

*A Fated Mates omegaverse Reverse Harem Epic Fantasy Romance*



**UNLIKELY  
BONDS**

*Hunted Fae 3*

**MONA BLACK**

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A FATED MATES OMEGAVERSE REVERSE  
HAREM EPIC FANTASY ROMANCE

HUNTED FAE 3

MONA BLACK

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## UNLIKELY BONDS

**As a Fae-blooded omega, I am on the run from the Empire.  
All Fae-bloods are hunted, omegas, alphas, betas, deltas.  
And on top of that, I'm about to go into heat...**

My timing sucks.

Bringing back the lost Fae race isn't my priority, though, no matter what the Empire thinks. Collecting all my fated mates before my heat hits, that's much higher on my list.

Going into heat without my entire clan can be dangerous for me. And for them.

And the stakes only get higher. As more of my mates join our group, as we are brought together through scent-matching and physical attraction, I find myself falling for them.

Who wouldn't? They are gorgeous, they are hot, and underneath their gruff facades, they have hearts of gold.

I'm the luckiest omega.

Do they feel the same way? Do they want all of me or is it only instinct that drives them?

We need time to get to know each other, but the Empire won't let up. They won't stop chasing us.

As we race toward the border, hoping to outrun the army, we don't know if we'll make it before we run out of time.

Or before my heat takes us down.

\*UNLIKELY BONDS is a full-length epic fantasy reverse harem omegaverse romance, meaning the main character has more than one love interest. This is book three of four, and it ends on a cliffhanger. There is a happily ever after at the end of the series. All four books have already been written.

In this series, the heroine will assemble her harem throughout the first three books. It contains some love-hate adult themes, foul language and explicit content with darker elements, as well as MM relationships. For 18+ only.

This book uses alternating points of view.\*

**Trigger warnings:** abandonment by parent, slavery, reference to violence and genocide, betrayal of friend, race discrimination, prejudice, some physical abuse, mention of death (outside the harem).

**What to expect in this series:**

Omega awakening

FMC collects her men throughout the series

Fated mates

Scenting, marking, knotting, heats and ruts

MM relationships

Blind alpha in harem

Grumpy/sunshine

Men fall for her (almost) immediately

Multi POV

Epic fantasy setting

Unlikely Bonds (Hunted Fae 3)

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## ARIADNE

**E** remis. The great city on the river Ekelon, the lesser, Summer Capital of the Anchar Empire, fortified with thick walls, gleaming spires and turrets crowning it.

It's early afternoon and after doggedly pressing on all night, we've made it to its grand gate.

The Serpent Gate.

We're standing in front of the walls now, astride our exhausted horses, contemplating the long line of people waiting to get inside.

Inside, where Finnen is kept imprisoned and waiting to be executed.

Unless we break him out.

"How are we planning on doing this, then?" I ask, pulling on the reins. My mare has smelled people and other horses and obviously to her that means home, so she's anxious to enter the city.

To me, it's my men that smell like home, and one scent is currently missing, making me feel antsy and sad.

Finnen's.

I'm collecting scents like I'm collecting cushions and mantles for my nest, I think as we slowly advance.

"If they don't move their asses," Taj says, "the drawbridge will be lifted and the gates will close for the night before we get inside."

"So what should we do?" My jaw hurts. I've been gritting my teeth all day.

"There's always a back door to any city," Taj mutters. His cheekbones are flushed from the cold, his dark hair windswept. He sits on the saddle with the ease of a seasoned rider. He grew up in the army, and probably spent more time in the saddle than on foot.

In contrast, our Wildman, Kiaran, looks mightily uncomfortable on his jumpy stallion—thought, to be fair, he has taken to riding like a fish to water. He has pulled his pale locks back from his face, tying it with a leather strap at his nape, and his blue eyes glitter.

I have this theory that he was taught riding before he was abandoned by his family in the woods due to his Fae-blood.

I have many theories.

What is for certain is that all of us were abandoned as children in one way or another. Kiaran was left in the woods to die, Finnen and I were sent to the Temple, and as for Taj, he somehow ended up with the army. How did he decide to join the ranks?

I need to ask him sometime.

After we have rescued Finnen.

Caught between a rock and a hard place—between running for our lives and riding the hard waves of desire brought on by the first stirrings of my omega heat—we never had time to sit down in peace and talk, get to know each other properly. It's funny and strange, but I think I know more about my men's bodies than their minds, although I love them.

I do love them all. All three of them so far. Each one is so different but they are all kind and protective of me and of each other—and they are courageous and self-sacrificing...

