her to willingly offer herself up as a vessel.

I could tell myself that, but it would be a lie. I needed to be close to her.

So now I find myself pressed against her, in a freefall of need lit aflame at her touch.

I refuse to be the first to remove our bodies from one another.

Her jaw is set, her nostrils flaring, and I know she doesn't like the idea of being interesting to me. Like a hare, she seeks to move quickly and unnoticed through this world. Her chest

rises swiftly as her breathing picks up, spurred by my words. I fight hard to tune out the soft curves of her breasts against me and her crisp, clean scent.

There is no benefit in giving in to this feeling. Viola Mistflow is not long for this world. There is very little chance she will survive being used as a vessel.

But I cannot help the draw I feel towards her. That I have felt towards her for longer than I care to admit.

We stand there, chest to chest, for ages, neither of us speaking. Her lips are a hard line, her brow furrowed. My mind spins. Viola Mistflow being able to feel my magic was not something I accounted for. I reign it in, shutting off my intentions, pulling it back to rest within me. I feel the tension leave her body as I do.

“You were steeling yourself against the magic?” I mutter.

“I couldn’t have you manipulating me, could I?” Her voice is laced with poison but feels so sweet brushing past my lips.

She steps back from me, finally putting air between our bodies. I immediately feel the void left in her wake.

She returns to the table, hips swaying as she glances over her shoulder at me. “Our food is getting cold.” It’s matter of fact, not a question or hint of request lying in her tone. I clear the fog of arousal from my brain and follow her back to the table. I take a long pull from my glass of wine and do not miss that she’s doing the same.

“Why is it so shocking that I can feel your magic?” she asks, her disinterested tone betrayed by her body language. She’s leaning forward, breasts resting against the table, shoulders tensed. Dragging my gaze upwards, I wipe my mouth with a cloth and dangle the wine glass between my fingers.

“To most on the receiving end, magic just happens. It’s not there, and then it is. Influence magic, in particular, would not be very effective if people knew they were being influenced. Some people can train themselves to pick up on the subtleties that lie within each magic, and Seasonale can visualize magic to combine for complex spells, but overall magic is quiet.”

Her nose wrinkles in displeasure, swiping a fork and stabbing a vegetable. She shoves it into her mouth, and between chews, she says, “If it’s so rare for magic to be obvious, why is it obvious to me?”

Why, indeed. Viola is an untrained vessel, so while the potential for magic within her is great, she should not be able to realize it yet. Trained, she should have the same level of magic as a Seasonale, albeit a very powerful one. To be attuned to magic on this level would imply centuries of practice.

“I’m not sure why, Viola. But I also don’t think you’re asking the right questions.”

I love watching her body tense and imagine how it would feel as it tenses for my touch. She may have been an enigma to the humans she grew up with, but I can see through so much of her facade. She has been relatively alone most of her life,

and while she thinks connection is not what she needs, her body is begging for it.

Eventually, she steels herself enough to ask the question I know she's been dying to know the answer to.

“Am I the vessel you say I am?”

A bolt of lightning strikes, loud and close. It's odd for the Bliksem to not have diverted it, but I shrug that feeling off. Locking eyes with her, I nod deliberately. “Yes.”

I don't follow up.

Viola stews, clearly waiting for me to tell her more. I make her squirm, forcing her to ask me for what she needs.

“Can you tell me what that means, then?” she hisses through gritted teeth. I lean back, relaxing in the control of the situation. By this point, we've all but abandoned our food in favor of wine, so I wordlessly gather my plate and motion to take hers. She pushes it to me but remains rooted to her chair.

After clearing the plates and resting them on the counter, I grab another bottle of wine and a bowl of berries, moving to my sitting room to place the offerings on a small table. I motion for her to join me, and she slowly rises to her feet and moves into the room.

Once again, it appears that I don't need influence magic to get her to listen to me.

I stay standing until she sinks into a seat on my sofa, and then I find my place beside her. Many would choose a seat across from someone they wish to gain information from.

Personally, I find it unnerves my targets more to sit beside them.

And I cannot quite explain why, but when Viola is unnerved, I am undone.

Grabbing the bottle of wine, I pour Viola another glass and push it into her hands. The silence I've forced us into has disarmed her, the wine softening some of the hard edges she erects around herself. She begins to tap her fingers together and then moves a hand to her collarbone, a staccato pattern upon her skin.

This is not the first time I've noticed her nervous tic, and my hand reaches for hers and stills it. I hold it within my own until her body slows, and only then do I release her. She inhales deeply, the breath leaving her body like a curse, and then turns her head to me. Finally, I answer her question.

“When the Gods were banished so long ago, their magic spread throughout the land. It became a part of humans, and those humans are what we now know as the first fae. Some of it went into creatures that haunt our lands, warping them into horrendous monsters, but most made its way into the humans. Not all could handle the magic, and they died because of it. This is what the humans have called the virus that wracked Krillium.”

It's almost imperceptible, but her fingers tap against one another again, her wine glass abandoned on the table. It is the only outward sign of tension I notice within her. I reach for her right hand with my left and hold it within my grasp.

“With the Gods’ magic spent, they were locked away into a pocket world, for lack of a better explanation. The promise made by four ruling families at the time was that someone from their bloodline would serve as a vessel for the magic of the Gods to ensure a return.” Her hand clenches within my own, and I release it. She snatches up her wine glass and drinks deeply.

My glass needs a top up, and I take care of that for both of us while continuing. “Stone, my advisor, found in a few tomes that we may only need one vessel and that a single returned God could bring the others back for us. The world could only be made better by the presence of the Gods. They would be able to ensure prosperity and protection for all. While we have Summer’s shielding the cities, it’s proven to be a huge toll on our people, and our magic is waning.”

I sit my empty glass down and pull one leg up on the couch, turning my body to face her. She mirrors my movement, and suddenly, we are knee to knee, facing one another. “Shields?”

“Each city was founded by one of the original families, so we needed to keep travel between the cities to a minimum to track the descendants better. The shields provided protection from the beasts, and we used magic to make the land between the cities inhospitable.” She winces at my words, and the familiar guilt that comes with the admission of my manipulation of the world churns up.

She runs her hand through her hair, pulling on the ends as she reaches them. “And I’m the vessel promised to bring back

Himureal and ultimately all the Gods?” she whispers.

“You’re getting ahead of yourself,” I admonish. I’m rewarded for my tone with a glare. “Stone noticed Winter magic disappearing, a sign that it was concentrating on a single vessel. But it went away entirely for too long, so we had to be relentless in searching for a vessel that showed any signs of Winter magic. The four original bloodlines became so diluted throughout the generations that it became exceedingly difficult to pinpoint the descendants. A few times, we thought we had the vessel, but none of them proved to have the aptitude required of them.”

My mind travels to all those failed attempts to summon Himureal into a vessel, the devastation that followed, and that knowledge claws at my throat to be shared with Viola. I swallow it back.

“Until me,” she says, her voice barely audible at this point.

I nod and gather her hands back in mine. “Until you, Viola. You are the embodiment of Winter magic. Power pours from you, even if you cannot see it. I have suspected it was you for ages, but it became abundantly clear this year.”

She winces. “You were watching me?”

I brush my fingers through my hair, and it falls in my eyes. “Yes, I was. And you were captivating.”

Her eyes flick up to mine, and I catch sight of her swallowing. I lean further forward, closing the distance between us. I cannot seem to help myself. She is magnetic,

drawing me in. “But what does me being the vessel mean, Mace?” My name on her lips is like a breath of frost, sending shivers down my spine.

“It means you are the conduit we will use to bring Himureal back. Your family was one of the original four noble families.”

“The Mistflow name used to mean greatness,” she mutters so quietly I almost miss it.

“What do you mean, mean greatness?”

“Something my father told me when he gave me the talisman I was telling you about.” Her opening up to me tonight was something unexpected but wholly welcome. I lay one hand atop her own and tilt her chin to look me in the eye with the other.

“You will bring Himureal back, he will bring back the other Gods, and Krillium will have peace again. No more Race, no more famine. Their combined power will make this land comfortable and whole again for everyone. And it will be because of you.” Her eyes are alight with promise, my enthusiasm rubbing off on her.

I genuinely believe the Gods’ return will only mean good things for our land. We have too long been a ship without a rudder, needing guidance. I just pray that Viola will agree to help us. I do not want to force this responsibility on her.

But if it comes to it, I may not have a choice.

“I still don’t think I’m the vessel, Mace.”

She is going to have to stop saying my name, or I'm not going to be responsible for what I do to her.

I brush a piece of her dark hair from her eyes. As I tuck it behind her ear, she tilts her face into my hand. My thumb traces down her jaw and brushes lightly over her bottom lip. Her eyes flutter with the sensation.

It is not my intention to seduce her into becoming the vessel.

No, this is all for me.

“You don't have to accept or even agree to it now, Viola. We have time,” I murmur, moving closer to her. My knee pushes her legs further apart, and I can't help but watch as her thighs spread, the dress barely covering the space between her legs. We are close enough now that our foreheads are touching, breath mingling in the rapidly dwindling area between us.

Her breath hitches. I flick my eyes to her heaving chest; the plunging neckline of the feudal fabric dress hints at the curve of her breast, and I long to see more.

When I saw her this morning, I was so pleased she decided to wear it. I spent my time carefully mixing metal and cloth into a protective but sensual outfit, but I was unprepared for how stunning she would be cloaked in the dark fabric.

I raise my eyes to hers once more, seeing the familiar fog of uncertainty within them, and realize I cannot take advantage of the emotional turmoil she is in. Reluctantly, I pull away, sitting back on the sofa away from her. She breathes sharply, leaning

to brace herself on her knees. Lightning flashes again, illuminating the conflicted look on her face.

I hear the rain begin to fall, pattering loudly on the roof. “Looks like it’s about to storm,” I say, attempting to lighten some of the palpable tension between us. She nods, pulling both her legs onto the sofa. I catch a flash of the miniature shorts under her dress, barely falling below her ass, and my stomach tightens.

Before I can make a mistake, I stand up from the couch and pace to the window to collect myself. I’ve lost a bit of my control and composure, and that flash of the bare skin of her thighs will spell my destruction. Being near her is intoxicating in the best ways, but I should not get involved.

I cannot risk getting attached to her.

Watching the rain fall and the storm kick up, I roll my shoulders to relieve tension. But when I feel her hand on the small of my back, that tension returns in full force.

“Looks like a pretty heavy storm,” she says, resting her elbow on my shoulder. “I guess I’m stuck here for a bit.”

Chapter 36

Viola

What am I doing with myself?

It's one thing to not rebuke his advances but another entirely to encourage them. That's what I'm doing, I'm sure of it. How else could he take me proclaiming happily I am stuck here with him?

Mace Nightroot.

The head of the Patricians.

The man who is the key to orchestrating the Race year after year.

And I want him. Desperately.

He turns to me, tilting his face downward so we can see eye-to-eye. Involuntarily, I gulp at the intensity of his gaze. His heat threatens to engulf me, and my body is all too willing to go under.

I have spent so much of my life fighting everything put in front of me. My parents believed getting to Ytopie was the

only thing that mattered. They only truly cared about winning and put it above their own daughter. And up until now, I have been the same.

During the Race, I chose the path to the elevator over Max. And she died because of my choice. Every choice I have made has been with the sole goal of making it here, to Ytopie. I never pictured it like this, being told I am a God-chosen vessel, but I still made it.

It feels cheap making the decision to finally seek joy for the sake of it now that I have reached my goal, but I need to do it. If my place as a vessel is true, it will never be about me again.

Who cares about the wants of a woman who is nothing but a conduit for a God?

I don't know what I want for the long term, but right now, I have decided I want Mace Nightroot.

I make no move to expand the distance between us, instead holding my stance deliberately still. I want him to make the decision to push this further. I struggle to admit that this fae, who has long represented all my ire toward the world, is responsible for the yearning in my gut.

He brushes his knuckle across my cheekbone, leaving goosebumps in his wake. The storm outside rages, a mixture of lightning and rain that whips the landscape into submission.

I could brave the weather. It's not far to the Palace. I could run, bracing myself against the storm, and slink downstairs, soaking wet but with my dignity intact.

Staying here means facing Tulip and the knowledge that I did not return overnight and instead spent it with Mace. I briefly consider the feasibility of a lie that I got caught up reading in a library. But as easy as it was lying to Max, I do not think I have it in me to lie to Tulip. I need to do better by her than I did by Max.

Mace shocks me back into my body by sliding his hand up my hairline and gripping the spot where my head meets my neck. My arm drops from his shoulder, and I lean into his grip. “What am I going to do with you?” he purrs, face intoxicatingly close to my own. I whimper from desire, and his eyes light up playfully.

“I was willing to ignore this undeniable thing between us. It would have driven me mad with desire, but I would have done it. But you could not leave well enough alone, could you?” He drops his mouth to my ear, and I shiver as he says, “You seem to always be so in control, Viola.”

It’s the truth. Since my parents left me, I have done nothing but control every aspect of my own life and many aspects of Max’s. I nod weakly, unable to bring myself to speak.

“I want to make myself clear here,” he continues, his nose sliding down the crook of my neck. I shiver at the contact. Every move this man makes is so sensual it’s almost impossible to resist him.

It briefly crosses my mind that influence magic is wasted on a man like this because he could convince a sailor to give up the sea.

“When you’re with me,” he whispers, kissing the flesh of my neck and down my jaw. “I’m in control.”

Those three words jolt me, and I tense under his grasp.

He immediately pulls away, noticing the change in my body almost as quickly as it happens. “I’m sorry, I overstepped.” His voice is soft and non-threatening, and his eyes are kind. He’s panting softly, and I see the evidence of his arousal pushing against his pants.

Yet still, he read my body, and he stopped.

I step back multiple paces, eventually finding a chair in his dining area and sinking into it. “No, you didn’t, it’s... it’s me.” I whisper. Shivers wrack my body as the memories flood back.

The year my parents left me alone in the arena, I had to finish the Race without anyone. I was in the back half after the winners made it to the arena, but when the rest of us had to loop back down the summit to the exit. I stopped to rest and fell asleep against a tree.

When I awoke, a man was there, staring directly at me. He had tied me to the tree. I fought against the restraints to little effect. My blade was out of reach.

I did not recognize him, so I assumed he was from another region. His pale skin and eyes hinted that he was from Pran. He never spoke to me; he just stalked across the clearing once I awoke.

The sound of his pants falling to the ground still haunts my deepest nightmares.

I work to clear my head of the memory, tapping my fingers along my collarbones to bring me back to the present. I tap out and count, just as my father taught me until I feel more grounded within my body and can open my eyes once more.

Glancing up, I see Mace kneeling in front of me, his expression a mix of sadness and guilt. “You do that when you’re anxious,” he says, nodding toward my hands.

I wince a smile at him. “My father taught me. It helps me focus myself back to calm when I feel like I’m losing touch.” He’s quiet, waiting for me to speak and bridge the gap now created between the two of us.

When I stay silent, he rises and heads to his kitchen, where he pours me a mug of tea from a kettle that was sitting on the warm rock from dinner. Passing it to me, I take it in my hands. It’s barely warm, the residual heat just enough to seep flavor from the leaves, but still a welcome sensation. I drink from it greedily.

“I’m sorry,” I begin after a few gulps of tea. “It was not my intention to make you feel bad.” He pulls a chair beside me and sits, shaking his head. He still doesn’t speak, holding space for me to process as I see fit. “I just... I can’t give up control. Ever. Not again.” I cannot bring myself to meet his eye and instead busy myself by memorizing the number of stone tiles that cover the floor under my chair.

It’s nine.

His inhale of breath is quiet, but it roars in my ears in the still of the room. “What happened?” he asks, his voice low and

gravely.

I shake my head. “Doesn’t matter anymore. It was a long time ago. The stark disclaimer of you taking...”

Before I can think, his knees are against mine again, and his chair is pulled to me. He clasps my hands and implores, “I had and have no intention of harming you. I would never cross any lines you’re not comfortable with.”

If I had been told just a week ago that I would believe that Mace Nightrout meant me no harm, there is no way I would have conceived it.

But today, I accept it wholly, with no doubt within me.

I meet his gaze, sadness and relief coursing through me. “I believe that, I do. But...”

He cuts me off. “But nothing will happen between us tonight, Viola.”

The relief that washes through me must be evident to him because briefly hurt colors his face before it returns to its familiar state of apathy. “I did want it to. I mean, I do want something to happen. Eventually,” I hedge. I can tell he does not fully believe me.

It’s then I notice that I have not heard lightning or rain since we broke apart. I glance towards the window, and while the night sky is dark, the skies are clear.

“We should be getting you home, Miss Mistflow,” he says, rising to his full height.

I wince at his use of honorific. “Please, Mace, this... I promise this isn’t you.”

He waves away my protests, but his eyes soften when he looks at me. “I understand, Viola.”

This man before me awakened a fire inside that I have not felt in a long time. He pulled yearning from me effortlessly. While his words may have triggered an unfortunate memory, his actions afterward showed me just how different he is from that man. With the men from the village, Amio included, I was scratching an itch to move on and be able to focus better. It was a transactional relationship purely for function.

When I touched Mace, it was excitement coursing through my veins. Desire pooled in me and stretched its tendrils out toward him, begging for his attention.

Mace moves to open the door to lead me out, and I grab his hand in mine. As he turns to look at me, I move my body up against his, pressing the air from the space between our chests. He grows rigid beneath me, breath caught in his lungs as he peers down at me with trepidation. And then my lips meet his. I kiss him softly until I feel his body melt into mine. One of his large hands rests on my lower back, and he parts his lips for me, welcoming my tongue into his mouth.

The kiss is gentle and languid, with no regard for time.

I can feel him holding back underneath the surface. And I must admit, I long to push the boundary, to dive deeper into this man, but I know this is all it can be for now.

We kiss like that for what feels like ages, and eventually, he pulls away, his lips swollen and glistening from the effort. His eyes glitter with desire as they travel the lengths of my body. “I meant it when I said I do want something to happen between us,” I say, smirking.

Ever the image of composure, he runs his hand through his hair and shrugs nonchalantly. “So you’ve shown.” Our gazes lock for another moment, and I start to giggle, the rush of so many different emotions confusing my system. He meets my giggle with a full laugh, the sound of which warms my chest and melts the last part of me intent on keeping him away.

Mace grabs my hand and says, “Let’s get you home, Viola. We can continue this tomorrow,” while dragging me out the door and back to the Palace.

Chapter 37

Viola

The incessant buzzing of the magic that powers the lighting in this basement is going to make me cut my own ears off.

Sleep will not find me, my body is still too worked up from my encounter with Mace.

I stare at the ceiling, the light sparkling across the gray ceiling like fireflies. The silk of the red blanket on my bed caresses my skin, slipping across my bare back that is still on fire with Mace's touch.

What am I doing? What would Max say if she saw me now, eagerly throwing myself into the arms of the fae at the head of the group responsible for so many deaths and atrocities? Would her desire for me to move on and live a normal life outweigh her anger towards the fae if she knew the truth of the Race?

Unable to ease the humming in my veins left behind by Mace with sheer willpower and the night too thick to run the

arousal out, I'm left with but one option. With a quick glance at where Tulip sleeps, I slide from my bed and into the bathing chamber.

I search for some flint, or anything at all, to light the candle sitting on the counter but resign myself to turning on the Bliksem-powered light.

It briefly crosses my mind that a team of Bliksem must work around the clock to keep Ytopie in the convenience of light, and I only express annoyance for their efforts.

The harsh light illuminates my sleepless eyes in the mirror, bloodshot and watery. I look gaunt and haunted, a far cry from the desirable figure Mace made me believe I was.

I reach out to quickly turn off the light, any lingering desire I felt chased away by my reflection.



Tulip lay stretched on the grass before me, clothed in yet another fine outfit courtesy of Mace Nightroot. Her feet are bare except for a chain of glittering gems wrapped around her ankle, and the soft skin of her legs reflects the sun, her thighs kissed by a pale brown skirt. The light green blouse, which clings to her figure, almost blends with the grass she rests upon.

She looks genuinely at peace.

That level of peace eludes me. I'm pacing a path in the grass, contemplating the masculine brothers I have spent the past two

evenings with. While I'm sure there are more critical things to consider, such as the fact that I may be a vessel that will herald the return of Gods that the people of Krillium do not even know are gone, instead, I am working myself into a tizzy over men.

“The Race should be declaring a winner soon, right?” Tulip asks, hands behind her head and eyes closed to the warm sun. I cease my pacing.

“I almost completely forgot the Race was still going on,” I say, shame creeping up my throat.

Tulip laughs, “That’s because you’re too busy entertaining men.”

I pantomime stepping on her fingers with my boots.

The outfit provided to me today is a stark contrast to yesterday’s. The soft leather fighting breeches and feminine cut doublet feel like home. I pulled my hair into a single knot on the back of my head and strapped myself with my knives, content to find a place to run through my familiar exercises.

I even brought out the Witch’s Ladder, eager to see if I could harness the magic again.

Instead, I’m pacing, fretting about men like I am fifteen again when I was wondering if Link felt the same way I do.

“Mace is convinced I’m a vessel.”

My words are spoken for me, but Tulips hears. “Do you think you are?”

Confusion has made itself a home within me. “I don’t know what to think. Zeph says I’m just a powerful Seasonale that needs training.”

Tulip is sitting up now, her back resting against the legs of a stone bench. “Which do you think it is?”

I worry my lip, shrugging. “How am I to possibly know? Truly! All anyone knows about Winter magic came from some asshole’s journal, and I still feel like Mace is withholding information about what being a vessel entails from me, despite everything.”

“What do you mean, despite everything?”

My face flushes, acutely aware that a slip of the tongue has now opened me up to a conversation I am not ready to have with Tulip. “I just mean that when I had dinner with him last night, we had a nice conversation, and we spoke a lot about the history of Ytopie. Despite sharing all that information with me, there is still so much I don’t know about the magic he swears I have within me.”

Tulip’s tinkling laugh fills the courtyard. “Okay, so then let’s practice!”

She’s on her feet, bouncing lightly on the balls. “How am I supposed to practice something I’m not sure I have?”

She shrugs. “Did the brooding brothers tell you anything about doing magic?”

I don’t miss her continued use of the nickname for Mace and Zeph, but I choose not to call attention to it.

“They both mentioned that it’s just about setting intentions. That it’s not there one minute and there the next. And Zeph said the Witch’s Ladder wouldn’t have worked without my inherent magic.”

I remove it from my pocket, and she squeals when she lays eyes on it. “Pull some feathers, let’s see what happens!”

We spend the next hour toying with the Witch’s Ladder, dismantling it feather by feather. Through it, we get small round balls of ice falling from the sky, shards of ice large enough to be used as spears, and shadows that creep low to the ground, hiding what is there entirely. Each spell is small and pointed, crafted explicitly for short bursts of defense. It’s obvious why Jaz’s family kept the ladder for so long.

After exhausting all the feathers, the last being a blanket of white snow that covers a small square around me, I look to Tulip for what to do next. She greets me with a ball of snow to the face.

As I prepare to send an equal one back her way, she darts behind me, hands on my shoulders. “Now we’re out of magic. Did they say anything about you creating it yourself?” The snow falls to the ground from my slack hand.