And I just wish I hadn't put them in such danger, but their scent has marked them as the perfect fit for me, my fated mates—and myself as the perfect fit for them—and I can't argue with my body or the gods.

Especially since they chose such handsome alphas for me.

A cry rises from the line and the crowd in front of the gate.

"They're closing the gate," I say, dismayed.

"Right. Let's move." Taj turns his horse away from the city walls. "Time to find another way in."

"We smash through it," Kiaran says.

Taj clucks his tongue. "The Wildman way, huh? No, Kia. Last thing we want is to draw attention to ourselves. Maybe what we need to teach you isn't manners but subtlety."

"Fuck you," Kiaran says.

Yeah, still not subtle.

“One day, my man...” Taj chuckles as he leads the way away from the gate, through narrow streets and badly-kept houses with overgrown hedges and goats and stray dogs wandering around. “One day you may get your wish.”

Kiaran looks confused.

I feel my face warm. “So...” I clear my throat. “Where are we going?”

“Back door,” Kiaran says.

“And how do you know there is a back door?” I ask.

“There is always one. Nobody would wall up their city without allowing for escape routes. And the royals and rich always send their servants through the back, not to spoil their perfect entrance. A gate through which the food provisions and the coal will pass, a small gate, barely allowing for a horse dragging a cart to go through.”

“Small gate,” Kiaran repeats, his stallion whinnying, scaring away a couple scrawny dogs who came to sniff at us. “How small?”

“Like I said, just big enough for a cart to pass.”

We trot through the lower city. Unwashed children play on doorsteps with flea-ridden cats, women carry huge baskets on their backs, hunched under the weight. A man is lying in the gutter, clutching a jug of what has to be wine.

“The way to do it,” Taj is saying, “is to stop at an inn and ask our way there. Or if you see a loaded cart heading toward the city. The back gates always remain open longer than the main ones, but I don’t—”

“This way,” Kiaran says, kicking in his heels, his stallion snorting and leaping forward.

Taj curses. “Kia, you wouldn’t know where to find the place if it bit you in the ass.”

“I know where it is,” Kiaran says and urges his stallion into a canter, overtaking us and rushing down the street.

Taj and I arch our brows at each other.

“You do?” Taj calls out. “But how? Wait, have you been here before? Have you—?”

“Follow me,” Kiaran shouts back. “Come!”

“Is he for real?” Taj mutters. “I thought his family lived in that small town. Martus, I think that was its name.”

“But he also knew the name of the main city gate here. The Serpent Gate.”

“In Martus lived the cousins and his aunt and uncle,” Taj says thoughtfully.

“Do you think he could be from around here?”

“It’s possible. He’s never told us much about himself.”

*Neither have you, I think, because it hurts to remember and talk about such things, and that’s in case you even remember it all, but I don’t say any of it.*

“I trust him,” I say, starting after Kiaran. “If he says he knows, then I say we follow his lead.”

“I’d trust him with my life,” Taj says simply and follows me.

---

We chase after Kiaran. His black stallion is a shadow cut from the night, and his pale hair has come loose from the leather tie and is flying behind him, a silver mane. People stop and watch us go by, some of them making the sign of the moon on their foreheads. The sign of the Temple.

Weird how the moon is also the symbol of the southern lands.

We probably look like we're daemon-ridden, the way we gallop through streets made for the quiet treat of donkeys and mules, where people walk freely, not scared to be trodden over by a horse.

"Sorry!" I call out to a mother clutching her child to her, an accusing look on her face. "Make way! We're coming through."

"Kia!" Taj looks pissed. "Dammit, wait for us."

Kiaran doesn't slow down or stop, though, and it's my turn to curse as I push my tired horse after him.

Through the maze of houses and walled gardens we rush and at some point, I'm certain we are helplessly lost, and that Kiaran was confused and is taking us in circles.

Until we take a sharp turn, hooves skidding in mud, to find ourselves right under the walls of the city.

And there is Kiaran on his stallion, looking back at us impatiently.

Standing in front of a small gate.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Taj breathes and a grin breaks over his handsome face. “He did it.”

“He knew,” I whisper, pulling on the reins, “knew where the gate was. He was right.”

“He was.”

“But this can’t be a back gate,” I say. “More like a side door.”

“Any gate that isn’t the main gate is a back gate.” Taj trots over to him and after a moment where I try to gather my wits—how did Kiaran know? What does that mean?—I join them.

Two loaded carts are waiting at the gate, another passing through as I watch, rolling under the worn-out coat of arms of the imperial family, carved in stone on the lintel.

The dragon and the moon.

Yet more symbols taken from the Fae. It never struck me as weird before, how the Temple and the Empire have taken over not only the Fae gods and their temples, their cities and towns, but also their signs and emblems, all that was sacred to the Lost Race.

I also never thought about entering an imperial city, and now I’m more panicky about finding Finnen in time and somehow rescuing him than visiting the wonders of the Lesser Capital of the Empire—but I admit a little thrill snakes down my spine as we line up behind the two carts and slowly roll into the city.

A guard asks about our business here and we tell him the same story, about visiting family. He grumbles that this is the wrong gate for the gentry, and Taj grins and promises to stick to the big gates next time. The guard grumbles some more about people doing anything to avoid lines but waves us in quickly—no doubt wary of insulting the aristocracy, even if they enter from the servants' gate.

And we're inside.

Welcome to the southernmost city of the civilized world.



**ARIADNE**

I nside the gate, the city begins but at first, it looks as much like the small, drab towns we visited on our way here as anything. Narrow streets, tall, ramshackle houses, trash and stray animals and a stench...

The Summer Capital stinks to the high heavens.

The hooves of our horses clop on dirt for a good while before we hit cobblestones, and it takes another long while to reach streets lined with buildings with clean facades and wrought iron gates, squares with small fountains and trees, finally getting a whiff of a different life. Here lamps hang on tall poles, turning the falling night into day, and flowers bloom in pots on paved sidewalks.

We don't discuss the fact that Kiaran is still leading the way, no hesitation in the way he picks our path through narrow or broad streets. There's a tightness around his eyes I've never seen before, though, and it's not anger. I've seen him angry.

No, it looks more like fear.

I don't think I've ever seen Kiaran afraid.

It knots up my stomach even worse, and combined with the ache in my belly, it distracts me enough that I barely notice the patrol riding past us on horses decorated with black and silver straps, and crimson plumes on their heads.

Taj swerves away, and my mare whinnies and stomps her hooves, startling me.

“Make way!” The patrol thunders past, striking sparks from the cobbles, or at least that’s how it looks to me. Their outlines flash in silver in my eyes, making me dizzy. “Make way for the Imperial Patrol!”

“Ari!” Taj grabs the reins of my horse who’s dancing sideways, rolling her eyes in distress. He steadies her. “Calm down, horsey, calm down.”

Kiaran has stopped, sitting rigidly in the saddle, head bowed. Lost in thought. I doubt he’s even noticed the patrol or my mare’s little dramatic performance.

“Kia!” I pat my mare’s neck as she huffs and shakes her great head. “Wait.”

He turns his head slowly, blinks. Such an incongruous sight—his muscular physique and wild pale hair, silver-gold bristles glinting on his face, and behind him, the great city rising toward the gray sky, black and red spires emerging from the gray stone, built to reflect the colors of the Empire. The wilderness, clean-cut and beautiful, braced against the brutal symmetry and cacophony of the civilized world.

Clucking his tongue, he pushes his stallion forward, at a more sedate pace this time.

“He seems... different,” Taj remarks, releasing my mare’s reins and giving his horse its head, letting it amble after Kiaran’s.

“He does.” My mare follows calmly enough now that the patrol has passed, though she shakes her head from time to time. I wonder if the stench bothers her, too. “He’s lost in thought.”

“That’s right. He never seemed to use his head for anything before.” Taj snickers. “This is a new development.”

“Taj.”

“Sorry.”

“No, you’re not.”

“You’re right. You know me well, sweetheart.”

“No, I don’t,” I whisper. “But I want to know you.”

He smiles at me. “We’ll make time for that once Finnen is free.”

I nod. He’s said that before, and I can’t wait, but that reminds me that first we need to get Finnen out of here and the more I see of the city, the more panicky I become.

It seems to spread on forever. In the smaller towns we’ve been, after a while, you reach the end of the main street and the other side. Here, we’ve been riding for what seems like half a day and all I see is more houses and more streets and more squares and more people.

It’s disorienting and confounding.

“Where are you taking us?” I ask after a while. “Kia?”

“To the city center,” he replies.

And the streets keep climbing, a slight slope but a slope nevertheless. We ride up and up, and I keep my mouth shut because this makes sense, right? The jewel of a crown sits on top of it, the gem sits on top of a ring.

As we turn into another wide street, this one so wide it can easily allow four carts to roll side by side, I see it, gray walls rising vertically over the city, black and red turrets spearing the clouds, the banners flying stark and bold against the sky.

The Citadel.

The Castle.

The Emperor’s Summer seat and Finnen’s prison.

---

“What are you doing?” Kiaran growls.