“They both just harped on intentions. That unless I’m hoping to combine with another’s magic, I have to picture an objective and let it flow from me.”

She puts her hands on her hips, looking every bit her eighteen years. “Okay, so, set some intentions. Hit me with some magic!”

I glance around the empty meadow, happy for the absence of an audience for what will undoubtedly be a spectacular failure. Luckily for us, this meadow is far enough removed from the city to afford me the privacy of my inadequacy.

Setting my intentions sounds easy in the abstract, but my brain will not settle enough to do it. Where do I even begin?

I do not want to bleed Tulip and try to conduct a brutal scrying of her life force. We've already frosted over portions of the meadow, and trying to stack ice on ice is useless to me.

That leaves shadows.

I remember the shadow-snake that wrapped around my arm during the Wendigo battle. It felt affectionate toward me, and I was sad to see it go. I look down at the arm it wrapped around as if it were a gauntlet and try to picture it there on my skin again.

Forcing my mind to empty of all thoughts but that shadow, that snake who saved my friends and me and brought me comfort, I do not break my gaze from my arm.

An unnatural coolness washes over me, and darkness envelops my feet and the ground below me. The meadow looks dimmer, a curtain of shadows wrapped around us. From a heavily shaded spot under a tree, I spy a rolling cloud of shadows stretching toward me.

Around it, shimmering dots of black seem to float effortlessly through the air, almost imperceptible in the fog of the spell. I call the shadows and the specks of black towards

me in my mind, willing them to fall under my command. They pulse with life, doubling in size as they travel to me.

I outstretch my arm, and a single tendril of shadow breaks from the cloud, slithering across the ground at a breakneck speed. Before I can blink, the shadow hooks onto my forearm, pulsing and wrapping its length around my skin.

I forgot Tulip was here with me for the briefest moment, but her horrified face has brought me back to myself. She gapes at the shadow-snake around my arm and then points to my feet.

Looking down, I appear to be turning into a shadow myself. I attempt to move my leg, to kick it from the shadows, and I am greeted by nothing but a translucent outline of what was once my appendage.

I yelp, matching Tulip's stricken expression. "Where are my fucking legs?" I shout as much to Tulip as to myself.

She throws her hands in the air, "How am I supposed to know, Viola?"

I glare down at the shadow-snake as if this trick of the light can understand what I'm saying. "Where are my legs, shadow-snake?"

I'd swear it tightened around my arms as I spoke to it.

Before I can continue to disappear into a shadow of my former self, a bright light fills the area. I wince, closing my eyes to the onslaught. I feel the shadow-snake loosen around my arm, fighting against the invasion of light.

When I can brave opening my eyes, I am pleased to see my legs are back and looking very solid once more.

Lifting my head, my eyes lock with the bright green eyes of Zeph Nightroot.

He looks positively giddy.

“You almost turned yourself into a shadow,” he says, stifling a laugh.

I swat at him with my snake-clad arm. He looks down at it, his eyebrows raised. “New pet?”

The shadow-snake loosens its grip around my arm ever so slightly. “I guess so,” I say, turning my arm over to look at it from all angles. “Why are my legs back?”

He waves his fingers at me teasingly. “Light magic. I told you I was your counter. You’re lucky I saw you out of the window. I’m not sure how I could’ve brought you back if you went pure shadow.” He gestures to the Palace, which I didn’t even realize was visible from where we stand, embarrassed that I was caught.

To camouflage my burning cheeks, I examine the shadow-snake in front of my face, effectively blocking Zeph’s view of me. It isn’t quite solid, but its body is opaque, and it even has a pointed head like the snakes I would find in the woods. It’s as if the shadows have compressed themselves and become tangible by my sheer will.

“Then why is he still here?” I ask, not taking my eyes off my new companion.

“He?” Tulip says over Zeph’s shoulder. She looks shaken up by the spectacle of magic.

I raise and drop a single shoulder. “Feels like a he.”

Zeph ruffles his sunset-colored hair, chuckling to himself. It’s a masculine sound rumbling deep within his chest. “That shadow is clearly still here because your intentions are still set on it. You don’t want it to leave.”

He was right. I feel comforted by the shadow, a reminder of the gruesome battle I fought alongside Max and Tulip. “I like him,” is all I manage to say.

I feel no judgment from Zeph at all, just admiration. “I told you that you were powerful, Viola. That level of shadow magic... I’ve never read of someone turning themselves into shadows. And now you have a familiar?” His eyes glitter, and he looks almost sheepish as he takes another step toward me. “You’re even more incredible than I thought.”

A flush comes over my cheeks, and out of the corner of my eye, I catch Tulip shrinking away, following the pathway back to the Palace.

Leaving Zeph and me alone.

I make a mental note to give her hell for leaving me alone and turn back to Zeph. He steps toward me, and I move backward, not looking to close the space between us. “What made you try your magic?” he asks, voice low as if he was speaking a secret.

“Well, after I read those books you had Plume give me, oh, thanks for that, by the way.”

“Of course. I wanted you to know more about yourself.”

I brush him off. “Anyways, after I read them, I had dinner with Mace, and we...”

His body is rigid, hands clenched in fists. I can practically feel the heat radiating from him. “You had dinner with Mace?” he spits like it’s a curse.

While I notice his reaction, I continue as if I don’t, feeling no guilt from my time with Mace. “Yeah, I had dinner with him. We talked about magic and the process of it, like how you and I did. He also told me more about being the vessel...” He grabs my snake-free arm, which was in the middle of gesturing, and pulls me roughly towards him, nearly chest to chest.

Reflexively, I yank a blade from my leg holster and press it against Zeph’s neck. My shadow-snake moves from my arm to his shoulders, wrapping around the man’s torso.

“Get your fucking hands off me, Zeph.”

He quickly drops my arm, shock and embarrassment coloring his cheeks. “I’m sorry, Viola...”

“You do not get to touch me,” I snarl. “Your anger is inappropriate and misplaced.”

He nods, not quite meekly but in deference. “I apologize sincerely, Viola. When you mentioned being the vessel...”

Well, I just wasn't thinking. But you must know, truly, you are NOT the vessel."

Taking several steps back from him and sheathing my blade at my thigh, I attempt to breathe my anger out through my nose. My shadow-snake unfurls his tight embrace from Zeph's shoulders and slips back to me, climbing my body before resting again on my right arm. It's pulsing and movement calm me, a cool reminder of what I am capable of if I allow it to be.

"I think this level of magic I am capable of points to the fact that I am, Zeph." My voice is tempered but firm.

He shakes his head sadly. "You believe what Mace tells you?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

His body moves with a deep inhale, and he takes a cautious step towards me. We lock eyes, his green ones imploring me to listen to what he has to say about the man I got to know last night.

"Mace isn't who you think he is, Vi." I flinch at the nickname Max used for me on his lips, the familiarity of it drying my throat. If he notices, he does not react. "He's dangerous. Incredibly so."

I have difficulty matching how Zeph speaks of Mace with the Mace I spent the prior evening with, with the man who read my body and listened to my boundaries with no complaint or question. While Mace has always seemed ruthless on the outside, his intentions appear to be for good. I

can relate to the fact that his way of getting there may be less than desirable at times.

When I do not respond, Zeph pushes himself one step closer to me. “Just do one thing for me, Viola.”

I say nothing, my arms crossed and body rigid.

“Ask Mace about Link.”

And suddenly, I’m in freefall.

Chapter 38

Mace

“**N**ow that the vessel is here...”

“Viola. Her name is Viola,” I say sharply, interrupting Stone. The echo of her kiss still lands on my lips, the memory of her body against mine replaying nonstop in my head.

He glares at me. “It would behoove you to remember that she is but a tool to be used for the glory of Himureal. She is significant in the grand scheme of things but should not be significant to you as a person.”

Stone has become insufferable in the two days since Viola and Tulip entered Ytopie. The validation he has received for being correct about Viola has pushed his ego to the point of bursting.

Unfortunately, we cannot truly know if Viola is the vessel until we attempt the ritual.

Which, if she isn't the vessel, will have disastrous consequences for her.

But any glimmer of doubt I had about Viola and the magic she holds was banished as I watched from the window in my office as she effortlessly called shadows to her, becoming one with them. It was beautiful and dark, just as she is.

Until my unendurable brother pushed through the scene, casting the shadows away with light before we could see just how far her powers would go.

That is why Stone is in my office, urging me to consider moving up the ritual. He also saw the display, and it emboldened him to think we could complete the ritual before the winner's ceremony.

By my calculations from watching the connection, the Race winners should make their way to the arena tonight. Already, citizens of Ytopie are gathering and heading towards the arena, eager to catch a glimpse of the humans they have been rooting for.

Tomorrow, a gala will be held in honor of those winners, an evening of luxury and merriment to celebrate their win. Afterward, they'll be escorted to the human village outside Ytopie that sits empty, purely for show. My stomach turns at the thought.

This is my least favorite part of my role as the leader of the Patricians. It sickens me that to concentrate the Winter magic enough for a vessel to emerge, we had to rid the world of

others with sparks of it. It's a part I have refused to participate in.

I let Stone do his own dirty work.

“Why aren't we sending this year's winners to the village for real, Stone? We've got what we've been looking for.”

His sneer is menacing, showing a ruthless side of him that rarely breaks through the surface. “Because it is what we do. What do you think will happen if they get there and realize they are the only ones? Do you think they will sit by idly when they realize we have slain their families, their friends?”

I'm on my feet, pushing into Stone's space, frustration at the years of bloodshed bubbling up. “Then we tell them! We explain what we did and why. They will understand. Ultimately, what we've done is protect them. We are just trying to make Krillium whole and safe again. I must believe we'll be forgiven.”

This man, who has raised me since the untimely death of my parents, is hardly recognizable to me as he pushes into my face, anger coloring his aged brown skin crimson. “You forget your place, boy. You may be the head of the Patricians, but I put you there. I made you. You will sit down, shut up, and allow me to do what I am here to do. We need to ensure there is no residual Winter magic left. This is what the Gods have ordained me to do.”

“No one ordained you! You took this upon yourself. You created this situation. If we had been honest with our people

from the beginning, we would not be faced with killing innocents now that we've reached our goal.”

“Innocents? No one is innocent, Mace. And this is the last I'll hear of it unless you would like me to escort Tulip to the village as well.”

My body falls, defeat loosening my muscles and lowering me back into the chair across from Stone. Viola would never forgive me if anything happened to Tulip. As much as I do not want to see innocents slaughtered because of Stone's stubbornness, I cannot allow Viola to go through the grief of losing Tulip on top of Max.

He snaps his thin, bony fingers in front of my face. “Well? Do you think you can get Viola to join you this evening in the garrison for the ritual?”

I need more time with Viola to finish what we started last night. To tell her the truth about what has been happening here and beg for her forgiveness. I need more time, and I am unwilling to give that up.

Nothing in the texts explicitly says the vessel will be cannibalized to allow the God to return. But how could she not be? He will use every bit of her magic and life force to push himself back into this world.

I'll be damned if I let that happen before I hold her in my arms again.

“No. The ritual will have to happen after the gala, as was planned from the start. The citizens must see Viola and her

companion around the city tomorrow. They will need to be formally presented as winners. Then we can do the ritual.”

Stone snarls, anger highlighting the gauntness of his face. “There is no need to wait. We have the means to bring our people their God back! We should do it now.”

Swiftly, I rise to my feet and lean across the desk. I dwarf Stone. He’s a small man, grown hobbled with age. “This is the last I’ll hear of this. The plan is there for a reason, and we must stick to it. You have threatened Tulip once, and I will keep your nasty secret, but I will not deny our people the chance to celebrate their winners. To do so would steal some of the last joy Viola will probably have.”

“Very well, Mace. But do remember, she is not long for this world. I would hate to see your attachment to her spell your ruin.”



By my calculations, the winners of the Race are less than two hours out from the arena, so I head downstairs into the basement to gather Viola and Tulip for the ceremony. They will be announced as winners, though their use of the elevator will not be revealed.

I knock and hear Tulip’s voice calling to enter. Slung open the door, I lock eyes with the girl, barely eighteen, and smile. She’s wearing her Race clothes again, a part of the facade that she has been on the Summit this entire time. “Oh. It’s you,”

she spits, her voice low. “You need to leave. She doesn’t want you here. We’ll find our way to the arena on our own.”

Confusion wracks me. Have I done something wrong? Viola and I parted on more than good terms. I recall the feel of her breasts pressed against me, her soft lips hungrily consuming my own, and I can’t fathom how she’d be upset with me. “What are you talking about, Tulip?” I say, not hiding my confusion.

Just then, Viola exits the bathing chamber, looking every bit the warrior in her traveling clothes. Her hair is back in a braid, and the clothes, while clean, still bear the tears and cuts of her hard-fought victories. When her eyes meet mine, her face steels, her lips pulling back in a snarl.

“Get the fuck out,” she hisses.

I hold my palms up in submission, thoroughly lost at her hostility. “Viola, what’s going on?”

Apparently, I asked the wrong question because she’s suddenly at my throat, a blade pressed firmly against my flesh. A shadow, which I first mistook for a gauntlet, winds its way over my mouth, effectively gagging me.

“That fucking shadow gives me the creeps.” I hear Tulip murmur behind me. I must agree with her assessment.

The shadow feels like a living creature, somehow both solid and intangible at the same time. It undulates and writhes against my mouth, churning my stomach at the sensation.

After several attempts to speak around it, I stare at Viola, who unwaveringly holds her blade to my throat.

“I spoke to Zeph. He came to see me, to help me train my shadows,” she begins, her voice cold and merciless. “And he said something very interesting.”

I can only imagine the lies and half-truths my brother could spin about me. We’ve never gotten along, and it’s plain for anyone to see that he desires Viola. Of course, he would ensure no attention from her would be spared for me.

“He told me,” she continues, pressing the knife tighter against my skin, “that I should ask you about Link.”

Well, that is not what I wanted to hear.

I wish I could say Zeph whispered falsehoods in her ear, but the situation with Link is regrettable, true, and utterly my fault.

“Link,” she continues, a slight waver to her voice, “the only man I ever loved. The one time I let my heart go soft. They told me he died during the Race. Every person I knew told me there was no hope he would find the elevator because the elevator wasn’t real. Seems like it’s pretty damn real to me.”

Tulip has moved to her friend’s side, her typically beautiful and carefree face a mask of righteous indignation on behalf of her friend.

“So, tell me, Mace,” she says, running the blade down my cheek, “did Link find the elevator?”

I try to speak around the shadow she’s gagged me with, but when it’s clear I cannot, she snaps her fingers, and the shadow

disengages itself from me and swirls back up her arm.

I do not have time to marvel at her control and depth of magic because the blade is still at my throat, and she's awaiting my answer. "He did find the elevator, Viola. But you already figured that out."

"Then why hasn't he found me yet? Why haven't you brought me to my parents? What kind of sick game is happening here?" she roars. With her fury comes a lashing of shadows from the corners of the basement, jumping into the air like crashing waves. Despite being underground, a frigid breeze passes over us.

The strength of her magic rivals that of the strongest Seasonale, but it is deadly magic that she appears to have very little control over.

I can see the flecks of light blue swirling in the air, frost magic waiting to be engaged. The black spots of shadow magic glisten everywhere, threatening to engulf the room in darkness.

"Viola, we must get you and Tulip to the arena. You have to be crowned the winner. Afterward, I'll explain everything. I promise. I'll tell you everything you need to know. But if you're not crowned in front of everyone, you'll have no place in Ytopie."

"What makes you think I want a place in Ytopie?" She shoves past me, knocking her shoulder into mine and causing me to lose my footing slightly.

How does this woman manage to keep me so off-kilter?

“No need to escort us, your liege. Zeph can show us to the arena,” she snarls on her way out the door. Tulip follows behind her wordlessly until she reaches the top of the stairs. She glances about, checking to ensure Viola is out of earshot.

“I do not know what happened between the two of you, Mace, but the little trust she had in you has been completely shattered. If you have any more secrets, you should consider letting them out now.”

Chapter 39

Zeph

From my spot on the sidelines of the arena, I can see Viola and Tulip, artificially dirtied by myself on the way here. They look almost as haggard as they were when I first laid eyes on them as they came down the elevator.

The elevator that was supposed to be a children's myth.

The elevator we're now pretending doesn't exist, having orchestrated Viola and Tulip entering the arena from the underground before any other Racers. To anyone who looks closely, it would be suspicious. But the citizens of Ytopie just want a good show, and the dark horse who disappeared from their connections following the death of her friend appearing at the last minute to win it all makes a damn good one.

When I met her at the steps of the Palace to escort her here, I could tell she had spoken to Mace. The tension that pulsed from her body had shadows dancing all around her. I could only guess at her intention, but it could not have been good.

I shouldn't be as happy about that as I am.

Tulip joined us shortly after, and we made our way to the arena through back alleys, stopping to dirty their clothes and muss their hair as we did. Once underground, I split from the pair to join my place with the rest of the Patricians.

Nimh still will not look at me, furious for decisively cutting the plan to expose the Race off at the knee. My attempts to speak to her have fallen on deaf ears, so I have resigned myself to quiet enjoyment of the ceremony.

Our advisors are not on the floor but on the first level of the arena. I look up to see Plume sitting next to Loris and a Helios I vaguely recognize. The light wielder looks at Loris with such devotion that when Loris reaches out to grab his hand, I cannot help but smile. My distraction with the Race and Viola Mistflow seems to have caused me to miss out on a new development in my best friend's life, and I remind myself to ask him about it later.

Stone sits off to the side, sulking and brooding in a black and ice-blue robe, his arms rigidly crossed on his chest.

I look towards the Racer's entrance as Viola strides through, chin high. Her whip is loose in her hand, dragging behind her. The arena explodes with applause, and they are on their feet instantly. Her jaw is clenched, the only sign that she is uncomfortable with the spectacle. When I look at her, I can't help but admire how she is a force to be reckoned with, a brutal beauty capable of such destruction.

The crowd chants her name, and she turns, surveying all the citizens of Ytopie who have spied on some of the most

devastating moments of her life. She is tall and regal, a lethal warrior that I ache to wrap my arms around. The crowd continues cheering, paying no attention to Tulip as she enters the arena.

Viola notices that none of the fae stop chanting her name with Tulip's arrival, and she raises her whip up in the air, bringing it down so swiftly that a loud crack fills the arena. She cracks the whip a second time, and the crowd falls completely silent, all attention on her. Tulip stands beside her, looking embarrassed and bewildered.

Viola turns toward her partner and bows low, a deference to the young girl. She rises and gestures widely with her free hand at the girl she was reluctant to bring with her on this journey. At her gesture toward Tulip, the crowd erupts with her name. The red that fills her cheeks rivals the color of my hair. The women embrace, and the chants become both of their names, a celebration of two equal winners who survived significant trauma to arrive where they are now.

Over the course of the next few hours, additional Racers slowly enter the arena, but none produce the level of admiration that was afforded to Viola and Tulip. I catch some familiarity between Viola and a few of the winners, but none she embraces.

She indeed did keep herself isolated and alone.

When nine additional Racers fill the arena, Mace rises to his feet and strides into the center, steps from Viola. When she visibly cringes away from him, triumph flows through me.

“Citizens of Ytopie! After a grueling nine days, we have our winners! These humans of Krillium represent all the hopes and strengths the Gods have promised us. Their bravery and dedication will satiate and empower the Gods for a year to come!”

The crowd is on their feet, cheering for Gods that don't exist.

Viola's face is tight, a brutal mask of indifference as she stares at Mace. If I didn't know better, I would think he was looking at her with hurt.

“The arena pathway has been closed, and all other Racers will begin their descent down the summit over the next few days. But tonight, go celebrate with your friends and family! Collect your winnings or nurse your wounds. Because tomorrow, you will get the chance to meet our winners during the Champions Gala!”



Nervously, I knock on the door leading to the basement apartment I discovered while following Mace in what feels like a lifetime ago. My arms are loaded with two oversized boxes balanced precariously as I try to keep myself level on the stairs.

The door before me opens, and Tulip's face visibly relaxes when she meets my eyes. “Oh, thank Gods, I was worried you were Mace.”

“And thank the Gods I’m not Mace, indeed,” I chuckle, moving into the room. Viola sits at a table, hunched over Damaris Forekeeper’s journal.

“Viola,” I call, attempting to break her concentration. She startles a bit and looks at me.

Her smile doesn’t reach her eyes. “Zeph, what are you doing here?”

Suddenly sheepish, I look down at the boxes in my arms. “Well, the gala is tonight. I bought you both dresses.” Tulip squeals, grabbing the boxes from me and laying them on the table without regard for Viola’s book.

“Hey!” Viola begins to shout, but she immediately realizes it’s hopeless.

Tulip spies her name on the tag for the white box and pulls the lid open. Inside is a gown I had Plume commission. If Tulip were fae, there is no doubt in my mind she would be a Spring Seasonale. She embodies the rebirth and growth of spring. She pulls the gown from its box, the fabric cascading to the floor.

The gown appears unassuming at first glance, a muted shade of blue. But when Tulip pulls it on, it comes to life. At the hem, flowers grow with every step she takes. As she spins, admiring the wide skirts, the flowers bloom to life, stretching across the strapless bodice with leaves of green and petals the colors of spring.

When she stops spinning, the flowers shrink, settling around her calves as small, muted blooms. “It’s incredible,” she breathes, running her hands down the skirts to smooth them.

“You’re always in motion, so I thought you deserved a dress that was too.” I pull a pair of silver sandals and a sage green ribbon for her hair from the box.

Grabbing the items from me excitedly, she throws herself into my arms in a squeezing embrace. Over her shoulder, I lock eyes with Viola. For once, her eyes are warm, and there is a smile on her face that I would raze the world to see again.

“Lola, let’s see yours!” Tulip encourages, finally freeing me from her crushing embrace.

Silently, Viola moves to the black box and pulls out the dress I brought for her. Plume may have commissioned Tulip’s dress, but Viola’s was all me.

The dress she pulls out is black and made of translucent organza. She barely looks at it before she goes to the bathing chamber with it.

When she returns, the breath leaves my body entirely.

The sheer fabric wraps tightly around her chest in a corset, which rests untied on her back. I slip behind her and begin to lace the dress up with a ribbon of white-blue silk and a delicate touch. I fight against my very nature to not trail my fingers up her spine. The sleeves are links of chains entwined with the same silk, and they fall in the middle of her upper arm.

From my position behind her, I am able to admire the way the skirt hugs her hips, flaring out at the knee into a curled and flared bottom, reminiscent of the shadows I caught her engulfed in two nights ago. The curve of her thighs fills the dress perfectly, and her ass is squeezed tightly. I shamelessly admire it, imagining sinking my teeth into the soft flesh and hearing her squeal.

She turns to face me, and I can see the swirling tendrils of frost sewn into the front of her skirt, dripping like ice down her sides. The corset pushes her breasts up, creating half-moon peaks on her chest. Her waist, nipped in from the boning and decorated with snowflakes, would look even better with my fingertips digging into it.

I reluctantly step away from her to reach into the box the dress came from, retrieving a smaller black box that fits in the palm of my hand. Viola eyes it, and I open it slowly, revealing a necklace made with rubies polished into teardrop shapes. The rubies rest within clusters of sparkling diamonds, a collar of blood and ice.