“Stopping you,” Taj says, blocking Kiaran’s way with his gelding. “What does it look like?”

“Why?”

“Because you don’t just march into the citadel, my man.”

“Why not?”

Taj harrumphs. “Oh, for all the gods’ sakes...”

“We need a plan.” I guide my mare beside Kiaran’s stallion. “And don’t forget the military and the Temple are looking for us.”

Kiaran glares at the citadel. “I don’t care.”

“You should.” Taj shoots me an exasperated look.

“You got us inside the city,” I tell Kiaran, trying to catch his gaze. “Kia, are you listening to me? You got us in, and we’re grateful, but now we need to find an inn, let the horses rest and make a plan.”

“I’m not wearing a dress again,” Kiaran grumbles. “It’s uncomfortable.”

I laugh. “Deal.”

“You looked real good in it, you know,” Taj says. “But okay.” He lifts his hands. “Okay, no dress. Wouldn’t know where to find one anyway.”

“Now to find an inn.” I glance around. Carriages are rattling by. A coachman yells at us to clear the way. Two noblewomen seated sideways on their horses are making their slow way up toward the citadel, tall oval hats on their heads, milky veils spread behind them on their horses’ backs. The houses lining the street are shops, I realize—workshops of shoes, clothes, weapons, furniture. I see bakeries and eateries and the entrance to public baths. “Somewhere…”

“I know an inn,” Kiaran mutters, turning his horse around and heading toward one of the side streets. “Follow me.”

“Wait.” I nudge my annoyed mare after him. “Kia!”

“That’s all we’ve been doing,” Taj says from behind me. “Following you. What gives, Kiaran? How do you know the ins and outs of the Summer Capital so well?”

No reply again.

Taj heaves a frustrated sigh, joining me in my pursuit of our Wildman. “Is he going to be like this from now on? Mysterious and all-knowing? That was more Finnen’s style.”

“I wish I knew. It’s like a new side of him. I’m sure now he’s been here before.”

“Oh, yeah. Definitely. He knows his way around. If he really knows an inn around here, I’ll be convinced beyond any shade of a doubt. Question is... why won’t he talk about it?”

“Maybe he only visited the city as a boy? Maybe there’s nothing to talk about.”

Taj doesn’t look convinced.

And neither am I.

---

“We have only one room left,” the innkeeper says, unable to stop staring at us, his small eyes a little wide—probably at the filth caked on our faces and hands and under our fingernails, our rumpled, dusty clothes and unkempt hair.

Here in the Lesser Capital, don’t they get any travelers like us? Do they all arrive perfectly coiffed and dressed to the nines to spend a night at the inn?

“We’ll take it,” Taj says, “and we’ll need—”

“The Round Room,” Kiaran says, stepping forward.

The innkeeper pales. “My... my lord? That’s the room we reserve for the noblesse, for the rare occasions when they visit the inn. That’s the rule and I can’t—”

“I said, the Round Room.” Kiaran’s eyes are blazing, and despite his filthy, travel-worn clothes and wild hair, he looks... regal somehow. “And be quick about it.”

“Right away, my lord,” the innkeeper stammers. “I hadn’t realized you were nobility, please, accept my apologies. Come with me.”

Exchanging puzzled looks behind Kiaran’s back, we follow the innkeeper up the stairs. And then another flight going up in a sort of turret, the steps creaking ominously under our feet.

“I’ll have someone bring up your luggage,” the innkeeper is chattering away, “and look after your horses. You are here for the Crown Prince’s birthday festivities, I assume?”

“Yes,” I say.

“No,” Kiaran mutters.

“It will be magnificent.” The innkeeper doesn’t appear to hear either one of us—thank the gods for small mercies. “Rivers of wine and mead will flow, music will be played in every square, and there will be dancing, singing, and executions!”

“Executions.” I stop still as the innkeeper opens a door with a huge key and bows with a flourish. “When?”

He looks up, startled. “Today, my lady. Tonight.”

“Dammit.” Taj sweeps past the innkeeper and into the room. Kiaran walks in after him, leaving me at the door with the older man.

“Your luggage, my lady? Shall I have it brought up?”

“We don’t have any,” I say shortly, my heart and thoughts racing. “We, uh... we got robbed on the way.”

He pales. “May the gods have mercy. If you wish, I can send for a seamstress right now.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Taj says.

“My lord?” the innkeeper frowns.

“We need to rest. Look to our horses, make sure they are fed and watered.”

“Of course, my lord.” The innkeeper bows deeply. “Will there be anything else?”

“No.”

“Your names...?”

“You don’t know who we are?” Taj huffs, not replying, and I barely suppress a laugh. He does play the role of the arrogant lord well. “Off with you. And send up supper.”

---

A round room. Windows open on every side, overlooking the city, and two enormous beds are set in the middle, behind them a sofa and a table set against the biggest window.

Taj makes a beeline for it and throws it open. “The view.” He whistles. “You can see the entire castle. Is that why you asked for this room?”



Kiaran is quiet. He sits on one of the beds, rubs his hands over his face.

“Come see,” Taj says, and casting a lingering, worried look at our Wildman, I walk over to the window.

It’s practically floor-to-ceiling tall, with a wrought-iron rail right outside as a precaution—and a good thing, too. I recoil when I realize how high up we are.

“Don’t be afraid.” Taj grabs my hand, pulls me to his side and wraps his arms around me. Comforted by his strength and scent, I finally take a look beyond the vertiginous drop below, and there is the castle. We’re high enough that we can see over the wall of the citadel and into the gardens and buildings inside.

The castle is a somber affair, built of the same gray stone that’s so typical of the entire region, cut from the rocky hills where Kiaran used to live, black pillars marking every entrance, red stone used on the crenelations of the roof.

There are more, lower buildings and gardens inside the citadel, including a Temple. I recognize its banners and the statues at the entrance are a dead giveaway.

“Fine, so here we are,” I whisper. “So close. How do we get Finnen out? How do we get inside the dungeons?”

“We can’t,” Kiaran says from behind us.

“Come again?” Taj’s brows draw together.

I pull back from Taj to look at Kiaran. “What are you saying?”

“We can’t go inside the dungeons. Too many guards. Too many soldiers.”

“How would you know any of that?”

He gets up and approaches the open window. “You enter the dungeons from the square towers at the back. Look at the castle yard.”

Inside the castle, there are several yards and each one is dark with something. “Are those *people*?”

“Soldiers,” Kiaran says who obviously has hawk-eye vision.

“Of course,” Taj breathes. “Between the Crown Prince’s birthday and the Emperor’s decrees, the army must be filling the citadel.”

“I don’t...” I shake my head. “It doesn’t matter. We have to go in, get him out of his cell—”

“No,” Kiaran says.

“We’re not abandoning Finnen!” I snap.

He scowls at us. “I didn’t say that.”

“But then what are you...?”

“The only moment we can grab him is when he’s *out* of the dungeons.”

“But that will be—”

“When they take him to be executed.”

“During the festivities,” Taj whispers. “Tonight.”

Kiaran nods. “We will be there, ready.”

“We have to be sure we can do it. We’ll be cutting it close.” I stare out at the castle. “Can we enter early?”

“Thank the Crown Prince and his auspicious festivities,” Taj rumbles. “I bet the castle will be open all day to the crowds. Entering shouldn’t be an issue. Leaving is. We just need to decide how we can cut Finnen loose and make it out of the city alive.”

*Just that...*

**TAJ**

The innkeeper sends up trays with roast meat and chunks of raisin bread, as well as watered wine. He asks if we want to bathe and though I see the longing on Ariadne's face, I send him away.

No time for such luxuries.

Time *is* the luxury right now.

She knows it, too, and turns her mind quickly to other matters. "Which bailey will the executions take place in?"

"Logically the biggest one." I gaze out at the castle while there's still some light left. "That one. The central one."

"Right."

"We will need new horses. Fresh and ready to gallop away. One of us has to stay outside the citadel to keep an eye on them."

"I'm not staying," Ariadne says, "if you thought I would."

"But—"

"Please, don't think I'm being a whiny brat," she says, eyes glinting. She lifts a hand when I open my mouth. "Or that

I wish to throw myself into danger. I do understand that the two of you are better suited to fighting other men, that you have the strength and the experience I lack. I'm not an idiot and don't care about compromising this expedition to save Finnen just to demand I take part."

I almost laugh. Her determination to explain all this is so cute. "You're definitely not an idiot, love, and I know you wouldn't do anything to compromise our mission to save our mate. You're not selfish like that, nor a daredevil. But then I don't see why you want to go."

"I don't know why," she whispers, "but I know I need to be there."

"That's not..." I sigh and rub my face. "Being Fae-blood doesn't give you oracle powers, does it? Just checking. I read about the Fae but it seems a couple of things might have escaped me."

She shakes her head, cheeks coloring. "No. I mean, not that I know of, and it's... not like that."

"Then what is it like? I just wanna know. Understand. Feel me?"