Together, they look just like the elements that came to me in a dream.

She was always meant for me.

I slide the necklace around her delicate neck and then step back, nodding my approval. “You are absolutely breathtaking.” My voice is hoarse, holding back all the emotions I wish I could explain. She and I are fated, and I think she’s finally starting to see it, too. Every bit of her body,

wrapped up in this dress, a testament of my affection for her, was made for me.

“It’s Winter magic,” she whispers, the first words she’s said since she saw the dress. Her hands run down her side, teasing the details with her nimble fingers. Her hand lingers around her throat, rubbing against the gems as if she were polishing them.

“It is equal parts of all the wonderful magic you are capable of. An outfit reflecting the true power of our last Winter Seasonale.”

Tulip has been silent, gaping openly at Viola. “Well,” she finally chokes out, “now you really have to let me do your hair.”

Chapter 40

Viola

The ballroom is opulently decorated in the colors of each Seasonale, with shimmering gems and jewels adorning light fixtures and precious metals coating serving dishes. The high ceilings amplify the string music played throughout, the likes of which I've never heard before. The walls, lined with tables full of decadent food, have tapestries woven in the colors I've seen wrapped around the exterior of the Palace. I have never seen such a beautiful sight as this room.

It makes me feel ill.

I have seen Ytopie and seen the comfort they've lived in, but this level of indulgence when the rest of us fight tooth and nail for survival is despicable.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Tulip breathes beside me.

"You are," I say, smiling at her. She is a vision in the blue floral gown Zeph gave her, blending in with the mingling fae seamlessly. She brushed her eyelids with a soft pink rouge and

applied a shimmering mauve on her pouty lips. She looks much older than her eighteen years today. A full woman.

A winner of the Race.

As soon as we enter the hall, we are swarmed, the fae lucky enough to be in attendance at the Gala clamoring for our attention. The young men beg Tulip to dance with them, crooning over her looks and strength to overcome her brother Twig's horrific death.

She winces at the mention of her brother and now remains firmly stuck to my side.

My eyes dance across the room, where fae are eating and laughing as if they didn't just make sport of the misery of my people for a week and a half. I turn to find a glass of wine but stop short as a tall man with dark hair and eyes hulks over me.

His limbs are thin and gangly, and his features are surprisingly bird-like. His dark hair spikes atop his head, and his face is fixed in a scowl. "Lady Mistflow," he murmurs, inclining his head towards the floor. "My name is Loris. I am one of Zeph's oldest friends. Please, may I have a moment of your time?" He juts his elbow out to me, and I look to Tulip. She nods at me to go, so I hesitantly rest my hand in the crook of his arm.

I may be tall, but this man is a giant. I have to run to keep up with him. He notices, slows his gait, and finds us a table to sit at to spare my feet from the heels I have been hobbling in. With a motion to a waiter, two glasses of wine appear before us.

“Viola, how much do you know about the history of the Race and why you’re truly here?” He speaks without pretense, and I find it incredibly refreshing.

Taking a sip of my wine, I do my best to appear nonchalant. “Mace and Stone think I am a vessel to bring back Himureal, the Frostweaver. Zeph thinks I’m an abnormally powerful Winter Seasonale and thinks I just need to hone that and that Himureal doesn’t need to be brought back.”

I swear Loris almost smiles. “That’s a pretty good summary.”

Taking a deep gulp from his wine, he fixes his strange gaze upon me. “What’s your magic?” I ask before realizing that may be rude.

“I’m a Bliksem,” he answers simply.

Lightning! “Why is the grid so Godsdamn loud?” I ask, leaning excitedly towards him.

With that, his laugh is a roar. “You too? Zeph is always on me, swearing he can hear it. You two are the only ones, I swear!”

That knowledge threatens to warm my heart a little more toward Zeph.

Composing himself, Loris looks at me again, his eyes searching my face for something. “Did Zeph tell you my theory about you?” I wrinkle my nose. “I thought not.” He clears his throat and finishes his wine before swiftly gesturing for another glass.

“I don’t think you’re a vessel of the Gods, Viola. I think you are one.”

I spit my wine directly into his face.

“Oh shit, fuck I’m so sorry,” I stammer, looking around for a napkin to help him clean his face.

His smile is wide despite the red wine dangerously close to dripping on his white shirt. “No worries whatsoever, Viola. I should’ve waited until you swallowed to tell you I think you’re a God.”

That word again. If no one ever mentions Gods to me again, it will be too soon. “Why in the world would you possibly think that Loris?”

His bony shoulders raise in a shrug. “Many things about you do not add up to a vessel. A vessel is a conduit for the Gods to channel their power from this world into themselves to pull themselves back to this world.” His words track with everything I’ve been told from both Mace and Zeph these past few days.

“A conduit, not a source of power themselves.” He continues, his face blank and unemotional as he swirls his finger around the top of his glass. “And you are not just any source of power. You are more powerful than any I have seen before.”

My head shakes from side to side before he finishes his sentence. “Of course, I have power. I am the concentration of all the Winter magic that has had nowhere to go until me.”

“No, Viola, don’t you see. A conduit pulls the magic from the world, acting as a channel for the God to access magic they otherwise couldn’t. You do not have power. You ARE power.”

I rise to my feet, shaking my head. “I cannot with all of the men in this city!” I snarl. “All of you want something different of me. Not once has anyone asked me what I want! Who I am! I am sick and tired of it.” I lean into his face, my lips curl as I push a finger into his chest. “I am Viola Mistflow. I am not your God, your vessel, your Seasonale. I am just me.”

For his part, Loris takes my outburst well, unflinching in the face of my aggression. “Viola, do you want to know what killed Max?”

I drop to my seat silently, the fight deflated from me at the mention of her name as a lump forms in my chest. “She... fell. She was climbing the rocks, lost her hold, and fell,” I say clinically, fighting a losing battle to keep the emotion from my voice. Loris bobs his head, the bird-like motion a humorous foil to the deadly calm of this conversation.

“That’s what it looks like, yeah. But tell me, did you two make a pact? A promise, maybe?”

The words come back to me, clear as if Max was in front of me, drinking mead and grasping my hands in the shack I grew up in.

“You know what, Max? Promise me that we will do this together. We run this year’s Race, we make it to the arena, and we live our lives in Ytopie, leaving all of this behind us.”

My words ring in my ears, pushing hot, guilty tears to my eyes. I gulp back a sob and answer Loris with only my eyes.

“Himureal had blood magic. Part of blood magic is soul binding. It’s a type of curse. You can tie someone to your words. Essentially, they give you their lifeforce until they fulfill the bargain.”

I shake my head, desperately trying to stop the words I know will come next.

“When you made that promise with Max, you inadvertently bound her soul. She was cursed to fulfill that promise. As she started considering breaking from you and Tulip, she became sicker and more irritable. I watched it through the connection, Viola. Her body was revolting at her attempt to break the curse.”

Tears are falling down my cheeks now, silent pathways leading directly to my guilty heart.

“When she finally committed to breaking that promise, she fell to her death.”

A choked sob escapes my lips, and my hands furiously tap on the table, but the familiar gesture does nothing to ease the devastating blow Loris has dealt me.

“I need you to know it is not your fault, Viola,” he whispers, leaning closer to me.

“How could it not be my fault? I cursed her!”

He shakes his head, the thin points of his hair swaying with the motion. “All records of Winter magic say that to bind a

soul, an incantation and offering of blood must be used. There is only one instance in the annals that does not require that.” Confusion joins the guilt that consumes my body. He sees it and continues without pause.

“Himureal could bind souls with just a promise, Viola.”

I feel ill. The room is spinning, and I feel myself slumping in my seat.

The party is raging around us, a cacophony of laughter clashing with the suffocating guilt that pulls me deep into the depths of my despair.

Large hands wrap around my shoulders and raise me from my seat. They turn me towards the door, and I barely hear a hiss of admonishment thrown towards Loris.

One of the hands falls to my lower back as I am steered from the banquet hall. “Call your shadows, Viola,” the owner of the hands murmurs in my ringing ears. The voice has a vague familiarity, but my brain is too muddled to place it.

But I still set my intentions as best as possible, thinking of my shadow-snake and hoping beyond all hope he can come and soothe this out-of-control feeling that is eating me alive. In moments, he’s there, wrapped around my arm in a soothing embrace.

The door in front of me is kicked open by my escort, and I find myself in the pavilion behind the Palace. It is serene and green, with couples partnered off in quiet embraces. I move to

stop, the fresh air stinging my face, and the hand becomes firmer. “Not yet, just a little further.”

We’re across the courtyard by the time my head clears enough for me to recognize the door being opened in front of me.

Chapter 41

Mace

Stupid fucking Bliksem.

I didn't think much of it when I spotted Loris with Viola at first. But as I watched her body language slowly change, I moved closer to hear their conversation. He all but blamed the death of her best friend on her. That guilt she did not need to carry was thrust upon her by someone who had no business speaking to her. And to what? Convince Viola she is a God?

"I don't want to be here, Mace," she snarls at me, albeit weakly. I ignore her venom and steer her to my table, pushing her into a seat. She slumps down, resting her head on the cool stone of the tabletop.

I busy myself making her a warm mug of tea, sliding it into her hands once it's ready. I gently push the cup to her mouth, urging her to sip. She does. "Good girl, it'll help," I murmur.

Pulling a chair beside her, I sink down and quietly speak to her. "You're not to blame for her death, Viola."

My heart may break when she looks into my eyes, the visceral pain she's feeling strong enough to knock the wind from my chest.

Her eyes, normally favoring a stormy gray shade, now remind me of hoarfrost and are wet with tears. I reach and gently brush the salty water from her face. To my surprise, she doesn't flinch.

"Blood magic is tricky. Very few fae have ever wielded it. Most who attempted to have disastrous effects." All magic when fresh is tricky. I recall my own disastrous first attempt at wielding storm magic and how I brought a lightning bolt directly onto my mother's garden.

To be fair, she was an awful gardener. It wasn't much of a loss.

"I didn't ask to be like this." Her voice, barely over a whisper, is broken. The strength that I have admired in her is buried by grief.

I gather her hands in mine and squeeze them. "I know. You've been given the burden that someone who shared blood with you long ago chose. Anyone would be angry at that."

She snuffles, raising her head to meet her eyes with mine. "I would think most would feel blessed to have such a strong magic within."

"Magic can be a blessing, but I have found it's more often a curse. There is so much pressure put on those with great magic."

We stay there in comfortable silence for several beats, her eyes burning holes into my own and my mind flashing back to the last time I had her here, her mouth on my own. I know she still holds anger towards me for not being forthcoming about Link, but for now, I cherish any moment I get to have with her.

“Thank you for getting me out of there, Mace.”

I run my hand along the back of my neck, allowing myself another quick glance at her before I look away. “You’re welcome. To be fair, I did the other women a favor by removing you. You far outshone them all.”

She is a vision in black, a kaleidoscope of all the magic she possesses swirling around her. Her dress shows off every bit of her figure in all its glory. I have never seen anything like it before. The choker around her throat shows off her long, slender neck, and my eyes linger on the collarbones she is so fond of tapping her fingers against.

She looks down at her lap, smoothing the skirts with her hands. “Zeph had it made for me,” she whispers.

I fight my eyes from rolling to the back of my head. Of course, he did.

“What happened to Link, Mace?”

I should have known as soon as she mentioned Zeph that this question was next. “I’ll need a drink for this. Care to join me?” She nods her agreement, and I grab a jug of mead from the back of a cool cabinet.

Sitting down two full mugs on the sofa table, I motion for her to join me, and just as she did last time she was here, she complies. As she moves, I catch glimpses of her skin beneath the dress, barely concealed by the shadow of the organza. I find myself hard-pressed not to stare.

She sinks into the same spot on the sofa she inhabited nights before, and I sit beside her, this time leaving ample space between the two of us.

With a long pull of the mead, I begin the story I have dreaded telling since she came down that elevator.

“Link found the elevator. Stone and I were dumbfounded. As you discovered, it would take someone with considerable Winter magic to navigate to it and get the hatch open. So imagine our surprise when the gate opened, and Link, freshly a man in his Ascension year, stood there.”

Viola’s eyes are wistful, no doubt her mind on the memories of that year with Link. Jealousy for a long-gone moment pinches my chest.

“We believed he must be the vessel. After all, he found the elevator.” She nods her understanding, drinking slowly from the mug I made her. “But, and I’m sorry to tell you this because I know you’ll find it distasteful, we had been keeping an eye on you for years by that point. And we knew the relationship you had with Link.”

She flinches, the impact of my words a shock to her system. “You were watching me that closely?”

I smile ruefully. “You must understand, Viola, to find the vessel, we had to track the original four families. As I told you, the more removed we became from the initial banishment, the harder it was to keep track of the members of each family. Eventually, we just had to put eyes and ears in each town in hopes of seeing something.”

Confusion crosses her face, then realization. “The night I stole from Jaz.” It wasn’t a question. I just met her gaze. “I was under her window, and I heard someone coming. I hid in the shadows. They passed by, and nothing else happened. Was that...”

“One of my men, yes. I have always believed that even if you weren’t the vessel, you would lead me to them, so I have kept tabs on you.”

She groans and shakes her head at me. “You’re such a fucking creep.” A light laugh coats the words, and warmth runs through me, displacing some of the worry that is making itself at home.

“I guess you’re right about that.” I chuckle, turning to face her on the couch. “We questioned Link about you and your powers. He, of course, knew nothing. He described to us a strong girl who kept his deepest secret. He told us about how much he loved you and how you were going to change the world. He also spat at our feet and swore you’d be there to slit our throats in three years.”

Viola tries to disguise a laugh with a cough.

“Eventually, Stone grew increasingly frustrated with Link’s lack of magical prowess. He could not call any magic towards him. Still, Stone insisted on performing the ritual with him. I told him it was a bad idea; the boy was clearly not the vessel.” Her face is pained, her hands tapping a light pattern on her thighs. I hold my hand out for hers, and she takes it quickly.

“If you’re amenable to it, Viola, I could influence some calm to you. Unfortunately, you may need it.” Without speaking, she nods, and I set my intention solely on her, pushing out the slightest wave of calm I can muster. Immediately, her fingers still in my own.

“The ritual is a complex spell, requiring the vessel to participate. When Link attempted to participate in the spell, his body... well, his body revolted, Viola.”

The quiet of the room is punctuated only by our beating hearts.

“He didn’t make it, Viola. The ritual is meant to create the body of the Frostweaver, Himureal, out of the vessel’s magic and life force. His body could not spare what was taken for the spell.”

She lets out a choking sound and doubles over, her grief fresh and raw on her face. When her eyes meet mine, hot, angry tears pour from them. “Everyone told me he died during the Race. Everyone. I convinced myself he had reached the elevator. It was better for my soul and gave me something to work toward.”

I sit in silence, giving her space to process and react to the earth-shattering news I gave her.

“And now you’re telling me that he found the elevator. He did what he promised to do when we were but children, and he... he died a horrible, pointless death? And you participated in it?” She snarls at me, red-rimmed eyes laced with fury.

I wish I could tell her I know how she feels, but I can’t. To hold that hope for a decade to have it shattered must be impossible to deal with.

Her hands have long since left my own, finding a place upon her shins as she pulls her knees to her chest. “I need to see my parents, Mace. Take me to the human village.”

Fuck.

Tulip had told me yesterday that if I held any more secrets, I better get them out, but this was one I was hoping to not have to address right now, on top of everything else she’s suffered tonight. “I can’t do that, Viola.”

She looks at me, lip curled in a snarl. “And why not?”

I reach for my forgotten mug of mead and take a deep sip. “Have I told you why we want to bring the Gods back?” For a moment, she looks confused at my change of subject.

“You said they’ll bring prosperity for everyone. What does that have to do with my parents?”

I hold up my hand, “Humor me, please.” Surprisingly, she nods and grabs her own mug to sip. “When my parents died, I was quickly elected to lead the Patricians. I was unprepared

and unwilling, but Stone, my father's closest advisor, insisted I could do the job and do it well. Once I was settled in my role, he informed me about the banishment of the Gods.

“I was devastated. I was quite pious, you see. It took me a long time to recover from the fact that the Race was not for the Gods enrichment but for the search of a vessel.”

Her nose wrinkles, confusion knotting her brow. “What do you mean?”

“The Race is engineered to let those with a penchant for Winter magic rise to the top.”

“So, my parents?”

I nod. “They had potential, yes.”

With another pull from my mug, I continue sharing the most shameful parts of me. “It was Stone's idea, the Race. He's significantly older than you'd think - several centuries now if I remember correctly.”

Her eyes widen in shock. “And you...?”

My laugh is low and in my throat. “A baby in fae years. Only seventy or so.”

She nearly chokes on her mead.

“As I was saying, Stone was one of the original designers of the Race. It was designed to seek Winter magic, as Winter has always been our least abundant Seasonale.”

She nods, remembering the conversation we shared the last time we were on this couch. “And the magic needed to be

condensed for a vessel to emerge.”

I smile weakly. “Correct, Viola. So, the Race was engineered to sort out those with latent Winter magic to further the search for the vessel.” I can see the gears turning in her mind, the excitement that she may share this magic with her parents.

“We need the Gods back, you understand. The finding of a vessel has always been of utmost importance to us. When the Gods were banished, magic blanketed the land and created the fae, but it also created magical monsters.”

She hisses. “The Wendigo. The seps...”

“And those are just some of them. The monsters of our land are dangerous, vicious beings. They do not discriminate, human or fae, what they consume. As they continue to encroach upon Krillium, our magic grows weaker. It gets diluted the further we get from the original power of the Gods, and they are no longer here to replenish the ambient magic in the land. When they were first banished, so many were just like you. Raw, untapped potential. As we bred and our magic spread, it diluted to a fraction of what it once was. Now it is running out.”

I thought of my father and his decay magic, how he could level forests if he wished. And myself, having to decay a tree at a time.

“So you see then, it has always been paramount that we return the Gods. They can help restore magical balance to the land, banish the monsters that threaten all who live here, and elevate the humans into a more comfortable way of life.”

I can see her tentative agreement in my assessment reflecting in her eyes. She wants to believe what I say.

“Unfortunately,” I sigh, “for a vessel to rise, no Winter magic could live within others. If it did, Himureal would be unable to draw enough of the magic into himself and return.”

That comfortable agreement I thought I spotted vanished.

“What are you saying, Mace?”

I attempt to brace myself against the words but come up empty. “Please don’t make me say it, Viola.”

She’s on her feet faster than I can blink, snarling in my face. That shadow she keeps wrapped around her arm like a pet undulates, rearing up to strike.

“We had to eliminate all the Winter magic from the land in order to get you, Viola.”

She is pure fury, an inferno of rage that will never be extinguished. “Fucking say it, Mace. Tell me to my face.”

“We killed the winners. All of them.”

Chapter 42

Viola

The frost forms seemingly from thin air, growing up a gnarled tree on the outskirts of the city of Ytopie. My shadow-snake squeezes my arm in approval as we watch the tree become engulfed in jagged shards of ice that mirror my own heart.

I've been out here for hours. I watched the sunrise with only the company of the shadow that I have imagined to life.

I have tried to focus my mind on honing my magic. It has come to me with surprising ease since I learned to set my intentions and clearly visualize my goal. I always believed that magic required tremendous effort to utilize, but it appears that is not the case.

At least, not for me.

Blood magic would be impossible to practice on my own, so shadow and ice seemed the best option to relieve some of my grief.

To learn in one evening that I was responsible for the death of my best friend, that my childhood love had been brutally destroyed, and that my parents had been murdered would be enough to shatter even the most solid of psyches.

But if you ask Max, I've never quite been solid, not since Link.

Link.

The pain he went through at the end must have been unimaginable. And to hear he promised vengeance in the form of my blade, and I almost slept with the man responsible? I am more of a monster than I ever thought.

Because regrettably still, the horrors that Mace revealed to me last night do nothing to kill my growing affection and trust for him. The honesty in which he spoke was brutal and punishing but also incredibly brave. I felt his inner conflict, his sadness about what had happened, and his regret that it affected me. His methods were horrendous, but his motivation was pure.

I have not forgiven him. But I understand him better now, and we are not so different after all.

My stomach growls, emptied in a bush last night when I burst from Mace's door to outrun the truth of his statements. I push the hunger from my mind. I cannot go back into that city just yet. Back to that basement apartment Mace arranged for me to stay comfortably amongst the people who slaughtered everyone I loved.

Well, everyone except Max.

That one is on me.

A snapping of twigs behind me has me spinning about, hand out and purpose set for as shards of ice fly at my uninvited visitor.

A burst of fire meets my ice, which falls to the ground in a puddle.

“Shit, Viola. You could’ve impaled me,” Zeph greets me with a shudder.

I wince. “Sorry, Zeph. I’m on edge.” He nods and takes a tentative step toward me.

“I spoke to Loris. He was out of line.”

I take in the man in front of me, with his broad shoulders and imposing build. The tattoos that crawl up his neck are on full display today, as he’s wearing a barely buttoned-up white collarless shirt. The sunlight sets fire to his hair, and I realize for the first time that this man embodies the Summer magic he possesses. He notices me taking him in, and a smile stretches across his bearded face, his eyes sparkling.

Why does Mace set my heart soaring, but Zeph doesn’t?

Looking down at my body, still clad in last night’s jewels and dress but covered in dirt and grass, I wince. “I’m sorry I ruined this beautiful dress.”

He waves my concerns away quickly. “It can be cleaned. I’m more worried about you. Can we go get you some food and

talk?”

I hesitate but eventually concede. This city is my home now, whether I like it or not, and I will not be able to avoid it forever. While Zeph is a part of the Patricians, and I know he was part of some of the horrors of the Race, I must believe he had nothing to do with it. He is the one who sent me to Mace for answers, after all.

“I’ll come, but I cannot go to the tavern and face this Gods-forsaken city.”

“My place, then.”



In Zeph’s home, the warmth of a fire relaxes my freezing muscles. He loans me a shirt and a pair of his undershorts to change into, and I happily do, leaving the dress on the floor of his bathroom and the choker around my neck. The intimacy of the situation is not lost on me, and when I glance in the mirror, I realize I look as if we just slept together.

I exit his room to find him at the table with a platter of bread, cheeses, fruits, and cured meats in front of him. He’s shed his shirt and boots, sitting in just a pair of low-slung olive-green linen trousers. His chest has a thin coating of red down on it, and his stomach is soft and comfortable looking. A steaming mug of tea sits in front of a chair for me. I slide into the seat, pull the mug into my hands, and drink from it greedily. “You had a spread like this just lying around?” I muse.

A flush crawls up his neck, and he sheepishly ruffles his hair. “I... Anticipated you may want to have breakfast here, so I gathered it before I went out to find you.”

“How did you know where to find me?”

“Tulip. I went to see you this morning after I spoke to Loris, and she said you’d been out of the city all morning.”

Fucking Tulip would send Zeph after me. She has such a soft spot for him. When I ran into her on my way out of town, she was dizzy and drunk from dancing. I told her where I was going but insisted she did not follow. She didn’t put up too much of a fight with her hands full of pastries from the dessert table.

Glancing down, I see my shadow-snake has released his hold on my arm and stretched across my legs. His presence is nearly imperceptible, but I still feel affection and warmth radiating from his shadowy figure.