"That's exactly it," she whispers. "A feeling. You know, like when you get a bad feeling about something and you're usually right? It's not a prediction exactly, it's just... clues banging around inside your head, trying to tell you something, but you only get a hint of it, good or bad."

"And your gut feeling is telling you that you need to be there when Finnen comes out?"

“Yes.”

I sigh again. “Then Kia, my friend, you’re gonna need to find the horses and keep an eye on them for us, yeah?”

Kiaran is still at the window, holding on to the rail, staring out.

“Right. You and me, Ari, we get inside with the crowd, approach the gallows as much as we can. When they bring him out...” Dammit, I had counted on having Kiaran’s berserk energy and fighting skills on my side for this. “We wait, until they bring him up on the scaffold, then I take out the guards and you—”

“I know how to fight,” she says tightly.

“What?” Startled, I glance at her.

“I know how to fight. I’ll help you take out the guards.”

“... okay? Where did you learn to fight?”

“I’m an acolyte of Artume. I’ve been training all my life for this.”

“To fight some guards?”

“To fight for my mates,” she says, and for some reason, it makes my fucking throat go tight.

“Of course.” I don’t want to tell her that all the ritual training doesn’t prepare someone to take another person’s life, or even just to grab them, maim them, not to forget that she’s a slight girl. She can’t grapple with a man twice her size.

“Find me a bow and arrow,” she says and I blink.

“...what?” I ask.

*So eloquent, Taj, gods dammit.*

“I have practiced with the bow and arrow, as well as with the sickle blades. Artume’s weapons. If you find me a bow and arrow, I could take the guards out. I’m a mean shot.”

“I’m fucking sure they check everyone for weapons at the gates,” I mutter. “They wouldn’t risk it, not with the Emperor and his family there.”

“I’ll hide them on myself. With all those people entering, nobody will notice. There was a weapons shop on a few streets down,” she says stubbornly. “We should look there.”

“Fine, I...” I resist the urge to run my hands through my hair and tug. Possibly tear it all out. “Let’s say you take out the guards, and I free Finnen, bring him down from the scaffold. Then we have to run through a packed crowd all the way out of the citadel. Fuck...”

I don’t say that’s assuming Finnen can run.

She’s my omega. I don’t want to sadden or stress her any more than this.

She should be in a nest made of furs and silks, ebony and gold and the down of fucking swans, languorously lying there, naked, hair spilling around her, while we pleasure her over and over, satisfying her, filling her belly with our babies and taking care of her.

Not running for her life and planning to kill men in order to save her mates.

*Us. To save us.*

“Let’s eat.” I turn toward the low table, set with the trays.  
“We’ll need our strength for tonight.”

---

*How to storm a castle with three people and a couple of knives.*

It could be the title of a satirical manual about warfare.

Sadly, it’s the situation we’re finding ourselves in right now, and the military man in me cringes at the odds.

We make quick work of the meat and bread, and sip at the wine. We need a clear head and everyone is lost in thought. It makes for a singularly quiet supper.

But then we’re taking one last look at the castle, noting the lit torches marking a long avenue leading to the largest bailey, crossing over the moat, and the crowd of people passing through the open gates, pressing inside, as I had predicted.

I think I can make out the gallows already in place at the center of the bailey, and my breath catches.

Seeing it makes the danger Finnen is in all the more real.

“Time to go,” I mutter, turning to find the door of the room opening, the innkeeper standing there. “What is it?”

“Someone said he saw Fae-bloods entering my inn.” His voice is tight and quiet, his eyes though look angry. “I thought you were lords from the way you talked but... but it’s you, isn’t it? You’re Fae-blooded.”



Behind him I see a soldier looming.

*Oh shit. Fucking shit.* We can't afford this, can't afford to lose more time.

"That's a lie and slander," I call out. "Leave us be."

"Your names," the soldier from behind the innkeeper says. "Who are you?"

I reach for my knives, prepared to make a stand, but Kiaran is already marching to the door. "I'll clear the way," he says. "You go. I'll see you later."

He shoves the innkeeper backward and there's a curse and a clatter. I wonder how many soldiers were standing on the stairs. Another shove, and Kiaran grunts, kicking at them.

Someone screams.

"Come on." I grab Ariadne's hand and we follow Kiaran down the stairs, after the men rolling down the steps. By the time we reach the ground floor, Kiaran is punching and kicking at a group of soldiers.

It feels wrong to skulk behind him, but priorities, dammit.

"We'll free Finnen," Ariadne yells as we go. "You'll see."

"You'd better." Kiaran pulls back, takes a breath and dives headlong back into the fray. "Now go!"

---

We find the weapons store just as its owner appears halfway out the door, about to close up.