Zeph must have noticed my attention, an expression of amusement crossing his face. “How have you managed to hold that spell for so long?”

I shrug, considering it for the first time. “I just want him here, so he’s here.”

“I’m not saying Loris is right about you being a God, Viola,” he starts.

My groan could rattle his windows. “Not you, too!”

Zeph shakes his head, his hand reaching across the table toward me. “I’m not saying you’re a God. But I am saying the

control you have over magic, how it effortlessly responds to you, and the length of time you've been holding that shadow spell indicates you're more than just a vessel.”

If I admit that this unnatural control over the magic I just gained is more than just a byproduct of being Himureal's chosen vessel, then I accept the truth that Max's death was caused entirely by my magic.

I'm not ready to accept that truth, even though my body screams at the verity of it.

I chew the foods Zeph set out for me quietly, unable to speak into existence how I really feel about his claim. Eventually, he clears his throat, and I meet his eyes. “Did you... Did you ask Mace about Link? I saw you leave with him last night.”

The food in my mouth practically turns to dust. I force a swallow. “Yeah, I did. Thank you for telling me.” He winces, and I can see on his face that he didn't want to be the one to share this truth with me.

We sit in a comfortable silence, and anyone who looked in on us would see nothing more than two lovers enjoying a meal after a night in each other's arms. No one would guess I was sitting across from a man who may have been complicit in the murders of my parents.

“Did you know about the winners, Zeph?” I cannot read his face as he lowers his mug and meets my gaze.

“I did.” The admittance is a punch to my gut, and I move to push back from the table and bolt. “I found out when I was a

child.”

A child? I lower myself back to my chair, waiting for him to continue. “I overheard Stone telling my father. I never learned the why of it until you came here. I wasn’t supposed to know - only Stone and Mace did. So, I struggled to act on it. Everyone else believes the humans are sent to a village a day or so walk from here to live comfortably but separately. I needed to find out why before I could do anything to stop it.”

“No, you didn’t need to know why! You knew innocent people were being slaughtered! And not just the winners but the Expendables! There was never any Godly sacrifice.”

His green eyes fall downcast sadly, and he speaks without looking at me. “The citizens of Ytopie don’t know the Gods are missing, Viola. The expendables are just as much a show for them as it is for the Lowlands.” I wrack my brain, trying to remember if someone had told me that prior to this conversation, but my head feels waterlogged and heavy from lack of sleep.

I let my excitement of developing magic, of finally making it to Ytopie cloud my judgment. I trusted everyone I met almost immediately. Their beautiful words and faces felt hard to deny.

“What have I gotten myself into,” I mutter, burying my face in my hands. What am I doing here, breaking bread with a society of people who would happily see my Race die? Regardless of the good Gods could bring back to the world, was this really the only way to get there?

A firm hand between my shoulder blades jolts my head up, and Zeph is there, so close I can smell his scent of smoke and ripe fruit. “Viola,” he murmurs, gently turning my body to fully face his. From this angle, he looks down at me with reverence. There is a glint in his eyes that could almost be mistaken for hunger, and it churns my stomach with unease.

I meet his gaze, hardening my face to his approach. “Viola, you’ve taken in an insurmountable amount of information in just a day. You’re in no state to make any decisions.”

My nose wrinkles at his words. “I can make my own choices, Zeph. Besides, there is no choice to be made. Everyone in this city is itching to use me. Even you. You want to use me as a weapon, right?”

He drops his hand from me, flinching at my words. “Who told you that?”

I snort out a laugh, shaking my head. “No one had to. You said it yourself that I am powerful enough to restore balance. That sounds like a weapon to me.”

He’s silent, his face giving nothing away to how my words make him feel. “You want to use me as a weapon, Mace wants to use me as a vessel. Loris wants to use me as a fucking God. No one has asked me what I want.”

He tilts my chin with his finger, a paternal gesture that makes my skin crawl.

“I don’t want to use you, Viola. I just want what’s best for you.”

Chapter 43

Zeph

I should have kissed her. I wanted to, badly. Her full lips trembled with a delectable mix of sadness and anger. I have always found myself attracted to sad women.

I guess it's the savior in me.

But instead, I held back, giving her space to grieve despite my baser instincts wanting to take control. She deserves that much from me.

I heave myself onto my bed, savoring the memory of Viola wearing my clothes. The whole of Ytopie could've seen her, dwarfed by my shirt and wearing my underwear as shorts, as I walked her back to her sleeping quarters.

I hope they did. I hope Mace choked on his morning tea.

After an evening of seeing her dressed in the clothing I picked, then a morning of her despondent and broken staring at me, I can barely hold myself back from myself. If I do not get my hands on her soon, I am liable to explode.

A knock on my door has me startling out of my daydreams, groaning at the imposition.

Heaving myself out of my bed, I swing the door open with a harsh, “What?” to find Loris and the Helios, who I now remember is named Taegan, standing on my doorstep. While I am always happy to see my friend, I could’ve done with more time in my fantasies.

“Zeph, can we come in?”

I nod curtly and walk away, leaving the two of them to find their own way through.

“Stone left on the journey to the human village with the Race winners. We’ve got only a few more days before they will use Viola as the vessel.” I shoot a glance at Taegan, suspicious about his attendance at this meeting. Loris tracks my thoughts. “I met Taegan during my scouting for those willing to assist during our original plans,” he explains. Taegan beams at Loris.

Taegan is significantly shorter than Loris, with a round face and bright blonde hair. He looked at Loris with pure affection. I nod curtly in acknowledgment of Taegan. I have met him a few times when Summer Seasonales met with those who wielded the lesser magics, but I have yet to have an actual conversation with him.

“Plus,” Taegan began, “I come with intel.” He snakes his hand into Loris’, and I fight to roll my eyes. We all settle in my sitting room, the sun shining through my window and blanketing us in the bright midday light.

“The Shade,” he began.

“Viola,” I interrupt, lacing her name with affection.

“Right, Viola. Well, Viola was seen leaving Mace’s home last night.”

I wave my hand. “I already knew that that isn’t intel.”

“Well, how about the fact that she kissed him?”

My stomach drops, and anger flares up my neck. “She what?”

He nods excitedly. “Yes, remember a few nights ago there was that large storm? Well, it wasn’t a planned storm, so Loris went to investigate. I had nothing better to do, so I ventured out with him. That’s when I saw through Mace’s window Viola kiss him. It seemed to be very close to going further.”

My knuckles whiten as I tighten them on the cushion of the couch I’m resting on. “Just what am I to do with this information, Taegan?” I growl, unable to keep the anger from my voice.

Everything I have ever coveted, fucking Mace has had to have. It’s been constant since our childhood. And now, Viola Mistflow. What was she thinking? And to think I had stopped myself from kissing her when clearly, she’d plant her lips on anyone?

Loris speaks up now, “Mace’s motives are proven to be murky. If he holds affection for her, he may not be willing to let her be used as the vessel. There is a very slim chance she

could survive being made the vessel, Zeph. If he holds affection for her, we may be able to bring him to our side.”

“Absolutely fucking not!” I snarl, jumping to my feet. “We cannot and will not work with Mace. He will never abandon her as the vessel.”

“We need to try. It could keep Viola alive.”

“I will not ally myself with the likes of him.”

Loris and Taegan exchange looks and then turn their questioning eyes on me. “You would rather have her die than work alongside your brother?”

I shake my head, turning my back to the couple and stalking towards the balcony overlooking the Lowlands. “No, of course not. I will make her see reason and that becoming the strongest Seasonale possible and fighting Mace and Stone is the only way.”

My oldest friend rises and follows me outside, resting his hand on my shoulder. “And if she doesn’t see reason?”

“I won’t take no for an answer.”



Under the cover of nightfall, I stalk across the open courtyard behind the Palace, following the familiar path to Mace’s front door. I don’t knock, I just throw the door open and stalk into his home.

He's sitting on his sofa, one ankle balancing on his knee. He's clearly preparing for bed, shirtless and wearing only loose muslin pants. He looks up to see me, shock crossing over his face for a fleeting moment. Folding the book he was reading and placing it beside him on the couch, he rises to his feet and moves to meet me in the foyer.

“My dearest brother. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

I cannot remember the last time I felt such rage. My hands buzz with the desire to embrace the flames that roll within me. “You kissed her,” I snarl.

The fucker laughs.

He actually laughs.

“Is that what has you so riled up?” he says, moving away from me towards his kitchen. He pours two glasses of amber liquor and hands one to me. “If you want to be accurate, though, she kissed me.”

Despite my anger, I drain the glass he gave me and slam it on the table next to us. “You fucker.”

He moves with infuriating calm to sit at his table, gesturing for me to join him. I don't. I move closer but make no motion toward sitting, choosing instead to leer over him for once.

“That cannot be the only reason you're here, Zeph.”

“She's mine, Mace.”

His laugh is brutal and piercing. “Viola is her own, Zeph. If she chooses to spend time with you, she can. If she chooses to

spend time with me, I will embrace it. She is miraculous.”

I slam my hands on the table in front of him, shaking with barely contained rage. “I know how miraculous she is! That’s why you’re going to stay away from her. You’re offering her up as a sacrifice!”

His face falls, and I see a flicker of indecision flash in his eyes. He takes another slow pull from his glass. “The Gods need to return, Zeph. I have to hope that Viola is strong enough to withstand the ritual.”

“Strong enough? You would risk her life? For what? For Gods who abandoned us? Does she know? Does she know it could kill her?” When he winces, I know my answer.

“I will tell her.” His words are measured and final. “I will tell her solely so she has the information to make her own decision.”

I grab my empty glass and hurl it against the wall. “You would let her choose to die?”

He doesn’t flinch when the glass makes an impact, sending a rain of broken shards around his head. “I would if it was what she wanted. She deserves to make the choice.”

“Fuck the choice! I will not let her die! I have waited too long for someone like her, and I will not lose her.”

“You do not have her nor possess her, Zeph.”

His words hit me in the gut because I know he speaks the truth. Viola has kissed him and not me. As long as he is around, she will never choose me. Anger boils inside me.

“From the moment I saw her in the games, she has lived in my head. I cannot let you kill her.”

“Don’t you see, brother?” Mace sneers. “You will not have to let me do anything. Viola will make her choice, and I will support whatever choice that is. Fuck Stone, and fuck you, frankly. Neither of you have considered what she wants. Have you ever considered her a person and not an extension of your desire?”

“It doesn’t matter what she wants! I will not let her die! If I have to take her away from here, I will!”

Summer magic is the magic of warriors. That’s what my mother always told me. I have always preferred to fight with my words, but today, for her, I can unleash my full potential.

It takes me only a moment to set my intention, and then flames are licking up Mace’s legs. He snarls and buries the fire in a mound of dirt. “So, is that what this is coming to, Zeph? You’d fight your own brother?”

I direct a blast of light into the room, blinding him to me, charging forward. I get him around the waist and slam him into the wall. Caught off guard and unable to brace himself, Mace takes the full force of my strength in the form of a fist to his nose.

The bone cracks, and I feel the warmth of blood cover my knuckles. He howls in pain, shoving against me and pushing me into the table. “You’re acting like a child, Zeph!” he roars. “Fighting over a woman! She will make her own decisions. You do not own her.”

I visualize flames dripping off my fingers at his words, and when they do, I slam the flaming fist up into his chest.

He groans and stumbles backward, freeing me to slide off the table. “Zeph, stop. There is no need to fight.”

My eyes track his fingers flexing. “Trying to influence me, Mace? Haven’t you learned by now I’m immune to your skills?” A lifetime of him trying to manipulate me into taking the blame for childhood mistakes has given me immunity over his magic, and today, I am grateful for that.

The snarl on his face could rival my own, but he knows I have him beat. Autumn magic is not particularly dangerous in the physical sense. He does manage to manipulate the metal of a spoon from his table, extending it like a blunt sword to swing at my stomach. The impact of it doubles me over, but carefully placed flame had the metal melting in his palms. He never was great at Geomancy.

I lunge towards him again, my fist connecting with the side of his head. I feel it knock back, but when I attempt to punch into his chin, he counters me with a knee to my gut. “Is that all you’ve got, Mace?” I pant, erecting a shield around me to allow me to catch my breath.

“I do not wish to cause you harm, brother. You’re clearly going through something, and my offensive magic can have dire consequences. Stop this so I do not have to decay you.” My shield falls, and he charges towards me, knocking me to the floor. “I do not want it to be like this, brother! I care for you!”

“Fuck. You.”

I kick my knee up, catching him in the back. He momentarily loosens his hold on my shoulders, and I take advantage. I flip us over, pinning him under me. He is tall and lithe to my brute strength, and though he fights, he is unable to exit my hold.

Furiously, my fist greets his face over and over until he is quiet and bloody underneath me.

Chapter 44

Viola

A knock on the door sounds through the quaint basement home, and I look at Tulip's sleeping form on the sofa with confusion. Could she have fallen asleep waiting for a visitor?

The knocks grow more frantic, and though I am not in the mood to speak to anyone, I wrench the door open to keep my companion from waking.

A sound of shock leaves my mouth when I see Mace leaning against the railing, bloody, bruised, and swollen on the stairs.

"Can I come in?" he drawls, voice thick with pain.

Wordlessly, I reach for him, wrapping my arm around his lower back and throwing his arm over my shoulder. I lead him into my sleeping chamber directly off the main room as quietly as possible. Gently, I lower him to the bed and then flick on the Bliksem-powered light, ignoring the buzzing sound that comes with it.

“Mace, what happened? Who did this to you?”

He groans and lowers himself to his back without answering me. I crawl next to him on the bed and, without thinking, lay my hands on his face, imagining ice growing from them. A chill shoots through my palms, lightly coating the underside of my hands with a layer of frost. I rest the ice on the most swollen parts of his face, and he sighs deeply. “Keep doing ... whatever you’re doing. That feels really nice,” he murmurs, eyes still closed.

“Okay, but I’m going to take them away if you don’t tell me what happened.”

One eye flicks open, and he takes me in with scrutiny. I suddenly feel self-conscious about my messy hair, piled high on the top of my head, and the robe I’ve wrapped myself in for the evening.

“I’m sorry I came here, Viola. I know you don’t want to see me.”

His words make me wince, reflexively pulling my hands back. He groans from the removal of them. “Put them back, please.” Mace’s voice is weak, and he’s obviously severely hurt. Whatever anger I feel towards him is doused in worry for his wellbeing. I gently return my hands.

I hate to admit it, but I have wanted nothing more than to see him today. Despite the devastation I felt at the revelation of his words, I cannot manage to shake my growing affection for this man. If I had any doubt that something was changing within

me towards him, seeing him bloody and broken just confirmed it.

I cannot get Mace Nightrout out of my head.

“I’m not going to ask you again, Mace. Who did this to you?”

Once again, he looks at me as if carefully considering whether or not to tell me the truth. “The truth, Mace,” I implore.

He slides himself up against the pillow, propped to be able to look me more directly in the eye. “Zeph did this.”

As soon as the words leave his mouth, I realize I did not need him to tell me. Some part of me knew. This injury looks personal, the type of vengeance only a brother would exact. “What did you do?”

“I kissed you.”

The words are a slap in my face, another level of blame in the long line of injuries and deaths I am responsible for. “Why does that even matter?” I wonder aloud, not expecting an answer.

Mace groans as he tries to raise himself further, my hands slipping from his face to his chest. “He’s obsessed with you. He came to me in a jealous rage because someone must have caught our moment those nights ago.”

Our moment.

Despite the anger and despair Mace has caused to grow inside me, I still find myself thinking of that night with him when I am alone in the darkness of my room. “But there’s nothing between Zeph and I,” I insist.

He waves his hand. “It’s not my business if there is, Viola. You owe me nothing.”

“This couldn’t be all for just a single kiss, though,” I say while running my chilled hands down his chest and back up to his cheeks.

He shakes his head. “No, you’re right. That’s why I came here.”

I’m surprised at how quickly he seems to be healing, at least on the surface. The swelling to his face has already gone down significantly. “I want you to tell me all about it, but first, let me clean this blood off you. And get you some ale,” I add as an afterthought.

It doesn’t take me long to gather a small bowl filled with cool water and a rag to sit on the table beside my bed. It’s joined by a mug of whatever ale Tulip got with her dinner, half empty and lukewarm. I wince at my offering, but Mace takes it and drains it in a single pull.

“I can’t heat the water, so cold will have to do.”

A lazy smile drifts to his angular face. “That will be fine. Thank you, Viola.” I wring the excess water from the rag and begin cleaning his bare chest, arms, and face, dipping it into

the water whenever it becomes too loaded with his blood. The water quickly becomes a milky red.

As I clean, he speaks.

“The fight initially started because I kissed you,” he begins.

“Technically, I kissed you.”

A wry smile creeps up his face, eyes glittering with amusement. “Oh, I also made that assessment, but Zeph did not quite care about that distinction.”

Embarrassment floods my cheeks at the memory. I had been so caught up in the sexual tension of the evening that I acted rashly, I realize now. “I’m sorry about that.”

“I promise you, there is nothing to be sorry for. Anyways,” he continues as if he doesn’t notice the flush on my face, “the main disagreement was about your use as a vessel, as I’m sure you could guess.” I’m not surprised, that’s certain. But why would they come to blows over that?

“I must be frank with you, Viola. I do not want you to think I’m keeping anything from you. And if you do not want to be the vessel after you hear what I’m going to say, I swear I will get you out of here, keep you hidden from Stone. Whatever you want, I will fight for you to get.” His hands are on my wrists, stilling them in their journey to clean his body. My gaze locks with his, and his eyes, ordinarily bright as emeralds, are shadowed and intense.

I sit back on my heels, my thigh resting against his outstretched leg. “What is it, Mace?”

“We’ve never successfully completed the ritual, obviously.” His voice is breathy, and it suddenly dawns on me that the waver in his tone is not pain but fear. “But in every attempt, it resulted in the death of the suspected vessel, just like with Link.”

“But I’m the vessel, so I should be fine, right?” He winces a shrug and reaches for me, tugging me ever closer to him. I threaten to topple over from my odd position, so I readjust myself to sit beside him, shoulder to shoulder. I turn my face toward his, the proximity igniting the flame we left simmering.

“I think you will be. But the risk is that summoning Himureal could drain you entirely, and you’d die.”

A fitting ending to me, I imagine, considering the death that lies in my wake.

“I would never force you into such a risk. I truly believe bringing the Gods back is the best thing for this world, and I want to see them returned. But not at the cost of your life, Viola.” I could search for it all I wanted, but I detect no deception in his words.

“All that aside, why would that cause Zeph to attack you?”

His hand finds its way into mine, and I realize I was tapping my fingers rhythmically on his thigh. “Zeph does not want you to be given the choice to be a vessel. He says he cannot let you make that choice if it would lead to your death.”

Fury ignites in my chest. “It’s not his decision to make!” I snarl.

Mace nods emphatically. “That’s what I told him. He said he would take you away and remove your choice in the matter by any means necessary. I worry he may attempt to harm you in a twisted attempt to keep you safe.”

My anger bubbles up, and I hop off the bed, pacing across the floor in a fit of rage. “How fucking dare he? Everyone in this Gods-forsaken city doesn’t give a shit about what I want! I am nothing more than a tool. A tool for the Gods. A tool for battle. A tool for *sex*.” The last word is a snarl I hurl at Mace. “Was that your idea, Mace? To seduce me so I would be so blinded by lust for you that I’d choose to be your vessel?”

As I say the words, I believe them less and less. My anger is reflected to me on Mace’s face. “I have been nothing but honest with you, Viola. To my own detriment, I may add! You hate me, my brother hates me, and if word gets out the Gods are gone before I can bring them back, my entire city will hate me! And I’m willing to risk all that to give you a choice!”

The anger towards Mace drains from my body, but the fury I feel towards Zeph rages on.

“Do you think this home is where Stone wanted to put you? He wanted to kill Tulip and lock you in an underground cell. He wanted to perform the ritual days ago, and I’ve held him off so I could have more time with you. More time to tell you the truth, to lay myself and my faults bare to your judgment. More time to explain to you the risks and rewards of being a vessel. More time to know you. More time to be with you.”

By this point, I've sunk back to the side of the bed, but I cannot face Mace. The passion in his words hit their mark, but still, they cause an ache in my chest.

I feel the bed beside me shift as Mace's weight settles beside mine.

"I am infatuated with you, Viola Mistflow. You continuously surprise me. You're ruthless and dangerous. Almost every time I speak to you, I wonder if this is the time you'll slit my throat." I choke out a laugh. "But you're also passionately protective of those you love and your people. You are the shade under a tree on a warm summer day. I fight so hard to ignore you, but I just cannot. I will live the rest of my years better for having known you for only a fraction of my life."

I dig my nails into my palms, pressing crescents into the soft flesh to staunch the emotions rising inside me.

Almost on command, my shadow-snake slips from under the bed and slides up my body, wrapping himself protectively around my upper arm like a sleeve. His presence gives me immediate comfort.

"I want to know everything there is to know about you, Viola, and I fear there is not enough time in this life to do so. I want the Gods to return. I believe it is the only hope for our world in the coming years. But I want you to live more. So, I will not ask you to be the vessel. I will only ask you to look at all options and follow your gut instinct. From what I've seen, your gut is rarely wrong."

I look at him, broken and bloody, beaten and bruised, but full of light and hope and care for me. I slide my finger across his cheekbone, wincing at the bumps I find below it.

“Why didn’t you just fight him with magic?” I wonder, unable to form the words for a response to his impassioned speech.

He chuckles. “Autumn magic is not known as an offensive or battle magic like Winter and Summer. Unless I wanted to decay my brother, I was stuck with just my own brute strength. And I’m sure we can both agree my brother is the clear winner on that front.”

I look down at the planes of Mace’s chest and smile. He’s not wrong. Zeph is broad-shouldered with thick arms and legs, and his chest looks carved from stone. Conversely, Mace possesses a quiet strength, with long, smoothly muscled limbs and a soft chest. He’s fit, but not overly, more like a fisherman. I can even picture him on a deck, throwing nets. The idea brings a chuckle to my throat, and Mace looks at me with a questioning smile.

“I was just imagining you as a fisherman,” I say.

He, too, laughs at this, his hand bracing his injured side. “I’m unsure why you would picture that, but I do not think I would be of much use on a boat.”

Chapter 45

Mace

Who knew all I had to do to get Viola to speak to me without venom in her voice was to get brutally beaten?

Not to say I would've gone and picked a fight, but I suppose there is an upside to the pain I'm in.

After leaving Viola once the sun rose, insisting I was okay and recovered enough, I sought out Plume. Despite her relationship with my brother, she is well known for her healing abilities, and I badly needed help.

Plume meets me in the Palace library, one of my favorite places in the city. I have always felt at home among the books. The smell of the parchment and dust has been a comfort to me since I was a small child. "Goodness, Mace. What happened?" she asks, hands turning my face to get a good look at the damage.

I briefly consider not telling her the truth but decide my brother doesn't deserve my loyalty. "Zeph attacked me."

Plume winces. “I’m worried about him.”

I look at the woman with curiosity. “I would’ve thought you would side with him.” She gently pushes my shoulders down until I sit in the oversized leather chair.

She fusses over me, unbuttoning my shirt to see the damage on my torso. She closes her eyes when she seems satisfied that she has all the information she needs. Before setting her intentions, she says, “I love Zeph, but I do not agree with the path he’s going down. He’s so volatile and drinking so much now.”

Her hands, resting gently on my chest, push a feeling of warmth through me. It’s akin to lying in a meadow. I can feel the healing properties stitch my busted lip, pulling the bruises from my face and mending my broken ribs and nose.

Quicker than imagined, she’s done, pantomiming, dusting her hands off. “There. Good as new.”

Plume has always fascinated me. As a Spring Seasonale, she has access to their full complements of magic, but I’ve rarely seen her do anything other than command beasts and heal. Spring magic has so much power available, yet she limits herself.

“Plume, can I ask a question?” She tilts her head. I’ve always been fond of her unique beauty. Her mouth is like a little bow, puckered and plush. She exudes warmth and comfort from her very being. Her soft curves hint at a virility that does not surprise me, considering Spring magic can include fertility enhancements.

“I was just wondering when the last time you reanimated someone was.”

She bites her lip in concentration. “Goodness, it’s been a bit. I think most recently was when we had a suspicious death in the hospital. I wanted to know what killed the poor thing.”

Well, isn’t that curious?

“What happened?”

“A young girl, no more than twenty, had been attacked. She was covered with cuts and slashes. She was almost ripped to shreds. Just awful. Her lover found her and rushed her in. He begged me to bring her back so he could bring her killer to justice.”

“What did she say?”

Pain flashes across Plume’s face. “It was a difficult reanimation. Sometimes, souls don’t want to come back, even for a brief moment. But when she came back, she just screamed. No words. Just a loud, ear-splitting screech. It horrified all of us, of course, and I pushed her soul out quicker than I normally would to get it to stop. The lover was devastated, of course.”

For centuries, our Spring fae have kept the magical beasts under control. As our magic wanes, we are increasingly losing control of them. That poor girl must’ve fallen victim to it.

With a chaste kiss on my cheek, Plume turns to leave. “Plume, wait.” She looks at me over her shoulder. “Keep an

eye on Zeph. I'm worried he's going to do something desperate."



I find Viola in the courtyard, a large tome resting on her lap. She looks genuinely happy. I wonder how many moments of relaxing joy she's had in her life. It must be few from what I know of her childhood.

The blue shirt she's wearing today has no sleeves, and her well-defined arms are on display. I picture those arms wrapped around me last night, carrying me to her room. There is so much strength in that woman.

Her legs are stretched before her, bare except for a small pair of shorts made from breezy linen. Her feet are naked, and a pair of white sneakers are cast off to the side. What would she be like if she had spent her childhood here, in Ytopie, without the pressures of the Race weighing her down daily?

I hope when the Gods return, all of Krillium can be like Ytopie. Maybe that will be the first step to healing the trauma people like Viola have experienced their entire lives.

She looks up and catches my eye as I approach her. A smile laced with trepidation crosses her face. She may never fully trust me, but we are closer than we were the night of the gala. The thought of never having her whole heart fills me with a sadness I cannot define.

But I will be happy with whatever she can give me.

Silently, she pats the grass beside her. I lower myself to the ground, maneuvering my long legs into a comfortable position with my knees bent. I don't think I've sat on the grass since childhood.

I break the silence. "I saw Plume and got healed up. Thank you for your assistance last night."

"Oh, did you? I couldn't tell a difference." She fights a smile at her own joke but loses that battle, and a laugh escapes her lips.

Throughout the Race, she didn't laugh much, but when she did, it drew my attention. It was a bark of a laugh, with no regard for being perceived as dainty or small. She laughed with no fear, as if everyone should feel lucky to listen to her.

I certainly did.

I close my eyes to the sunlight, tilting my face to the sky and letting her laugh wrap around me. Since Viola came to Ytopie, I have finally felt I can slow down. Every moment used to be scheduled and crammed, but lately, I find myself wanting to just be. A movement across my finger startles my eyes open, and I look down to find that she has rested her pinky over my own.

She's still deeply engrossed with her book, but that small amount of contact and what it could mean makes my heart soar. Fear of losing it causes me not to acknowledge it. "Is that Damaris Forekeeper's journal?" I ask.

“Yeah, it is truly fascinating. But I still can’t find anything out anything about this.” She holds up her right arm to show the shadow-snake tightly coiled in its usual place. “I don’t think I can make him go away even if I try. And I know this sounds crazy, but I feel like he’s becoming progressively more aware.”

I wrack my brain for any information of magic acting like this. “I can’t think of anything I’ve heard like it, honestly. It’s almost like the shadow has become a true, living familiar of sorts.” She turns her arm over, looking at it from all angles. “I have an idea,” I say, turning to look at her head on. “Can you will him into a solid state? Right now, he’s shadow and air, right?”

“I can’t pet him or anything if that’s what you mean. And I feel him there, but it’s like I would feel the wind whipping around me, if that makes sense.”

My excitement bubbles up, my head nodding quickly at her words. “Absolutely, that makes sense. Okay, see if you can will him into being a three-dimensional form.” Her brow furrows, her nose wrinkles, and the overwhelming need to kiss her rises in my chest. I push it down, not wanting to ruin the tentative peace we have found in one another. I watch her eyes slowly close, then focus my attention on her arm.

Before my eyes, the shadow-snake thickens, its soft edges firming into iridescent black overlapping scales. I watch its face take shape, and suddenly, I’m staring into bright yellow eyes.

Viola opens her eyes, looks down, and yelps loudly. “It’s a fucking snake!” She shakes her arm, but the snake holds firm, flicking its tongue at her.

My laugh fills the courtyard as she jumps to her feet, trying her hardest to dislodge the snake. “This not funny, Mace! I’ve got a fucking snake on my arm!”

“You put the snake on your arm!” I call over her sounds of fear.

Her screams of fear weave with my laughter, and we draw the attention of others in the courtyard, and for once, I do not care what anyone thinks. When I am with her, I do not feel like Mace, the head of the Patricians. I feel like a long-gone version of myself before the death of my parents, and the weight of responsibility crushed me. I rise to my feet and run to her, wrapping an arm around her waist to still her movements.

The snake eventually unwinds from her arm and moves to the ground, where it sits up and looks at her.

It is unlike any snake I’ve seen before, the glistening iridescent scales creating an intricate pattern all down its body. Its body is easily four feet long, the end of its tail a smooth point. It watches Viola with curiosity as she calms herself and eventually lowers to the ground in front of it.

“Shadow?” she asks, so quiet I can barely hear her. The snake flicks its blue tongue and slides closer to her, touching the back of her hand with its head.

“It seems you have just created a familiar, Miss Mistflow.” She shoots me a death glare at the honorific. At this point, I’m doing it just to get a reaction out of her.

“What does that even mean?” she asks, holding her arm out tentatively. The snake coils itself back into its regular place. If snakes could purr, I bet it would. She straightens to a stand and turns to me, and I hope she can see the pride I have for her at her success.

“A familiar is a spirit that is there to protect, assist, and obey you. I have never heard of someone creating a familiar with their own magic. They’re exceedingly rare as is. I’ve never heard of anyone outside the Spring Seasonale having them.”

Over and over, Viola is proving herself to be so much more than I have given her credit for. When she arrived, my only concern was gaining her trust before using her as the vessel. Now, her power seems to be so much more.

We sprawl out together on the grass again, Viola blissfully happy with the reveal of her new familiar.

“Viola, I think...”

“Mace!” Stone stomps across the courtyard, interrupting my sentence. I take a step back from Viola, and the loss of my proximity shows on her face for a trice.

“Stone. Back so soon?” My stomach drops at the implication of his return.

He glowers at me, eyes darting between Viola and myself. “It’s tonight. Get her ready.”

Viola tenses, and when her eyes meet mine, I see strength, resilience, and fear.

Chapter 46

Mace

One would think that being a society with nearly limitless opportunities for magic, I, as its leader, would not be beholden to paperwork.

But alas, there are some things magic can't do.

After Stone's proclamation of tonight being ritual night, Viola insisted she was fine and implored me not to follow her as she left into the Palace and returned to her basement home. With my moment of peace shattered, I had to busy myself, or I would drive myself crazy with worry about her and end up making a fool of myself chasing after her. My heart breaks for what is to come. For the fact that my time with this incredible woman may be soon coming to an end.

I rest my head on the smooth wooden top of my desk, groaning at the imposition of tedious work I have to complete when I would much rather be anywhere else. The lighting in my office is low and warm, the wide window behind my desk open to let in some of the cool night air. My bookshelves, full

of my favorite scholarly journals and accounts of each Patrician head's career, are messy with unfiled paperwork I have shoved haphazardly into any free spot. There are no personal touches here, just the office of someone who has never had anywhere better to be.

Until now.

I am unable to get my mind off Viola, and the words on the papers before me seem to swim and rearrange themselves to spell her name, begging my focus on the woman I was hopeless to ignore from the beginning. I blink rapidly to clear the vision that my brain conjured up in my inability to focus. The looming ritual, which Stone is insisting on doing tonight, threatens me like a phantom bent on destroying me.

I have been trying to look over the fact that I all but confessed my feelings to her when I was broken in her arms, and she changed the subject fairly swiftly. But the more time I spend with her, the more time I want to remind her of the things she makes me feel. I want to tell her again that I meant what I said, that I am infatuated by her. That when she smiles, I feel like my heart could explode, swollen by the pure joy she inspires in me.

But maybe she changed the subject because she doesn't feel the same way. The thought is enough to dry my mouth with fear, and I know I will not bring up my burgeoning feelings with her again.

After all, how could she ever feel that way about me?

It's selfish of me to want her, I realize that. Not for the first time I think that maybe this is my punishment for all the wrongs I've committed. Doomed to care for a woman who could never see me the same way.

My hands are stained with the blood of so many, and while I was not the one that drew the blade across her parent's necks, I stood by idly. I put Link into a ritual he was wholly unprepared and unwilling to participate in and watched as his life drained from him. How could she forgive me for that?

Of course, the reasoning behind the slaughter was just, but does that excuse the action? Stone seems to believe it does. He thinks that the Gods will be so grateful to have been brought back that they will forgive all our deceits. I argued for ages that if that was the case, people would willingly sacrifice themselves and their magic to bring the Gods back and earn their favor and that if we approached this with pure honesty, all of our society could work toward the problem together and come up with a more elegant solution than the repeated slaughter of humans. But Stone's opinions of humans are not as high as mine, and he believed they couldn't be trusted to make the right choice.

Try as I might, Stone was as immovable as his name, and I lost every argument.

And so, we proceeded, cutting down winners and hiding the truth from our citizens. Every year, I had to lie with a smile to the people I wanted to save. If it was up to me, Himureal

would strike me down the minute we bring him back, the blood on my hands too thick to wash clean.

But it is not up to me. Only the Gods will be able to absolve me of my transgressions, and until then, I will bear the weight of my actions and inaction so my people do not have to.

Everything I've done is for my people, including those of the Lowlands. I want them to live safe, happy lives with access to the magic they need to thrive. I want the Race to finally, blessedly stop, with no need to search for a vessel any longer. I want Ytopie and the Lowlands to unite as one nation and the land to be as it was before the banishing.

But until then, paperwork.

“Wow, Mace, don't look so excited to see me.”

I jerk my eyes away from the document before me, some droll application for a community bonfire to celebrate the Equinox, to see Cirrha leaning in my doorway. Her arms are across her chest, and she's clothed in a shimmering gold dress that stops at her knees, her rich dark skin glowing in compliment to the luxe fabric. “Cirrha, my apologies. Just lamenting all the documents I must sign when I would rather be elsewhere.”

Her face stretches with a wide grin, and she slips into a chair in front of me. “I am sure you would much rather be with Viola Mistflow, Mace.”

My scowl doesn't reach my eyes as I pin her with a look. Cirrha and I have worked together as Patricians for decades

now, and she, of all the others, has broken through my shell and been able to tear down the wall I must build when I lead this city.

“That obvious, huh?”

She snorts. “Exceedingly. I’ve never seen you sit on the ground before.”

A flush creeps up the back of my neck. “You saw that, huh?”

“Oh, we all saw it. You looked like a spider, limbs all bent around you.” I ball up the bonfire application in front of me and toss it at her. She catches and unfurls it, smoothing it across her thighs to read it. “You not approving the Equinox bonfire?”

“Which one?” I scoff, holding up three more sheets. “Seems like every Bayal in the city wants to run one. We do not want four bonfires running at the same time.” Cirrha crumbles the paper in front of her, then pulls it out and re-crumbles it, softening it as she fidgets. “Is something on your mind, Cirrha?”

Her short, curly hair becomes the target of her nerves as she runs her fingers through it. “Sort of.” When I stare at her, silently urging her to continue, she sighs. “I’ve never seen winners treated the way Viola and Tulip have been. And I’m curious why they didn’t leave when Stone took the others to their village.”

My stomach twists, the reminder that this last group of winners that were just led to their deaths churning acid up my

throat. I cough, trying to buy myself time to answer her.

“Do not try to lie to me, Mace.” Cirrha pins me with a withering gaze despite the fidgeting and nerves her body portrays. As close as we are, I am still her leader, and she fears confronting me, even knowing the most I would do is shut her down.

“Would you believe me if I told you it had to do with the Gods?”

She sucks her lip into her mouth, worrying it. “I would.”

I lean back, crossing my arms behind my head. “Stone and I have been working to bring them back. It’s not guaranteed, but Viola may be our best bet at doing it. If we can get her to agree.” I don’t add that part of me hopes she won’t agree, the fear of losing her stronger than the desire to return the Gods to the land.

But the joy and hope that flashes on Cirrha’s face is proof enough that this is the right thing to do, even if the methods we had to implement to get here are unsavory. I can damn my soul if it saves my people. “You can bring them back?” she whispers.

“Stone seems to believe so. He believes that we can bring Himureal back with Viola, and Himureal can break the banishment of the others. If that happens, the lands can be restored to their former glory. Magic will flow again, and humans and fae can coexist peacefully.”

“And you can be with Viola,” Cirrha muses softly, “if she’ll have you.”

I drop my arms to my lap. “I never said...”

She waves a hand at me. “You don’t have to. I have known you for thirty years now, Mace. During that time, you have never had a partner that I am aware of. You have poured over your paperwork and books all day and then gone to your home to read quietly. Since that woman got here, you have brought her into your arms, sat on the grass with her, gazed out your window to find her, and smiled unabashedly.” I feel the blush covering my face now, flushing my skin with the acknowledgment of the truth of her words. “Life is messy, Mace. It is messy, and long, and painful. If you can find someone who makes the mess fun, makes the length a blessing, and makes the pain bearable, you have something more valuable than anything else in this world.”

I choke over the lump in my throat, gazing at Cirrha with a multitude of emotions. I know she is speaking from experience. When her partner died two years ago, Cirrha was a shell of herself. She had loved Taret fiercely since they were children, and his death almost destroyed her. I was not sure if she’d ever be herself again. “Opening yourself up is scary, I know,” she continues. “But you deserve the happiness you have always fought for for our people.”

Standing, I move to her and pull her into a squeezing embrace. She squeaks at the intensity of my arms. “Thank you,

Cirrha.” My voice is foreign to my own ears, clogged with emotion and fear for what is to happen tonight.

Pushing away from my chest and laughing, she shrugs. “You don’t need to thank me. It’s for the good of all of our people if you’re a little less intense.”

We both burst into laughter, and I lean against the wall, tracking my eyes over the books and paperwork I have shoved in every corner. “I guess you’re not wrong about that. What did you come in here for, anyways?”

Her face flashes guiltily. “I was coming to check on the status of the Equinox approvals.”

“Get out of my fucking office, Cirrha.”

And she does, laughing loudly on her way out the door.

Chapter 47

Viola

“**Y**ou cannot be serious!” Tulip screeches, attempting to use anger to mask her fear. “You cannot use yourself as the vessel!”

I sit calmly at the table in our sleeping quarters, hands folded on the top. The shadow-snake, now an actual snake named Shadow, is curled around my neck like a collar. “I trust Mace, Tulip.”

“Mace told you you could die!”

I shrug. “Then I die. I think if anyone can survive it, it’s me. My ancestors had to have known what they were doing when they agreed to this.”

I was close to accepting my fate as the vessel before Mace appeared, beaten and bloody, on my doorstep. The more he spoke, the more I believed this was the right thing to do. Despite explaining all the good that will come to Krillium with the return of the Gods, Tulip still is not convinced.

“Zeph doesn’t think it’s a good idea! If he’s willing to hide you, you need to take him up on that.”

“Zeph also beat Mace half to death for kissing me.”

“I’m sorry, what? You *kissed* Mace Nightroot?”

I can’t tell if the fury in her voice is from kissing him or not telling her. Either way, my face flushes. “I’m just saying. Zeph’s motives may not be squeaky-clean.”

Tulip roughly pulls a chair out from the table, causing a screech on the floor. Shadow lifts his head and flicks his tongue out angrily. “That thing is exponentially creepier now,” she mutters.

“It’s not like I can stop him at this point. Shadow refuses to go.”

“You named it?” she asks incredulously.

“Yeah, why not. If he’s intent on being attached to me, I may as well give him a name.”

Tulip leans forward, face in her hands. “You *kissed* Mace Nightroot. Maybe your motives aren’t so clear either, Viola?”

I think about that for a moment. Have I made this decision because of the affection I have for Mace? I genuinely do not think so. I have tried to convince myself my feelings for Mace are mostly lust because lust wouldn’t hold a place in my decision-making.

But I cannot deny this unfamiliar feeling rising within me at the sound of his name.

Sitting back in my chair, I rest my clasped hands on my stomach. “Tulip, they’ve killed all the past winners in hopes of forcing a vessel into fruition. Stone killed this year’s winners to cover his tracks, something I intend to make him pay dearly for. I will never be able to live with myself if I don’t do this. When I do this, the Race can stop. Himureal can bring back the other Gods. There will be no more vessels, no more expendables, no more Race. I must do this. Even if I die, it will be worth it.”

I look up at my friend and see tears running down her face. The fat, hot tears fall silently to the tabletop. “I cannot lose someone else,” she whispers.

I didn’t consider how I would leave Tulip if I didn’t survive. She is surrounded by the ghosts of her loved ones, and I will potentially join their ranks. I lean across the table and clasp her hands with my own.

“I will talk to Mace. We will get you a home here in the city, and you can start a new life, Tulip. You can make friends, date, and fall in love. What was it Max said, that you do not have to spend your life in a fight, you can settle down and just exist. You can have a family.”

She snuffles loudly, attempting to steel herself. “You’re my family, Viola.”

Tulip and I have not known each other for very long. While it feels like so much time has passed since she stumbled into Max’s and my campsite, it’s only been maybe two weeks. Still,

the draw to her was almost immediate, and since then, I have felt closer to her than anyone.

“I know, Tulip. And you’re my family, too. I care about you deeply and do not want to see you left alone. It’s why I’m going to fight hard to survive the ritual. Mace believes I can, and I do too. I need you to believe in me.”

Standing quickly, I move to her side of the table and pull her into my arms. She sobs onto my shirt, but I don’t mind one bit.



At nightfall, I make my way up the stairs to the main level of the Palace and navigate to Mace’s office. Unsurprisingly, he’s there, face in his hands. I slip through the door and close it behind me. The sound of the latch clicking makes his head rise.

“Viola? What are you doing here?”

I sit across from him and prop my feet on his desk, a cheeky reminder of my first time in his office. I changed before I came here, ditching the breezy shirt and shorts for the leathers I wore during the Race. I had them cleaned and asked some of the fae assisting us to repair them, and they were happy to oblige.

I need to feel powerful and brave for what I am going to do.

His eyes latch on my boots, and then he stares me down, a bemused smile twisting his lips. He points his finger toward the ground, and I slide my boots to the floor, happy to heed his

unspoken command if it slows down the conversation I'm here to have.

We sit in comfortable silence as if not speaking will hold off the inevitability of what is to come tonight.

“Stone killed the winners, didn't he?” I surprise myself with the words, far from my intended conversation when I walked through his doors.

Mace winces and buries his face in his hands, all amusement gone. “I tried to stop him, Viola. I really did. He threatened Tulip. I couldn't be responsible for you losing someone else.”

My heart wrenches at the mere thought of Tulip no longer lighting the world up. “I would've made the same choice.”

He raises his head to look at me, desperation for forgiveness painted across his face. “I thought you would be furious that the deaths are still happening.”

“I mean, I'm not thrilled about it, don't get me wrong. But I would slaughter hundreds to spare Tulip.”

As he looks at me, an emotion I can't place flickers across his face. The silence hanging between us tells me it's time to have the conversation I came here for. I'm surprisingly nervous. I thought this would be easier, that I would be ready by now. With a shaky breath, I tell him, “I'm here for the ritual, Mace. I'm going to be the vessel.”

Before my eyes, his face transforms from resignation to fear. “You can't, I won't let you.”

I glare at him. “You too? Trying to take my choice away?”

He shakes his head and stands from the desk, moving to sit on the top directly in front of me. “I do not want to take your choice away, Viola. But I don’t want to lose you.” The crack in his voice surprised me, but I think it surprised him more. He ducks his head, a soft pink coloring his cheeks.

I was eighteen the first time I saw Mace, and I was about to run the Race for the first time. He was a picture of stoicism, brutal hard edges in a beautiful package. When he spoke, it was seemingly with indifference to human life.

I hated him.

Every year, my hate for him grew, but I could never hide my appreciation for the striking beauty he possesses. I would hear the women of the Lowlands gather to whisper about him, their desires growing increasingly suggestive the longer they spoke, and though I never joined in, I agreed with more of what they said than not.

There is no denying that Mace is a formidable figure. While not as physically strong as his brother, Mace’s strength lies in how he carries himself. Looking at him, you’d know beyond a shadow of a doubt that he’d destroy you with a snap of his fingers.

I spent my adult life hating him and everything he stood for.

Maybe I should still hate him. He is at least partially responsible for the deaths of my parents and Link, the man I loved. But when I look at him, I don’t see their deaths. I don’t see the deaths of any of the countless winners, even the ones who were slain just last night, on his hands. I see a deeply

flawed man who thought he was doing what was best for his people, no matter what.

Can I fault him for that?

I am no innocent. Amio wasn't my first transgression during the Race, even if he was my most glaring. Through the years, I have lied, cheated, deceived, and stolen to push myself further ahead. All for the hope of being here, where I am now, among the fae.

I was owed my place in Ytopie, and I got it.

“Do you remember the opening ceremonies this year?” I ask, taking him by surprise.

“Of course I do. You yelled at me.”

The memory of it slashes a smile across my face. “I did. There was a moment when we locked eyes, and I felt like my skin was being peeled back. Like you were seeing right through me into my core, probing into everything I was sensitive about.”

He furrows his brow. “I am sorry I made you feel that way. When you spoke, I was so excited to get the opportunity to finally make contact with you. I-”

I cut him off. “There is no need to apologize. I spent most of those ceremonies trying to make sense of the mix of the anger I felt towards you and the heat you brought to my core.”

His eyes widen, and he coughs, that practiced indifference melting into shock. “I'm sorry, what?”