“Wait up!” I drag Ariadne along as we run toward him. “I said, wait!”

“I’m going to the celebrations,” he mutters, giving us a dark look. “What might you be wanting at this time?”

“A bow and arrows.” Panting, we arrive in front of him and I prepare to fight him to buy what Ariadne needs.

But she points at something in the small window of the shop. “That bow and the quiver of arrows,” she says.

It’s a small arrow. It looks old, almost as if it was made for a child. I open my mouth to argue with her, but the man’s expression changes.

“Those are the symbols of Artume, the Huntress.” He opens the door wider and gestures us inside. “They’re ritual weapons. I made them for a priestess of the Temple in Akados but she never claimed them. Nobody dares buy them now.”

“I am... I was dedicated to Artume as a child,” Ariadne says, reaching for the items and he lets her take them out of the showcase. “I trained with similar weapons.”

“You were an acolyte?”

“Ari,” I hiss. “What are you doing? Shush.”

“That was long ago,” she says, paling a little as if realizing what she has let show. “I’m a free woman now. I would like to purchase these, for old times’ sake.”

“I don’t know.” He rubs his chin. “Such items are supposed to belong to a Temple, not a free woman.”

I put my hand in my purse and take out a heavy silver *eremin*. I let him see it, twirling it between my fingers. “Throw in a good dagger, and this is yours.”

“My lord, I shouldn’t.” But his eyes gleam, reflecting the shiny coin. “It wouldn’t be proper.”

“Isn’t it better a former acolyte has the weapons rather than your dusty windowfront? Come on, we’re all in a hurry. I bet the festivities have already started. You don’t want to miss them. What do you say?”

He reaches for the coin, almost unconsciously, a raptor’s movement. “Yes.”

I give him the coin and grab a dagger from its case on the wall. “I’ll take this, and we’ll be on our way. Come on, Ari.”

She clutches the bow and quiver of arrows to her chest. “Thank you,” she tells the man. “I’ll take good care of them.”

“Go,” he says, staring down at the coin, “before I change my mind. If I didn’t need to buy a dress for my little girl...”

We all have someone we love, someone we’d do anything for. I understand him and as Ariadne takes my hand and leads me out of the small, cramped shop with its racks of blades on the walls and the smell of wood and leather, I nod at him.

I understand him all too well...

---

We join the crowd outside the doors of the castle and elbow our way forward. It’s like swimming in a slow-flowing river of

mud, knocked this way and that, hitting rocks and getting caught in slow eddies instead of moving onward.

I'm gripping Ariadne's hand and her fingers are slipping from mine—so I surge toward her with a snarl and grab her around the waist.

Not losing her.

Not letting her go.

Together we push toward the castle and finally we start making progress. The people are chanting a name—the Crown Prince's I presume—and wave their lit torches, the flames forming dizzying lines in the gathering dark.

The dagger is a reassuring weight at my hip, and the knives in my boots a familiar discomfort, the girl in my arms heady and mesmerizing—but I wrench my thoughts away from her and back to the mission at hand.

We shove through the river of people and they shove back, jostling us right and left, but the castle gate is now looming over us, decorated with red and black silk flowers and banners with praise for the Emperor and his progeny, painted in silver calligraphy. Grand torches burn on top of the citadel walls, casting dancing shadows over us as we cross and surge down the colonnade leading into the castle's main square. The stench of unwashed bodies and the herbal oils people use to cover it up mingles with the smoke from the torches and the aromas of roast meat. Smoke rises from the castle kitchens as the royal birthday feast is prepared.

The long tables and benches line the square and they're already full, people jostling for the last seats. I don't think any food will be served before the executions, not to spoil everyone's appetite, though I doubt most of these people would bat an eye at a couple of jerking bodies.

A growl is rising in my throat, and I clutch my omega closer to me, thinking of my alpha mate, kept in chains, waiting to die. The crowd flashes with lights and colors. My teeth ache, my hands shake. I don't know what the fuck is going on. The flickering light of the torches seems to change color, and the whole square becomes visible, from the servants waiting inside doorways to guards with tall headgear, half-hiding someone in chains, the clinking of them overly loud, skimming over the hubbub.

"Finnen?" I breathe.

"He's there," Ariadne whispers, and her voice also seems oddly loud in my ears. "Can you see him?"

"Yes," I say and my voice is more of a hiss.

"Come." She pulls on me. "Let's go to him."

But a murmur rises from the crowd. On the scaffold in the center of the square, someone in a tall, gleaming hat is standing, flanked by guards. Behind him stands the gallows, a simple structure, elegant even, yet gruesome in its intended function.