My laugh rings through the quiet room. “I bring all of this up because now that I’m here, I know what that feeling was, and I can recognize how my feelings toward you and Ytopie as a whole have changed since I yelled out at you that day. For all its faults, Ytopie is the dream I always wanted for myself. But if I can’t have it, if I am destined to die bringing the Gods back, I will die happily because it will be worth it. My people will live happier lives, and the world will be in balance once more, with no one else having to go through what I went through growing up. It is the least I can do for my people after a lifetime of doing what was best for me.”

He reaches for me to silence my words, but I hold up my hand. “It will also be worth it because I got the chance to know the real you, Mace. Not Mace, the head of the Patricians. Not Mace, the orchestrator of the Race. But Mace, the fae man who was willing to give up everything he’d worked for if it meant keeping me safe.”

I cannot stop the quiet tears that roll down my cheeks. My proximity to Mace suddenly feels simultaneously too much and not enough. I can’t bring myself to look at him.

His strong hands grab my chin, forcing me to look into those vivid green eyes that bore into me from the platform that day on the green. His eyes are cloudy and wet around the edges as they search my face. It hurts to meet his gaze. I feel disarmed, laid bare in front of him, with my words hanging in the air between us.

I’ve never been one for declarations of feelings.

His gaze bores into mine, and I worry I will be unable to breathe.

I blink, and his lips are on mine, his arms pulling me from the chair to stand between his thighs. The kiss is fearful and aggressive, a declaration of feelings that don't need words. His hands grip my back, strong fingertips digging into my skin.

My body melts at his touch. I'm leaning into him, fighting to push all the air out from between us. I cannot get close enough to him. Never breaking his lips from mine, he turns me around and sits me atop his desk. His hands drift to my front, teasing the sides of my breasts.

I very much regret wearing these difficult-to-remove clothes.

He breaks his lips from me to kiss and nibble down my neck. He's soft, unwilling to hurt me. He kisses the hollow of my collarbone and looks up at me with questioning eyes. "I do not want to make you uncomfortable," he says quietly. "I need to know how far you want this to go."

I brush the high of his cheek with my knuckle, then wiggle out of my shirt unprompted by him. "I want this. I want you, Mace."

He smiles and looks down at me, eyes traveling across the wrap I have around my breasts. "Can I?" he whispers breathlessly, hands moving to the fabric. I nod enthusiastically, and he unwraps me. My nipples tighten in the cool air of his office, and he inhales sharply at the sight.

He leans forward and flicks his tongue across one of the tightened buds and I shiver in delight. A rakish grin greets me in response. His hands knead my breasts, gently twisting and pinching my nipples as he kisses me with renewed fervor. I shiver and curl beneath his touch at the sensation. I reach to unbutton his emerald green shirt, fingers slipping on the rich fabric. Mace does me the courtesy of helping me undress him.

With his shirt removed and standing in front of me, eyes hooded with desire, I rake my eyes over his form. Mace Nightroot looks like the Gods designed him. I'm not sure if I've ever seen anything as beautiful. The parts of him I once saw as sinister and severe have been replaced with expressions of warmth and joy. My eyes linger on the proof of his arousal straining against his rigid cotton pants. His eyes sparkle when he catches me looking.

He hooks his fingers in the waistband of my leather shorts, but it takes my assistance to get me out of them. He leans me back on the desk.

“You are art,” he sighs, voice husky. “The brightest star in the sky would brass in your presence.”

I pull him towards me and kiss him deeply, my tongue darting into his mouth to explore. He yanks away abruptly and bites my lip. I watch as Mace sinks to his knees in front of me. “Maybe the Bliksem was onto something about you being a God because I just want to worship you on my knees.”

I snort out a laugh, but he cuts me off with soft kisses up the inside of my thighs. I inhale sharply as he ghosts his mouth

over my most sensitive area. His long fingers slide up my hips, grab my underwear, and pull them down. “Do you know I picked these panties out for you?” he whispers without moving his mouth away from between my legs.

His warm breath brushes up against me in the most delicious way as he speaks. “You did not,” I reply, my voice unexpectedly raspy.

He looks up at me and grins. “I did. Every piece of clothing I hand-picked for you.” He holds up the panties I was wearing today, black and sheer, with blue threads running through them in overlapping lines. “Blue is my favorite color.”

I sit up and glare at him from above. He still hasn’t moved his head from between my legs, and the proximity of him is driving me mad with need. Still, I can’t help but give him a hard time. “So that’s why ALL my panties were blue?” He tries to school his face into an innocent expression, and I chuckle.

Before I can continue to berate him, he blows a strong breath across my clit, and I let out an entirely uncharacteristic yelp. Pleased with the response, he continues to blow softly, my legs spreading of their own accord to open to his advances.

Mace takes a single finger and drags it up my slit. It sends a shiver down my spine. “You’re so wet already.” I feel my face heating. In all the sex I’ve had, it’s been mechanical, just for a release. I am not used to someone taking their time the way Mace seems determined to.

I can feel my wetness growing more the longer Mace holds his face to my center. Without warning, he takes his tongue and runs it up my lips before dancing it over my clit. My head rolls back, and I lower myself to the desktop, lying bare before him.

“You’re so beautiful, Viola. Let me worship you.” He pushes my thighs farther apart still, opening my center before him. His tongue resumes its exploration of my body, every inch of my skin pebbling with the sensation.

With his tongue circling my clit, he slowly slides a finger into me. I gasp, my back curling up where my shoulders are all that’s left on the desk. He makes a sound of approval against me, the most delicious vibration powering through my body.

A second finger joins the first, and I groan, feeling both hook upwards in tandem, hitting that very sensitive spot of flesh inside me. I writhe beneath his touch, the pleasure all-consuming, like fire burning inside my limbs. His tongue, though sharp when he speaks, is soft and languid as it laps up my arousal.

Pulling his face away from my heat but leaving his fingers moving inside me, Mace whispers, “Do you like that?” His voice is deep and devious, and it makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

“I do.” My voice sounds foreign to me, breathy and low. He moves to close the distance between his mouth and my center again.

“Then why don’t you go ahead and come for me?”

The authority in his tone sends me reeling. Quickly, his mouth returns to my clit, sucking it into his mouth and rolling his tongue against it. He scrapes his teeth gently, and I cry out, my body fighting to remove itself from the table again.

He watches me, increasing the speed of his fingers with the feedback from my body. Shockwaves course through me, and I move to cry out once more. Mace rises up, my body immediately feeling the loss of his mouth as he clasps his free hand over my mouth. His other hand stays firmly rooted inside me. “Shh, there are still people working here. You’re being terribly rude.” The thumb of his hand grinds against my clit in tandem with the movement of the two fingers he continues to sink deep inside my sex.

With a final curl of his finger and his hand over my mouth, my orgasm shudders through me. He drops his hand from my mouth once I recover, panting and slick with my own juices. Mace slides his fingers out of me and pops them into his mouth, licking the dampness from them like a delicacy. “You know, you just may be my favorite taste.”

The release from my body, something only I have succeeded in coaxing out of myself until this moment, has left me heady with desire for him. I sit up, trembling still, and pull him towards me for a kiss. I taste myself on his tongue, and the reminder that he worshipped me on his knees makes me lightheaded with desire.

“Mace,” I breathe into his ear, disentangling our mouths. “I want you to fuck me.”

He pulls away, eyes searching my face. “Are you sure?”

I nod emphatically. “Please.”

His eyes alight with fire, a mischievous grin stretching across his face. “Oh, I quite like hearing you ask so politely. But I am not quite convinced. You may need to beg.”

I glare, fixing my face into a caricature of anger. “I don’t beg.” He steps away from me, adjusting himself at the crotch of his pants. My eyes track his movement and need fires low in my belly again.

“I’m sorry, I’m just not convinced.”

This bastard. I wrinkle my nose and sharply say, “Please fuck me, Mace.”

He taps his finger to his chin, then shrugs a shoulder. “I’ve not been sold on it yet.”

I slide from the desk, striding naked across the room to him. My hand roughly grabs his cock through his pants, and I stare at him. “Fuck me, Mace.”

His tongue runs across his teeth, and he picks me up, wrapping my legs around his waist. “Well, since you asked so nicely.” He tosses me back onto his desk with no regard for the papers and books he’s had stacked there. My body pushes them, and they fall haphazardly on the floor.

“I’ve wanted you on this desk since you first put your boots on it just to annoy me.”

The memory of that day brings me to a chuckle, and I can't help but taunt him. "Then teach me a lesson."

I watch as he pushes his pants off, and I lay eyes on his cock for the first time. Moisture pools in between my thighs with need. He stalks towards me, and I move to reach out and grab him. He lightly pushes my hand away, opting instead to line himself up at my entrance.

"A lesson is certainly in order, Miss Mistflow." He gently trails the head across my slit, moistening it and teasing my clit all at the same time.

I am panting, overwhelmed by need, digging my fingers into his shoulders. "Please, Mace, please..." I cannot believe I'm actually begging.

His eyes are practically black, with only a sliver of green visible around his widened pupils. "Maybe the lesson can wait until next time." With a slow thrust, he moves inside me, and I groan at the delicious pleasure of being filled by him. His rhythm is slow at first, savoring. His eyes are half closed, his breathing labored and panting. I wrap a single leg around his hips, driving him deeper, and I groan as he pushes against me.

His hand wraps around my chin, forcing me to look into his eyes. With one particularly delicious thrust, my eyes roll closed, and he pulls down on my chin. "No, no, I want you to look at me when I fuck you." His tone, so authoritative, sends waves of pleasure through me. His grip on my chin is firm, his thrusts forceful as he picks up his pace.

Another orgasm builds low within me, and I quiver and clench beneath him. “Are you going to come again, darling?” I whimper and nod, unable to make my brain form a response. My eyes threaten to roll back again, and Mace presses a brutal kiss on my lips. “You’re going to look me in the eye when you come, Viola. You’re going to come for me and let me see that look I have dreamed of seeing since the moment you challenged me before the Race. Then, and only then, will I come. I will keep going until I get what I want.”

With my eyes forced open and my chin in his hand, fingers gracefully lying on my throat, a second orgasm wracks through me, curling my toes and bending my back up from the desk. My body bucks underneath his, and he holds firm to my chin and neck, moving in tandem with me as my pleasure crashes around me in waves. With a final punishing thrust, he groans out his own release and spills his warmth into me.

In the distance, I hear the crack of lightning and a downpour of rain.

Chapter 48

Zeph

He fucked her.
And the fucking whore begged it of him.

When I went to talk to Viola to convince her that the best thing she could do would be to come with me and let me hide her away, Tulip told me she had made up her mind and went to Mace to tell him. I did not expect to find him buried inside her.

I have always been able to slip in and out of spaces without being noticed, but this was one time I almost wanted to be caught. I wanted to ruin it for them.

Instead, I stayed there, listening, watching, as she came for him. As she begged him to fuck her. Bile threatened to spill from my throat the longer I stayed, but I could not pull myself away from them. Unaware they had an audience, and with their inhibitions lowered, I watched as my brother fucked the woman of my dreams.

I am everything Viola could have wanted. I was kind and understanding, getting her books to learn more about herself. I helped her practice her magic and got her that beautiful dress for the gala. I was the picture of a gentleman, never pushing too hard or too fast, just being there for her.

And still, she fucked him.

Mace. Of all people, she chose to fuck my brother.

I stomp out of the Palace, sconces flaring to the ceiling as I pass. I have always had trouble controlling my magic when angry, but this is something else. Once outside, I'm greeted by sprinklings of rain. It does nothing to extinguish the flames threatening to burst from my chest.

The fire wins because a tree bursts into violent orange and red flames near me. The drizzle of rain does nothing to staunch the growth. In the fire, I see every slight, every betrayal from my brother. This may be the biggest, but it is not the first and will not be the last.

Standing there, staring at the tree, I don't notice Nimh has come up behind me. She extinguishes the flame quicker than the rainfall could and silently stands near me. She has diligently avoided me since I chose to save Viola over revealing the truth behind the Race.

I know she does not forgive me for that. I chose Viola over the people of Ytopie and, in doing so, thrust a Winter Seasonale into the mix, threatening to divide the Nereids in half as they choose how to divide their ranks.

She doesn't speak, just holds still as my rage whirls around us. Once my breathing settles, I cast a glance in her direction. "It's raining," she says, her voice quiet. I look up at the sky as lightning cracks, the rain picking up.

"So it is. I didn't know a storm was planned tonight."

She raises one shoulder in a noncommittal shrug. "It wasn't."

Ytopie is so carefully balanced in our combined magics that even our weather is planned. What is the point of controlling the elements if we do not use them to our advantage? We plan our rainfall and storms to the exact needs of our soil, providing optimum growing conditions.

"Then why are the Nereids going rouge?"

She smiles at me and puts her hand on my arm. "This isn't us, Zeph. I've had my own opinions and suspicions, but I have concluded that this is Viola Mistflow." My gut clenches at her name, the anger fresh and visceral in my veins.

"It's always been debated whether water fell under Summer or Winter, and for a while, I even considered if we were a shared resource or one of our own. But this is the second unscheduled storm since Viola joined us in Ytopie. The only Winter Seasonale anyone has seen in centuries. And when she comes to us, she brings wild rainstorms, frosted trees, and creeping shadows."

I glower, eyes narrowed at my friend. "That doesn't explain the Bliksem going rouge."

She shrugs, a chunk of her deep blue hair falling from her shoulder to her back. “It does if she’s with Mace.” She waits for a beat. “Plume told me what happened.”

Plume. I never took her for a traitor.

I cannot trust anyone anymore. Not Plume, not Loris, and now Nimh is bringing up that Viola chose Mace over me? No one is looking out for me. The world is working against me, and it’s taken my friends with it.

“The last unscheduled storm was the night she kissed Mace, if I’m correct.” I grit my teeth but nod. “And where is Viola now, Zeph?”

“She is currently fucking Mace in his office,” I spit. Nimh flinches, and I can see the question of how I know in her eyes. I won’t dignify the look with a response.

“Then that settles it. Viola’s magic is unstable from what Loris has said, and she doesn’t need intention to cast it. It appears she has combined her magic with Mace’s. Something happens when they’re together that brings their magic together without them knowing.”

I hold up my hand, bile rising in me. “I can’t think about them combining anything anymore, Nimh.”

I turn my back to her, pacing back and forth so quickly I may wear a divot in the ground. “I found her, you know? I got to her first. I was the first thing she saw when she got to Ytopie. I thought that meant something. I thought she would feel that connection I felt watching her throughout the Race. I have not

been able to get her out of my head. She pulls me in, wrapping me around her finger, and then she goes and does this? She sleeps with my brother? She knows what she's doing to me. She's doing this to hurt me.”

I feel myself descending into madness. No woman has ever caused me to lose control like this before. Flames lick at my palms, threatening to explode again.

“I could have anyone in this city, Nimh! I've got women throwing themselves at me whenever I step out my door. I've got power, I'm handsome, I've got money. Anyone here would be lucky to have me. And what does she do? She scorns me. She ignores me. She fucks the one person in this city with more power than me. The one person she knew would hurt me the most.”

Ever the picture of serenity, Nimh tilts her head to the side, looking at me with curiosity. “Why does this upset you so much, Zeph?”

“Because she was supposed to be mine!” I roar.

Nimh flinches back from me. “Zeph. She is her own person. You cannot possess her.”

“Watch me.”

Chapter 49

Mace

I made a mistake growing too close to Viola Mistflow.
But oh, what a glorious mistake that was.

Watching her dress herself, the flush still on her chest from her release at my hand, is like getting to see a masterpiece as it is created. She looks over her shoulder at me, still naked and leaning on my desk. “You’re staring, Mace.”

Of course, I’m staring, I want to say. Instead, I just meet her gaze, as unflinching as I was that day on the stage, staring at her in the middle of a crowd. I scanned the crowd for her as it gathered, aching for just a glimpse of the woman I had spent years hunting down.

When I first noticed her there, something came alive in me.

I thought at the time it was my knowledge that she could be the vessel that drew me in. That her magic called to mine, and I had no choice but to answer. Now, as I finally dress my body from claiming her here on my desk, I know what it was.

Call it fate, destiny, or divine intervention, but I was always meant to be here, in this moment, with her. The way she looks at me says she feels the same. I watch as she dresses, slow and languidly, like we have no place to be but each other's arms.

I step to her and pull her close to my chest, interrupting her dressing. "Hey!" she protests, but her face is lit with a smile. I gaze down at her, and the warmth of her face mirrors my own.

"I need to know you were okay with that," I say quietly. She slaps me on the shoulder, and I fake a wince. "Okay, point taken."

Viola pulls from me and slides her leather shorts on, the same clothing she wore during the Race. I recognize it for what it is – a battle outfit. "Viola," I begin.

She faces me again, frustration coloring her features. "I'm fine, Mace. I begged you. You didn't force me into anything." I hide a chuckle under my breath.

"It's not that. I just want to tell you again before we leave that you do not need to be the vessel. We can hide you. I will get you out of here, and no one will ever know where to find you."

Her small hand, callused from a hard life, cups my face. "Mace, I'm not going to hide. If I don't do this, I will spend my entire life hiding and running from my destiny."

I nod curtly, knowing there is no changing her mind anymore.

“What can I expect?” she asks, a hint of fear breaching her voice. I sit in my chair and lean back, hands behind my head.

“It’s a ritual. It’s going to require one of each of the Seasonale to participate. I’m unsure who was tapped for Summer and Spring, but Stone said he’d handle it. It’s always someone different that owes him a favor. I’ll stand in for Autumn and, of course, you.”

“I’m the Winter.”

At her words, I see her glance to her bare right arm. In seconds, a black snake wraps himself around her. I don’t have to ask why she brought the snake out. I can see the comfort it brings her. She can try to hide it all she wants, but it is obvious she is afraid.

“The ritual is essentially just a spell, combining different magics. It’s not much different than what you’ve done already, just with more people. Once the spells are done, you’ll need to spill your blood. It’s said that Himureal will then rise from your blood.”

“How is my life at risk if it’s just a spell? Will he take my body?”

I can’t meet her eyes when I answer. As much as I want to bring the Gods back, I would sacrifice that for her any day. But that is not what she wants to hear. “There is no telling how much of your blood will need to spill. When I said the ritual consumed the other vessels, I meant it pulled all the blood from their bodies, seeking more and more magic.

Theoretically, your body will stay your own, the blood and magic forming a new one for the Frostweaver.”

She stiffens and slides her back against the wall, down to the floor. With her face buried in her hands, I barely hear her say, “I don’t want to die, Mace.” I am on my feet, crashing to the ground before her with my hands on her shoulders. This rare show of fear from Viola leaves me shaken.

“You will not die, Viola. You are something I never expected. If it’s magic in your blood that the ritual needs, you have it in spades. You will survive, Himureal will rise again, and you will be the one Ytopie has to thank for its salvation.”

I wrap her in my arms, pulling her onto my lap. She’s vulnerable in a way I am unused to associating with her. “Everyone I loved is dead.”

The words aren’t a question nor an invitation for me to console her. She speaks with finality as if she has to remind herself of the fact.

“They’re all dead,” she repeats.

And suddenly, she’s crying, wet tears dripping down the crook of my neck. I hold her as her body wracks with sobs, and I tap a light pattern across her shoulder blades.

As quickly as it began, the tears are gone, and Viola rises from my chest with her face fixed in brutal resignation. She stands, reaching her hand down for me, and pulls me to meet her. Together, we are chest to chest, eye to eye, staring at one

another. The snake on her arm flicks its tongue, and I laugh at the sensation of it lightly touching my skin.

“I am Himureal’s vessel,” Viola affirms quietly. “I am a human from the lowlands. I am the last Winter.”

She looks at me with determination, shoulders squared and her jaw set, and that ruthless woman all of Ytopie rooted for stands before me.

“And I will not die today.”

Chapter 50

Viola

It's a longer walk to the garrison under the arena than I remember. Mace says that the rest of the people involved in this ritual are waiting for us. I guess our extracurricular activities slowed us down a bit.

If I am to die today, at least I will die with his taste on my lips.

My mind cleared of the anxiety of telling Mace I would be the vessel, it goes back to the deaths this year's winners. "How did Stone do it? Get rid of the winners, I mean." I ask as we walk.

I see his shoulder tense. "You must believe me when I say I tried to stop it, Viola. He took them under the cover of night as soon as the gala was over. They still have some latent Winter magic, and Stone wasn't willing to risk it ruining your chances during the ritual. I have to hope that when we get Himureal back, we can tell everyone why we did what we did and beg forgiveness."

Maybe I should feel more upset about the death of these innocents. It's not that I feel nothing, but I feel very little. If the alternative was Tulip, then I would allow it to happen again tenfold.

Their deaths make sense in a twisted way. Human life has never been valued in Krillium. Now that I know why, my anger toward the situation is directed at Stone, the one who forced this decision on Mace.

“Was it quick, at least?” I bump my elbow against his, and he looks down at me. I hope he can see in my eyes that this is not something I blame him for.

He nods, guilt flashing across his features. “Very. And they're buried respectfully. Stone truly believes he's doing the right thing.”

Do I wish it were different? Of course. Had I known when it was happening, I would have done what I could to stop it. But I am one person, and the only way I can truly change this way of life is in the garrison.

My entire life, I have worked towards coming to Ytopie, training alongside my parents to be the fastest, strongest, and sharpest. I finally achieved the goal I have had my entire life, and rather than get to enjoy it, I am thrust into an impossible decision.

The men here have tried to put a label on me from the first day.

They call me vessel.

They call me Winter.

They call me God.

It wasn't until I was faced with a broken and bloody Mace that I was able to hide the noise of everyone else and start to think about who I think I am.

I am Viola Mistflow. I am my father's daughter. And I am no longer afraid.

While I am still not convinced that I am the vessel they need, I accept now that I am the last, the only, Winter Seasonale, which must mean something in the grand scheme of things.

How can I be hurt summoning the God whose power blesses me?

And maybe today, I will still die.

Maybe I will be leaving Tulip alone, broken.

I stop walking.

"Mace," I say, grabbing his arm. He skids to still and looks at me.

"Have you changed your mind?" he asks, somewhat hopefully. I cannot imagine the war within him as he balances his duty to his people and his burgeoning feelings for me.

I shake my head sadly and meet his gaze. "Tulip. Promise me you will not let Stone execute her. She gets to live. She gets a home, a life, and a family. That is what I want in exchange for me doing this."

His hands grip mine, large and firm. “Of course, Viola. I would never let anything happen to her. You have my word.”

With that, I continue the march towards my future, whatever it may entail.



Inside, the garrison is quiet and reserved. It feels like a place of worship rather than a command center. Stone sits at a table under the vaulted ceilings, face bowed over a yellowed volume. When Mace and I enter, hand in hand, I see the disgust drip off Stone’s face.

“I see you heeded my warning about growing too close to the vessel,” he drawls.

The venom in his voice towards Mace lights inside me, but before I can lash out, I hear Mace’s voice. “Her name is Viola. She is more than just a vessel.”

The words, so simple and yet so powerful, wash over me. Of course, he’d said as much to me before, but this was to Stone. Stone, who has been his partner in this for years, whom he had been working towards this with for centuries. I watch Stone’s lip curl, his frustration with Mace’s rebuke obvious.

“Whatever you think she is, it doesn’t matter. She’s here for one purpose. She was born for this moment.”

“I grow tired of you speaking about me as if I am not here, Stone.” His head whips towards me with my words, and I get

the feeling that if he didn't need me alive, we'd be having a very different conversation.

“Of course, Miss Mistflow, my apologies. Please, your position in the ritual is right over here.”

The last time I was here, I did not spend much time observing the garrison, more focused on figuring out why the elevator was not the winning path I had been led to believe it was. Now I see the high, vaulted ceilings carved out of natural rock, sparsely appointed with furniture and bookcases. The cobwebs and slightly damp smell give a distinct impression that this space is rarely used.

Stone crosses the rotunda to a small stage built against the wall. On it lays a stone altar of black and ice blue quartz, a large basin atop it. An ornamental blade of black obsidian with red jewels in the hilt lies beside it. On the ground in front of the stage are three podiums of varying colors.

A burnt orange and faded brown for Avidor, the Harvest Lord.

Swirling pinks and bright greens for Amaryn, the Bloomtide.

Brilliant reds and yellows for Solarius, the Radiant Sunfire.

In this room, we will summon a God.

But the question is – will the God listen?



I am surprised to see Plume come in from a tunnel off the rotunda, her face downcast like she is ashamed of what she's supposed to be doing here. I recognize quickly that it is not guilt at participating in the ritual but guilt at defying Zeph. As she takes up her spot at the Bloomtide's podium, I see the fear and sadness in her eyes.

I've been sitting on the floor of the stage, hanging my legs off, until it is time for the ritual to begin. Stone mentioned something about the moon needing to be just right, and he and Mace set off doing calculations I have no desire to be aware of.

Plume is wearing pants for the first time I've seen, ecru and flowing in cream around her legs. Their bottoms are dirty with the grime and dust from the garrison. "Hey, Plume. I wasn't expecting to see you here," I say lightly, as if we're two ladies going out for drinks.

"Viola, how are you feeling?"

No part of me wants to talk about my feelings. On the best of days, I avoid the conversation, but today, where I slept with Mace, sobbed in his arms, and then walked into what may be my death chamber? Feelings cannot become a part of this.

"I am fine, just a regular day getting ready for the possibility of being slaughtered. Not much different than the Race, now that I think about it."

She looks as if my words actually wounded her. "I know, it's awful what the Lowlands have been put through to bring the Gods back. Your sacrifice..."

I cut her off swiftly. “I’m not dying here today, no matter what Zeph says.”

At the mention of her best friend, I see a flash of anger across her face. It looks wholly out of place on those rosy cheeks. “He is not himself lately. His alcohol consumption is out of control. He’s unstable and angry all the time. Nimh even told me he...” She drifts off as if deciding she wants to share information with me.

“What, that he beat Mace half to death?”

She shakes her head. “No. I mean, yes, that happened, but what Nimh told me was...” She looks around, checking to see if Stone and Mace were within hearing distance. When she feels satisfied, she turns back to me. “Nimh told me he caught you sleeping with Mace.”

The shock of the statement rips through me like lightning. “He what?”

She blushes as if talking about my sex life is more embarrassing for her than it is for me. “A few hours ago. He apparently went to talk to you; Tulip directed him to Mace’s office, and he... He saw...” I hold up a hand to stop her.

“I was there. You don’t need to tell me what Zeph saw.” Her shoulders relax at that.

“The things Nimh said he was ranting about are fearsome, Viola. He feels as if Mace stole you from him, that you were to be his.”

“I am my own person. No one possesses me.”

“That’s what Nimh told him, I’ve heard.” Her voice is layered with worry for her friend and fear for me. “What happened between the two of you, Viola?”

I lean my elbows onto my knees. “That’s the thing, Plume. Nothing happened at all. He was flirtatious a few times, but it was never more than that. He’s a good-looking guy and was kind to me, but I never felt anything towards him. If he says otherwise, it’s in his head.”

A brutal laugh fills the cavern. It’s wild, aggressive and unhinged. I swing my head to place it but see nothing at first glance. Plume glances around warily, fearful and moving closer to me.

A flare of white light fills the cavern, and standing there in the middle is Zeph Nightroot. His hair is disheveled, his clothing dirty and ripped, as if he was in a struggle. His eyes are bloodshot from drink and wild with anger. He’s terrifying, a wild force of brutal magic who has set his sights on me.

I rise to my feet, hands clenched in anticipation of the fight that Zeph seems to be desiring. Shadow hisses and flicks his tongue from my arm, and I begin to call the room’s shadows towards me.

“All in my head, Viola? That’s what you have to say?”

“Zeph, there was not anything between us. I thought we were friends.”

His hollow laugh rings out again. “Friends? I saved you. I was the first one to see you. To touch you. I helped you with

your magic, and when Mace finally told you the truth about everything, I was there to pick up the pieces. I waited for you to come around. If you just for a moment stopped to think about what type of person I was, how good I would treat you, you'd never be in this situation!"

"I chose this situation! You wanted to choose for me. You seek to force me into what you want from me. I am so tired of people dictating what I need to do. This is my choice. I choose to be the vessel."

I watch Zeph's nose curl in a sneer as he walks to a shadowed tunnel and leans on the wall next to it.

"You like choice so much, Viola? Okay then. Choose."

A flash of white illuminates the tunnel, revealing that which he kept hidden.

There in the tunnel, bound and gagged with a tear-streaked face, is Tulip.

"Choose, Viola. You can save your friend by coming with me. Choose. Tulip or being the vessel. Me or Mace."

Chapter 51

Mace

I hear the commotion in the garrison and leave Stone to his moon math, rushing towards it just in time to see poor Tulip tied and crying, a casualty of Zeph's obsession with Viola. Zeph cannot see me from my position within a shadowed tunnel, but Viola does. Her eyes are wide with fear, pleading with me to help her. Raising my finger to my mouth, I urge her to keep silent about my arrival.

I no longer recognize my brother. The boy I used to read stories to and held when our parents died is gone. In his place stands an angry, volatile fae man whose driving force is to strong-arm Viola into acquiescing to his demands.

Zeph continues begging Viola to make choices she should never be asked to make. "Viola, it's easy. You come with me, I leave Tulip to Mace, and you and I can live together happily for all our years." His eyes are wet, and he takes a staggering step towards her, leaving Tulip to slump against the wall to remain upright. "Why can't you see that we're perfect for each

other? I am the light to your dark, the fire to your ice. It was written in the stars, Viola.”

“It doesn’t work that way, Zeph,” she says measuredly. The look on her face and the timber of her voice take me back to watching her in the cave with Amio. The stricken expression on his face makes me sure Zeph recognizes it, too. I bet he never expected to be on the receiving end of that ire.

“Zeph, please see reason. You can’t force a connection. It’s not something you can will into existence,” Plume says softly.

His eyes whip to his oldest friend. “This is none of your concern, Plume. Of course, you would take his side. What, because I wouldn’t fuck you, you went and got it from Mace?”

Plume’s lip curls up, and she bares her teeth, a sign of aggression I’ve never seen from her before. “I never wanted you, Zeph. Never. I don’t want to lay with anyone. I’m happy on my own. You’re the one always trying to take it further after a few drinks!”

My brother’s laugh is haunted, and while I’ve seen aggression from him all my life, this is something else entirely. His brain has been poisoned by jealousy.

I’m slowly lining up my positioning to clearly see him and begin setting my intentions for an attack I wish I did not have to make.

“Zeph.” Viola’s voice is so soft I almost miss it, breaking my concentration momentarily. “Zeph, what happened between Mace and I... Well, I’m sorry you had to see it. I’m not sorry it

happened, though.” Hearing her say that makes my heart swell, confirmation I didn’t know I needed.

“Why him, Viola? Why him and not me?” Zeph is desperate and sad, a man at the end of his rope. Viola is nothing if not clever, though, and moves towards him with soft feet, hands up in submission. Despite how angry at her he is, there is still affection, and she seems desperate to use it to keep Tulip safe.

“I can’t explain it, Zeph. There aren’t instructions for what I’ve gone through since the Race started. You have been nothing but kind to me since I came here, and you deserve happiness. It’s just not with me.”

Her words strike him in the chest, and he doubles over, a wail of anguish on his lips.

Yanking a bound Tulip to rest her back on his chest, he pulls a blade from his pocket and holds it to her neck. The anguish from moments before is gone, replaced by red hot rage.

“You and I were meant for each other, but if you can’t see that, I will have to make you see it. You seem to favor blades, right Viola? Seems only fitting that your friend falls by one,” Zeph snarls. I move to rush him, but Viola gives an almost imperceptible shake of her head.

She takes several more slow steps to Zeph, softening her gaze. “Zeph, you’re right. I didn’t see it until just now. How have you never held a blade before me? You know how much I like them...” Her voice is seductive and low, and I do not recognize this woman at all. Zeph doesn’t notice how wholly unnatural this version of Viola is. “I’m a fool. I should have

realized it before. Put Tulip down, and let's get out of here." His shoulders sag, and his arms drop, Tulip tumbling to the ground.

"Thank the Gods, Viola. I can't lose you." He rushes her, gathering her in his arms. He grabs her cheeks and places a bruising kiss on her lips.

The magic within my veins roars, jealous at his hands upon Viola, but I tamper it down, knowing she can handle herself and that my feelings of his assault on her mouth are not the priority.

She throws her hands around his neck, leaning into his kiss while she slowly turns his back towards me with the movement. She breaks her mouth away from him, but there is no light in her eyes when she does. He doesn't notice, trailing a hand down her face. "I have longed for this moment, Viola. More than you could ever know. I am so glad you came around."

Tulip, the shock of the situation having worn off some, does her best to crawl away from the duo towards the table in the middle of the garrison, her bound hands requiring her to drag herself with her elbows. Zeph doesn't notice, his gaze trained solely on Viola.

Her voice possesses a gentleness I haven't heard from her yet when she says, "I know you have, Zeph. I know how much you care for me. I was just too blind to see it." Over his shoulder, Viola locks eyes with me and nods.

I draw the ore that sparkles in the cave walls around us to float in the air around us, melting and molding into chains before my eyes. Too infatuated with Viola to notice, Zeph is blind to my actions until it's too late, and the chains drop around him. As soon as they do, Viola jumps out of his arms with a sneer. "You bitch!" he screams at her.

She shrugs, spitting on the floor and then wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "How could you think, after all you know about me, I would take threats and someone trying to force me to be with them positively? You're delusional, Zeph."

Zeph tries to fight and bring forth fire to melt the chains, but Plume has been working quietly to bring forth vines, and she wraps him in the bright green and flowered plants. With Tulip removed from Zeph's crazed grasp, we can unleash our magic without fear of her becoming collateral damage.

"You're my friend, Plume!" Zeph roars.

"I was. I am. But this is not right, and you need help. This is for your own good."

To add insult to injury, I infuse Plume's vines with decay, turning the beautiful flowers dank with blight. The decay from the vines sinks into Zeph's skin, and while it is not enough to kill him, he slumps to the ground, face pallid and skin covered in a sheen of sweat, unable to fight as his magic leeches from him.

I may have decayed his body, but the rot within his mind is self-inflicted.

Chapter 52

Viola

I move to Tulip, fingers twisting and stumbling to unwrap her binding. She's free after a few shaky moments, and I pull her tightly into my arms. "Are you okay?" I whisper as tears fall from both our eyes.

She shakes her head but still answers, "I'm fine. I'll be fine."

I pull her towards the seat Stone vacated at the table and run my fingers through her hair in an attempt to calm her. I see Mace and Plume dragging Zeph into one of the tunnels off the garrison for safekeeping. He's subdued and not fighting, but his eyes bore into mine in a way that makes my skin crawl.

"What did you do to him?" I ask Mace.

He looks up at me with a sheepish expression. "That's the magic of Decay. I don't like to do it – the results aren't uniform from person to person. But I couldn't let Zeph hurt Tulip, so it was worth the risk. He's going to be out of it for a bit."

Plume sadly glances to where Zeph lay, eyes tracking my every movement. My skin crawls at his perusal of me. “This is not my best friend. He’s losing the fight against his own goodness,” Plume whispers sadly.

The four of us sit in the quiet, reflecting on what has happened and what is yet to come. My hurt at Zeph’s betrayal must be nothing compared to what his brother and best friend are processing, and yet they both have their hands on me, on Tulip, comforting us wordlessly.

Mace ducks his head towards me, whispering so only we could hear. “Are you still sure you want to do this, Miss Mistflow?”

“Will you ever stop calling me that?”

He chuckles, the laugh dancing across the curve of my neck. “Never, not as long as you still make that face.”

I force my face to fall blank, releasing a screwed-up expression I didn’t realize I had fallen into. “I am sure, Mace. I know what I’m risking. It’s worth it.” Tulip tenses in her seat but doesn’t interrupt.

Mace pulls his mouth from my ear to look me in the eyes, his brilliant emerald ones flashing with pride and small glimpses of fear. I meet his fierce gaze and hold it there, unwilling to look away. “You are something else, Viola. You amaze me.”

This time, when he kisses me, it’s not of a hungry desperation for me as it was in his office. It is a kiss that

forgives me in advance in case I don't survive, but hopes beyond all hope that I will. My hands feed through his hair and pull him closer to me, deepening the kiss despite our audience.

There was a time in my life when I would have rather died than have someone see me locked in an embrace like this. But I may yet still die today, and I'll be damned if I do it without enjoying him once more.

“Well, there is that distance I asked you to keep from Miss Mistflow in action.”

The words cause us to abruptly part, and through still hazy eyes, I see Mace's unaffected façade drop back in place. He squares his shoulders and stands straighter. I turn to follow his gaze and catch site of Stone exiting one of the many tunnels surrounding the garrison. He doesn't even look down as he steps over Zeph.

Stone's long gray hair is pulled away from his face in a single leather loop, and he's dressed in a floor-length black robe. Under his arm, he clutches an old, worn book. I was so distracted by his interruption of our kiss that I didn't notice the man following behind him. Short and stocky, with an impossibly square jaw and deep brown skin, the man looks like he could break Tulip in half. I can tell she thinks the same thing as she sinks deeper into her chair.

“Morrow, that woman that Mace was entangled with is our vessel,” Stone states, looking at his companion.

Mace sneers. “Viola. Her name is Viola. She is the vessel and a true Winter Seasonale, and you will show her the respect she deserves, Stone.” If I hadn’t been paying close attention, I would have missed the faltering of Stone’s steps at the hostility in Mace’s voice.

For his part, Morrow nods at me, and after a questioning glance at Mace, he reaches to shake my hand. “Morrow, Summer. I owe this one a favor,” he says lowly, jerking his head towards Stone. He lowers his voice and moves his face closer to mine. “Winter, eh? I would love to see some shadows.” Despite the situation of our meeting, Morrow’s warmth and childlike curiosity about my magic warms me a bit.

Darting my eyes around like it’s a secret, I motion for Morrow to move closer. “Ready?” He nods in excitement. Over the past few days, I’ve grown more comfortable with my magic, especially shadows. It’s not perfect, but since no one has seen Winter magic in their lifetimes, it’s easy to be impressive. I may as well show it off a little.

Never breaking eye contact with Morrow, I call out for Shadow, and the snake uncoils from my arm and slides across Morrow’s shoulders. The man’s shrieks fill the garrison, and everyone save Stone laughs loudly at his expense. A quick flick of Shadow’s tongue towards his ear has Morrow swatting the snake.

“What the hell? Snake magic? I’ve never heard of that!” Shadow slips from Morrow’s shoulders and swirls around my

arm, flicking his tongue towards Morrow again.

“Not snake magic. He’s a shadow. Just somehow, he’s also a familiar and a pet. I’m not sure. Meet Shadow.”

Morrow shakes his head, the initial rush of adrenaline giving way to bemused wonder. “This is incredible. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

As he reaches to touch Shadow, Stone interrupts the moment. “Yes, yes, very impressive. It’s time. We must begin the ritual before the moon loses position. It is time to bring back our Gods.” Shadow hisses towards Stone and slides around my arm in his favorite position.

Everyone is rooted to their spots, waiting for me to affirm a decision I’ve made many times now. I rise to my feet and head to the ritual space, climbing up on the stage and standing in front of the bowl I have deduced is meant to hold my blood.

Looking out at the group that has gathered for this, one of them unwillingly, I marvel at the power within these walls. If I am to survive the resurrection of a God, it will be with their assistance.

Mace falls behind the podium representing Avidor, resting his elbows atop it, steepling his fingers as he always does, green eyes fixed firmly on me. I cannot decipher what is behind those eyes. From this angle, he looks more like the Mace Nightroot of the Race’s opening ceremonies than the Mace who spoke to me from between my thighs.

The memory of his warm breath sends a shiver down my spine. I hope I survive just to experience that again.

Plume, her soft, beautiful face stricken with fear and worry, stands beside Mace at the Bloomtide's podium. Once she settles her hands onto the top, she looks at me with hope and reverence one normally reserves for their Gods. This woman denied her best friend because she believes in me so much, and I hope beyond all hope I do not let her down.

Morrow, a stranger to me, joins the group at Solarius' podium. He looks neither excited nor scared about the situation as he picks at his fingernails. It makes me wonder how much he knows of what is happening here. "Morrow, you know why we're here, right?"

He nods tightly, gripping the edges of the podium. "Aye, bringing back a God."

"You know this will probably kill me, right?"

He shakes his head with a laugh, the braids in his dark black hair cascading over his shoulders and down his back. "You won't die, girl."

I groan as I hear Tulip's chair scrape, knowing what will come out of her mouth. "She's not a girl! She's a woman!"

Morrow swings his head towards her voice, eyebrows raised like he's just spotted Tulip for the first time. Her face heats at the attention. "She is a woman, you're right. Apologies, Viola." He looks at me with a half nod, which I return before he fixes his gaze on Tulip again. "And so are you."

I do not know how he managed to make those four simple words sound so sensual, but Tulip's knees start to buckle as she lowers herself back to her chair.

Morrow turns back to face me with a pleased grin on his face. Mace catches my eye, and I stifle a laugh at the expression on his face at the exchange.

Stone stomps between the podiums and myself, his face schooled in anger. "You're all too distracted! We need to begin. It's time to set our intentions."

"And what are our intentions?" I asked, confused at the formality of the spell. Until now, I've mainly just considered what I wanted and gotten it. Stone looks at me like I am nothing more than a nuisance. Before he can speak, Mace steps in.

"The ritual is deceptively simple to initiate, but the complexity is in its completion. Plume, Morrow, and I will set intentions to empower you to bring back Himureal. You will need to open your mind to spotting the intentions of our magic flowing towards you. Gather them, consume them,"

"Consume? Like... eat? You want me to eat your magic?" I interrupt.

Mace chuckles while Stone looks on in annoyance. "Yes, actually. You gather all the intentions and pour them into your body to merge with yours. From there, once our intentions are a part of yours, you will use that dagger to cut yourself, pouring your blood into the bowl."

I wrinkle my nose. “That does sound too simple.”

He shrugs. “For our part, it is. You, on the other hand, have to hold the magic of three Seasonale inside of you, combining it with your own. It can be difficult to maintain hold of all that magic for enough time to combine all of it. Our hardest part was finding you.”

I look to Stone. “And where do you come in in all of this?” He fixes me with an angry glare.

“I am the one who translated the texts and orchestrated your entire being, *girl*. I am here only to welcome one of my Gods with open arms. Now enough. I will not wait a moment longer. It’s time to begin.”

I look down at the altar, where the stone basin sits with the ornamental obsidian blade. Reaching into my pocket with my Shadow-free arm, I pull out the tiny stone with the flourished M that my father carried my entire life. “Hey, Dad, if you’re out there, I hope I’m doing the right thing. I hope you’d be proud of me,” I whisper as I set the stone next to the blade.

A slight buzzing fills the air, almost imperceptible but raising the hairs on my neck. It’s quieter than the buzz from the Bliksem lights but no less insistent, itching my skin and pulling my attention. When I raise my head to look for the source of the noise, I am shocked at the most beautiful sight I’ve ever laid my eyes on.

Floating before me, growing more numerous by the moment, are shining petals of green magic, bright white flickers of light that flash like lightning bugs, and crumbling, delicate flecks of

brown that could only be Mace's magic of decay. Each fae in front of me chose their strongest magic to send to me for protection and strength.

I understand that I am supposed to gather and consume all this magic, so I will the particles toward me, swooping them into my hands. I start to raise my hands to my mouth, but my body is screaming at me to drop the magic from my palms. It is impossible to fight the sensation of wrongness as the magic is in my hands, so I toss them up, scattering the magic into the air around me.

Almost without effort, I call forward my own magic, and for the first time since I came here, I fully believe that I have it within me. All around me, I see inky black specks, drops of crimson, and flakes of blue fill the cavern of the garrison. My magic swirls together, collecting the petals of Spring, the light of Summer, and the decay of Autumn into a shimmering vortex above me.

Stone appears to be saying something, face angry at my departure from the planned ritual, but I cannot hear him. It is as if I am underwater, focused solely on the magic settling in front of me. I cannot look away from the beautiful blend of magic, my own taking up as much space as the other three combined.

The vortex spins down from the ceiling, swirling over the basin. It hovers in front of me like a specter, a physical manifestation of the destiny I have been fighting since I arrived here. I long to reach out and touch it, to bask in its

warmth, but just as I knew not to consume the spell particles, I know that grabbing it is not what the magic needs. Shadow slips from my arm to the dagger next to the basin, and I reach to grab it. The familiar seems hesitant but allows me to take it into my hand. He climbs back up my arm and wraps himself around my head, tangling in my hair and anointing me like a crown.

Before I can rethink what I'm doing, I drag the pointed blade down the sensitive underside of my arm. Rivers of blood immediately pool in the basin beneath me. For the briefest moment, my eyes are transfixed, the flow of blood much greater than I expected. My skin gapes open, a waterfall of my life dripping down my flesh.

The moment the blood hits the bottom of the stone bowl, the magic vortex drops, colors and light and dark that disappear into the blood in a blend of my life force and magic intended to bring forth a God.

As the blood pours from my arm, my eyes stay transfixed on my wound, wondering how Link felt in this moment, and if I will know when I have lost too much. From my peripheral, I can see the blood churning, a whirlpool of life splashing on the edges of the bowl. My own stubbornness and fear stop me from looking at my friends for what may be the last time.

I cannot bear to see the grief and anxiety I know laces Tulip's face, and I will lose my nerve if I see the admiration and care in Mace's eyes that is no doubt waiting for me.

The blood and magic continue to swirl in the bowl of their own accord, churning like an ocean during a storm and picking up speed every moment. The blood keeps falling from my arm, and the edges of my vision begin to grow black. I suddenly feel too hot, my head spinning and my skin flushing deeply. Nausea overtakes me, and I crash to my knees. I angle my arm to rest over the basin, not wanting a drop of my blood to spill outside of the ritual. If I am going to die, I need to make this worth it.

Hands are on me, soft, gentle, pulling me away from the basin. I try to fight, but there is none left in me, and I am dragged away and laid atop someone's knees. Feminine fingers wrap around my arm, and my skin begins to stitch before my eyes, my skin cooling and my vision slowly returning. I look up to see Plume holding me steady, healing me. "But the ritual. It needs more blood. Himureal isn't here." My voice is weak, timid, and broken.

"You gave enough. You've done enough."

We both look towards the basin where the blood and magic no longer thrash in a tempest but instead, part for the figure slowly rising from its depths.

Chapter 53

Viola

The figure in front of me is not what I expected when I pictured Himureal. Instead of a fearsome old man with white hair and a beard and ice dripping from his clothing, there stands a devastatingly beautiful man clothed only in my blood. He's built well, with strong arms that are crossed over his chest. His mouth is turned up in the self-assured smirk of a God among men.

Plume has not released her healing hold on me, but from my vantage point on the ground, I see Himureal lick my blood from his fingertips. He swings his head in survey of the space, Morrow and Mace with eyes downcast to avoid his gaze. Stone drops to his knees as he looks up at the figure.

“My Lord, I can hardly believe it. We did it. We brought you back.”

The God gives Stone a look of pure confusion. “You're the vessel?” he asks quietly. His voice rumbles into my core, an avalanche of power awakening my own. While I do not feel

fully healed, something in his magic is soothing the ache left within me.

“Oh no, my Lord, I am not the vessel. I merely procured the vessel.” Stone gestures towards me with a flap of his hand, and Plume tightens her grip on my shoulders.

Himureal raises his hand to his mouth and licks more of my blood from the back of it. “I didn’t think so. This blood is female.” He steps out of the basin, and as his foot hits the ground, ice erupts up from the point of impact and swirls around him. As quickly as it rose, it’s gone, and a clean and dressed Himureal appears with his eyes trained on me.

Without the blood, I can see his otherworldly bright eyes, the clear blue of a frozen lake. His hair, stark white and glimmering, falls to the middle of his back in beautiful waves. He looks carved, with features that are as sharp as they are breathtaking. His tall, lean body is wrapped in a smokey gray shirt and black pants. If I didn’t know I was looking at a God, I would think I just happened upon an especially beautiful fae man.

“You, vessel, what’s your name?”

I open and close my mouth a few times, unable to make sounds leave. When I finally work up the nerve to answer, Stone cuts me off. “She is no one, my Lord. She’s a human. We did not intend for her to survive the ritual.”

Pure fury flashes over Himureal’s face, and he grabs Stone by the collar with an unnatural quickness. “You intended to

kill my vessel?" Confusion colors Stone's face, and I sneak a glance at Mace to see an equal expression.

"My Lord, the texts say the vessel must give all their lifeblood to ensure your return."

The snarl that rips out of the God's throat elicits a startled yelp out of Tulip from the other side of the room. "Do not dare attempt to tell me what the texts say. Who do you believe wrote the texts?" He spits the last word out and throws Stone to the ground, where the Bliksem scrambles back.

Himureal turns to me, eyes locked in my own for the briefest of moments. "I spent entirely too long in that realm waiting for this moment. You were never supposed to drain your vessels." He snarls and swings his gaze directly to Stone. "The texts say that a vessel is made by a willing sacrifice of power from an equal." Mace rakes his hands through his hair, the strands landing at odd angles. The slump of his shoulders silently indicates his realization that he got everything wrong from the beginning.

"Your equal? That is not how we read the texts, there must be some mistake. My Lord, she is not your equal. She is but a human gir-" Stone's thought is cut short by a shard of ice impaling his throat. He looks stricken for a moment, and then he falls, blood pooling behind him. It is not long before he stops moving.

Tulip gasps and buries her face in her hands, fear of the violent God in front of us shaking her shoulders. Plume's fingers are digging deep into my arms, protective of me in the

face of Stone's murderer. Mace holds back angry tears at the loss of a father figure, and Morrow slips backward, silently hiding himself in shadows against the wall. Himureal either doesn't notice or pretends not to see the reaction to his brutal murder of Stone.

No love is lost between Stone and me, and if Himureal hadn't taken care of him, he would've fallen at my blade for his transgressions. That doesn't mean I wanted Mace to witness it.

The scent of Stone's blood reaches me, and my body feels lighter, like I am drifting in the wind. I stumble to my feet, roughly pushing Plume off me, and take a tentative step toward the body. Shadow slithers down from my head to wrap around my forearm possessively as I move.

The stain of the blood stretches below Stone, a map of his wrongdoings begging to be read by me. I take another step, the magic within me pushing for more, lighting up my veins with desire.

If I could just get closer, I could find out what is there, calling for me, pleading for me to take it.

Before I can get to Stone, a firm, cold hand grabs me by the back of my neck like a mother cat. I turn my head slowly to look directly into the eyes of Himureal. This close, I can smell his clean scent, like a wooded forest covered in snow. "Your name."

His words are a command, not a question, and my body betrays me with the desire to answer. Just two words from him

have left me slack in his hands. Or maybe it's the blood. I turn my hooded eyes back to it, the stories it holds calling to me. "Your name, child, then I can help with the bloodlust."

I wrinkle my nose at his words, momentarily snapped from the spell that Stone's blood cast on me. My voice is shaky and breathy when I speak. "Bloodlust?"

He sighs, spinning me to face him directly with his hands on my shoulders. "Yes, bloodlust. Since your world has been without me for so long, your powers will amplify now that I am here and can push more magic into the land. Your blood magic seems to have gotten the largest boost. Now. What is your name?"

His grip on me doesn't feel kind, but his tone and face do. I do not possess enough logical thought at this moment to dissect that duality. "Viola Mistflow. That's my name."

He drops his hands from my arms and nods. "Viola Mistflow. Your blood magic can be hard to control when fresh and young. You can try to ignore it and leave the room, or you can embrace it." He kneels to Stone's corpse and drags his finger through the pooled blood.

"Embracing it means you will unlock the mystery that blood means to tell you. Living blood and the blood of the recently deceased tell different stories, as does the blood of the long gone." He's in front of me now, holding the finger coated in Stone's blood out to me. "What will it be, Viola?" He murmurs, face close to mine.

Instinctively, I lean towards him, towards the blood whose smell burns my nostrils and spins my head with questions.

“Tongue.” His voice is soft, but the command is obvious. I stick out my tongue with no thought. He places his finger on the soft flesh, and when he does, the world around me surges, and I lose my footing. I crash to the ground, dazed, as a vision falls over me, the story of the death of Mace and Zeph’s parents and Stone’s role in it playing out in front of me.

In a blink, Mace is in front of me, pulling me to my feet.

Mace. How can I ever tell you what I just saw?

Himureal looks to Mace disapprovingly. “Who are you?” He scans the garrison as if noticing we are not alone for the first time.

“Mace Nightrout. I’m head of the Patricians. And Viola is...” He looks at me. My disoriented expression does not help Mace find the words to describe whatever is between us. “I am responsible for Viola.”

His words snap me out of my stupor, and I swing my head to him incredulously. “Responsible for me? I’m responsible for myself, Mace. I thought you’d realize that by now.” I spin to Himureal and school my face with a disinterested affect, wanting to hide from the God just how much Mace now means to me. “We’ve slept together and haven’t thought much past that.” The shocked gasp that tumbles out of Tulip’s mouth is almost worth the terrifying look of anger on the God’s face.

“Your presence is not needed, Autumn.” I give Mace an encouraging nod, urging him to step aside. “Viola, tell me about your arm.” I look down at Shadow, still coiled tightly around my forearm. He picks his head up and fixes his gaze directly on the God.

“That’s Shadow. He started as a shadow, then a shadow-snake, and now he’s just a snake.” Shadow flicks his tongue at me in annoyance at my assertion that he is just a snake. “Sorry, not just a snake. He’s my familiar.”

Himureal curls two fingers towards Shadow, beckoning him to his own arm. Shadow hisses and twists tighter around me.

The Frostweaver laughs, the mirthful sound echoing in the cavern. “You made yourself a familiar from shadows. His magic is more yours than mine. No wonder you are the equal that brought me back.”

He stalks at me, reaching for my hand. “Come, Shadowweaver, we have lots to do. This world needs Gods, and we can give it to them.”

I stare at his extended hand with fingers so white his nailbeds are blue, and confusion twists in my gut. Everything about this God is deceptively beautiful, from his looks to his voice and vicious magic. “What of the other gods? The Radiant Sunfire, the Bloomtide, the Harvest Lord?”

Himureal sneers. “We do not need them. Together, you and I can ensure they are locked away forever.”

Backstepping, I nearly trip into Mace. He must not have retreated when Himureal demanded it of him. “We did this so you could bring those Gods back and put the world back to how it should be. That’s the only reason why I was a willing sacrifice.” His eyes flick to Mace’s hands on my arms, their steady presence empowering me.

Memories of childhood stories about Himureal rise to the surface, horror tales of a monster of a God with no regard for life. It’s incongruent with the beautiful man standing before me, looking decidedly more God than monster.

“I will not share my rule with those unworthy beings. Now take your hands off the Shadowweaver, Autumn. I am responsible for her now.”

Chapter 54

Mace

My grip tightens on Viola, and I feel her tense against me. I want to lean down and whisper in her ear not to antagonize a God, but if I have learned anything about Viola, it is that telling her to do anything would be pointless, especially when it comes to this.

“Once again, I am no one’s responsibility but my own. I appreciate the offer, Himureal, but I have no desire to be your assistant.” It’s hard not to wince in anticipation of the backlash from her words.

Himureal was said to be a brutal force when the Gods were all still present within Krillium. The one record we have from his high priest paints the picture of a God who would stop at nothing to get what he wanted and who had no problem tricking unsuspecting people into deals that heavily favored him. He was not my first choice of God to bring back, but Stone was adamant.

And look where it got him.

I have no time to grieve the man who stepped in to raise me after the accident that took my parents' lives because that man left me with a megalomaniac God who wants to ensure no other God can return to deal with.

The God of Winter fixes Viola with a rigid stare, his expression unreadable. "My assistant?" he drawls, taking a slow, lazy step toward where we stand. His sharp features are fixed in a smirk, and his bright eyes do not break from their perusal of Viola. "I am not looking for an assistant, Shadowweaver. You are the daughter of Winter, created in my image. Do not debase yourself by thinking you arrived where you are now by anything but divine intervention."

For decades, I have been told that Stone had to kill the Race winners because they showed Winter magic, and it would need to be concentrated for a vessel to form. Knowing Himureal would return and fix our world is the only thing that allowed me to sleep at night.

With Himureal standing in front of me, I begin to doubt that it was necessary more than I ever have before. As eager as I am to beg for the answers to all my questions, my trust in this God is quite thin, and I doubt the motives of anything he says at this point.

What have I done? Was all the death and destruction for naught? Himureal has no desire to bring back the other Gods, effectively choking off all magic but his own. I spent the past forty years working towards this, and now I wonder if I have doomed us all.

Viola slides out of my hands and steps toward the towering God, looking up at him without fear. I have grown to admire her resolve and bravery, but sometimes, I wonder if she could do with a healthy dose of fear when faced with an adversary.

“I want to make sure I understand what you’re saying, Frostweaver,” she begins, hand resting lightly on her hip. “You’re saying that I am your daughter and you, wherever you were, orchestrated my life to get me here in front of you?”

Frustration laces his face, not unlike when Viola wouldn’t tell him her name. “Not born from my body, no. But you were born of my magic.”

Stepping back from them, I move to Plume’s side, touching her shoulder with mine. We share a look. This God is nothing like what either of us thought he would be, and chances are neither are the other three.

Viola’s hands tap a rhythm on her thighs, and my eyes track it as she speaks. “Aren’t all Winter fae born of your magic?”

He chuckles, a gentle sound so inconsonant with the fierce image he portrays. He taps his fingers together, long, sharp nails clicking loudly. “No, Shadowweaver, they are not. They were able to utilize my magic, but you, as you now are, were created by it.”

Her body stiffens, the shock of what he said freezing her tapping fingers. “Explain.”

Himureal rolls his eyes, frustrated with the exchange, but speaks anyway. “Humans may have banished us, but they also

created a door for us to return through. The other Gods and I planted seeds throughout the land to speed our return. One was placed with each of the four families, an insurance that they could bring us back if they regretted their decision. Over time, the families carrying the seeds expanded, and the seeds must have gotten lost, but I knew someone worthy would eventually find mine. And so, you did.” Viola’s nose crinkles, and she looks at me as if I have the answers for her. Unfortunately, I am as lost as she is at this point.

“What seeds?” she asks tentatively. “I never found any seeds.”

He closes the distance between them and touches a stray piece of her hair, then drags his fingers down her cheekbones, lingering a touch too long. Anger blossoms in my chest that he’d touch her so intimately. “Not actual seeds, Shadowweaver. Mine was a Ladder.”

I cannot see her face, but her body language tells me everything I need to know. A rapid step back, hands fisted at her side, legs braced as if she expects an attack.

Viola Mistflow is furious.

“The Witch’s Ladder? That’s what started this?”

The smile that rips across Himureal’s face is devoid of all warmth. “It’s what finished it, my dear. Do you think anyone could have claimed it and made themselves into what you are? The magic you naturally had in your veins sang to the Ladder and made it respond to you. Did it not speak to you, guide you? It recognized my magic within you. I could feel, even

locked away, the moment you touched it. The moment you released the first spell awoke a long sleeping part of me. You have always had Winter magic within you – the Ladder just enhanced it to what was inevitable. You were meant to be by my side.”

Her shoulders droop, and she stumbles back, but my hands are there, quickly grabbing her and steadying her against my chest. “It’s really all my fault. Max wouldn’t have died if I hadn’t stolen the Ladder. It made me powerful. I killed her.” Her words are a soft mumble, spoken just for her but overheard by me.

“Even if the magic wasn’t already in you, she still would have died without the Ladder, Viola. It would’ve been during the Wendigo attack, but it still would have happened,” I whisper in her ear, hand closing over her tapping fingers.

“As much as I wish to disagree with the Autumn,” he sneers, “he is correct. Everything that happened was meant to happen. And now, daughter, you will join me. We will assume our proper places at the head of this world, and Winter will become the only magic this land possesses.”

Chapter 55

Viola

“I am not going anywhere with you, Himureal.”

The words come out before I can barely even blink, but they still ring true. “I have no desire to rid this world of its magic or its Gods.”

He rushes me, snarling in my face, the beauty he possessed transforming into a savage anger at my denial. I push back against an unyielding Mace, an ever-present steadying force at my back.

“You will help me, daughter, because your magic is mine. You will not be able to resist me. You will submit to me, and I will rule this land with you by my side.” Himureal grips the front of my shirt, fingers tight in the fabric. This close, I can feel his cool breath across my face and see the shadows swirling in his eyes.

The more upset he gets, the wilder he becomes, showing that all our mothers were right about the horrors of Himureal.

I grab his hand and wrench it from my shirt. He lets me. “I am tired of being told what to do. I am tired of men trying to make my decisions for me. I want to settle down and just exist for once in my fucking life. I owe that to Max. I’m not fighting your battles for you.”

He moves to snatch me from Mace’s arms when bright white light floods the space, blinding all of us momentarily. As the light fades, I spot Morrow, silent until now, bright lights floating off him. Before I can blink, thick green vines covered in flower buds wrap around Himureal’s arm, holding it down and allowing me to slip from beneath his grasp. I take a breath, and the vines surrounding the God begin to wither with decay, leeching magic out of the God.

Morrow sends flames licking up the legs of Himureal, but they’re quickly doused with water. He fights against the vines, the skin touched by them morphing from stark white to a sickly green. I see flecks of gray flying around Mace, and a boulder lands on Himureal’s feet, a roar leaving his mouth. Shadows whip around the God, reaching to grab us and hold us back. My shadows rush to meet his, tangling in an almost even match that I can only hope buys us enough time.

“Run, Viola!” Plume shouts, heading for the exit of the garrison with Morrow. Plume grabs Tulip’s arm as she darts by, wrenching her from her seat and leading the two down the hall to the elevator, where this all began.

Himureal bucks against the vines, but I can see light dimming in his eyes as the decay seeps into him. “I’ve got

some of his magic decaying, Viola, but we have to move fast!” Mace shouts, grabbing me by the arm. A loud roar escapes Himureal as he fights from the vines. Ice creeps around his feet, rushing to freeze me to the spot.

“I will not let you leave here, Shadowweaver! You belong to me!”

“I belong to myself, and it’s time everyone fucking learns that.” I summon a large shard of ice to pin the vines holding Himureal to the floor and cast the room into a blanket of shadows.

I hear the vines creaking and falling to the floor under his strength and worry that it will not be enough to allow us to escape him, but still, I run towards the tunnel with the others.

Plume skids to a stop. “Wait. I have an idea.”

She runs back towards the garrison despite all our protests, and I see purple flecks of magic swirling off her as she runs. She reaches the head of the tunnel, and I hear a scream reverberate through the room, panicked and pained.

“How could you!” Stone’s voice bellows. “I brought you back! It was my planning...”

“Morrow, shield the entrance!” she shouts as she runs back to us. He steps forward, and orange magic swirls before us, bracing and shielding the tunnel entrance.

Stone’s angry words fade as we run.

The five of us slam ourselves into the elevator, rising to the surface of the Summit. We stumble out into the fresh air and

turn to face the entry latch, blown open by ice from Himureal's Witch's Ladder such a short time ago.

Together, we push the door back over the hole, and Morrow calls upon flames to melt the metals together. Plume builds vines around the surface. I watch as Mace calls forth ore, encasing the entire mountain face with a layer of metal.

With the door heavily blocked, I stare at the team of four who just pulled me from the grasp of a clearly wrathful God. My eyes land on Morrow, a complete stranger who just risked everything. "Morrow, I can't thank..."

He waves me off with a grunt. "I couldn't just let him take you, could I?" I bump my shoulder into his, nodding towards Tulip as he turns and fixes his eyes on her.

She's oblivious to the look he's giving her, but I see it.

"You resurrected Stone?" I hear Mace ask Plume incredulously.

I spin to see that she turns green at the question. "I feel awful, I do. No doubt Himureal kills him again before the spell is up. But I just thought the distraction..."

I put a hand on her shoulder. "It was a great distraction. Thanks, Plume."

Mace agrees, looking at all of us. "Himureal must not have been at full strength since he just returned to this plane. We will not be so lucky next time. But that was excellent work and quick thinking on all your parts."

Tulip, shaken and with bruises forming from her capture, slides to me, grabbing my hand to tearfully say, “Looks like we’re back where we started.” Max’s presence weighs heavily here, the grief we both felt last time we stood on this rock overwhelming our senses.

Mace moves to me and leans to place a chaste kiss on my lips, bringing me out of the spiral of grief that threatened to bury me. The images I saw in Stone’s blood push to the surface, and when I look at his beautiful face, I ache at what I am hiding from him.

Plume wipes her hands clean on her pants and looks out towards Dalery. “It won’t hold him long. We’ve got to move.” Morrow leans against the rock of the Summit and mutters to himself about the trouble he’s gotten himself into, eliciting a nervous chuckle from the rest of us.

I turn to look out over the Lowlands, my home, and reach my free hand to Mace, entwining our fingers to ground me in his fortitude.

“It looks like a normal life will have to wait. We have a God to stop.”

Epilogue

Zeph

My body is one giant bruise as I finally free myself from the vines and chains binding me. I had to wait for the decay to wear off and my magic to return to finally melt the ties that bound me. When my eyes adjust, and I realize no one is in the tunnel with me, I slowly rise to my feet to get out of the Gods-forsaken garrison.

Viola made her choice very clear, and so apparently did my best friend and brother. My ill-advised attempt to force her hand has left me with nothing but shame to show for it. The anger at my situation grows within me like a disease, rapidly expanding to fill every part of me.

When I exit the tunnel they stashed me in, my eyes are drawn to a tall and imposing man. He leans over the table in the middle of the garrison, frustration evident in the aggressive way he flips the pages of a book in front of him. The man hears me and turns his gaze on me, eyes ice blue and hair long

and white. He's beautiful and other-worldly - as if he fell into Krillium accidentally.

He barely looks at me when he speaks. "Who are you, then?"

His voice is rough, as if he lost something but cannot grieve. "Zeph Nightroot," I answer warily, taking a few hesitant steps toward him.

"Nightroot? Any relation to Mace?"

I bite back a snarl at his name. "My brother, though not for long if I have any say over it." The mention of his name brings back memories of it falling from Viola's lips in passion, a sound I won't soon forget.

That gets his attention, and he rises to full height, towering over me. He is formidable, his presence overwhelming in all manners. "Well, Mace has something that belongs to me that I would like back. I believe you know her as Viola."

Her name, from another man's mouth, tightens a vice grip on my heart. "He stole her from me," I say, my voice soft with barely restrained rage.

"From you?" the man questions, leaning against the table and crossing his arms.

"She is my destiny. I'm a Summer, she's a Winter. We balance each other. I was meant to have her; I just know it. I have known it since I first saw her. But instead, he ensnared her. I'm not above saying that I think he may have used some of his influence. That is the only way she would have chosen him over me."

As I speak, the man tilts his head curiously, appraising me.
“What would you do to get her back?”

I don't even have to think. “There is nothing I wouldn't do to have her.” A sinister grin splits his face, and he moves closer to me, extending his hand.

“I believe we can help each other. You may address me as Himureal.”

Acknowledgements

I'm not sure why but writing this feels more difficult than writing the book. The Last Winter is the result of a lifelong dream of writing a book, so it is only fitting that the concept of it came to me in a dream. Once I wrote it down, I sat on it for almost two years before I worked up the courage to actually write it down. But man, am I so glad I did. This has been an incredible journey for me and something I wasn't sure I could ever do.

Carlos, I don't care if you never read the book. I know you'll read this page. Thank you for your love, support, and patience as I wrote this book. You read more passages and listened to me talk through ideas with so much more patience than I ever could have asked for – easily equivalent to the 100,000+ words in this book. You are the love of my life, and my best friend, and the support you have provided me is invaluable. Thank you so much for believing in me, and for listening to those first rough 3000 words in the car on the way to

Savannah. I would not have had the courage to go through with this if it weren't for you.

To my parents, I kind of hope you didn't make it this far because I am sure chapter 47 was a little uncomfortable for you to read (please don't talk to me about it I'll die). I have a memory of a house Dad was looking at flipping or something (I must've been like eight years old) and sitting in a room and scribbling a story out on a notebook. And maybe I've made this next part up, but I remember Dad bringing the book to Mom and both of you whispering about how I wrote a story, and it was good. So even if that didn't happen, let me pretend it did because I thought of that a lot while writing this book. I am so grateful that you two consistently encouraged my creative side and always knew I would be able to do this.

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About the Author

Holly Monroe lives in Florida with her two kids, two dogs, and the world's loudest cat. Holly was always the kid in school with a notebook that scribbled story ideas down to save for later, and her favorite class was English and literature because she could fall into another world. She comes from a long line of strong women, both of blood and bond, and aims to write characters those women would be proud of.

When not writing or obsessively reading, Holly can be found playing video games with her husband, singing and dancing badly and loudly with her children, and trying to avoid endless piles of laundry.

Before You Go!

If you enjoyed this book, please review it on Goodreads and Amazon and your social media pages. Please follow me on my socials, @authorhollymonroe, and sign up for my mailing list to get updates on Book 2 of The Shadowweaver Trilogy.

Sign up [HERE](#) for a special bonus scene from Part One from Mace's Perspective!

This isn't the last you've seen of Viola, Mace, Tulip, and Zeph! Join them as they return to Krillium Q2 of 2024.