"Good people of Eremis and citizens of the Anchar Empire!" the man bellows, his voice smooth and dark, carrying over every other sound. His headdress glitters with

gems. “I bid you welcome to the celebrations for the natal day of the son of our beloved Emperor in this southern capital of the Empire.”

“It’s Cardinal Leior,” Ariadne says. “He’s wearing the colors of his office.”

I don’t know how she can see colors. All I see now is black and white, every person outlined in bright silver, their chests pulsing. My breathing echoes weirdly in my ears.

I tug her between people, shoving this way and that, in Finnen’s direction. The cardinal speaks about the Emperor and his illustrious life, his generosity and wisdom, his beautiful family and his plans to annex the Rising Moon Lands and get access to the sea, an old dream of all the Emperors who went before. Of the great prowess of the military and its aid in the smooth running of the Imperial machine. Of the Temple’s love for the people and their hard work in order to keep their souls safe.

Of signs in the sky, speaking of danger.

Of the Emperor’s decrees to shut down any Fae-blood uprising, his desire to cleanse the land and create a pure human race.

“The Fae threat is real!” he shouts, “the Fae rebellion is real!

A yell rises from the gathered crowd, a wave of sound that makes my head ache.

“And we will start putting it down tonight. Punishing the remnants of those bastards who butchered us in the past, who

raped our women and killed our children. Their blood is an infestation and any manifestation of it must be put to the sword.”

The people we push past are shaking their fists and screaming in agreement.

“The army has brought us some of their catch,” the cardinal says, managing to inject satisfaction and disdain in his voice. “They will serve as an example to any Fae-bloods out there who think they can escape the long hand of the Emperor’s will.”

My nails are growing into claws—or am I imagining it? I glance around, seeing savage faces, anger roiling behind their glass façade, and mine answers.

I’m going to swipe at them, tear them to shreds.

Then someone’s hand falls on my shoulder, and I growl, letting go of Ariadne to grapple the attacker.

“Taj,” he says. “Calm the fuck down.”

I’m panting, my muscles coiled, my vision still flashing. “Kiaran? What are you doing here? You were supposed to find us horses.”

“Many horses here,” he says. “We steal them and go.”

“Dammit. You want to stop and fight some soldiers to get their horses as we run for our lives?”

“Better than walking through the crowd.” He bares his teeth at me. “You need my help,” he looks me up and down, “claws or not. Let’s go.”

And then Ariadne stops and sniffs. “Do you smell him?”

“Finnen?” She can smell him in this maelstrom of stench and perfumes? But maybe it shouldn’t surprise me. If my senses have changed, if I have grown claws to protect my own, why wouldn’t she also get some extra abilities?

“No, the *other* one.” She swallows hard. “A *new* one.”

A new mate.



**RHIAN**

**T**hey've taken Finnen out of his cell, bound his wrists and led him to the central yard to be executed.

I feel as if a rock is hanging from my heart. Not sure how to explain or express this heaviness and sadness. It's not as if I know him well. I brought him medicine to bring down his fever, as well and food and water, as I was supposed to.

After exchanging names with him, and a couple more words besides, I was sent to chop a thousand pieces of wood for the roasting fires for the festivities and didn't see him again.

Until now.

I remember his scent, though, his sarcastic tone, and his near-hysterical laughter. His voice when he told me he was going to die anyway.

For some fucking reason I can't fathom, his scent lingers in my memory. I can't shake it off. It's as if I can still smell it over the pungent stench of the crowd gathered here, over the aromas of food. It has a grip around my chest, around my cock.

It's the weirdest fucking thing that's ever happened to me.

Clutching the tray of cups I'm supposed to carry out to the tables after the execution, I find myself trembling. Executions happen often here, though I mostly don't have time to hang around and watch, nor would I want to, but Finnen...

*I can't let him die.*

My inner voice has been nattering at me all day, and all night before that. In fact, it hasn't stopped talking to me since I met Finnen.

And it's mostly to say the same thing.

*Can't fucking let him die.*

Whatever it is that's drawing me to him, that scent, that voice, that courage in the face of blindness and impending death, it's undeniable, and it's not mere attraction. It's not just his handsome face or strong body, no.

I've been attracted to men and women before. Had my dalliances, quick and mostly anonymous behind doors and inside pantries and sheds.

This is different.

Damn different, even if I don't know how or why, and what the fuck I'm supposed to do about it. I clench my hands on the tray until my knuckles ache. The wooden handles creak. I want to check that the birthmark on my left pec is hidden, a reflex tension, though I know it's covered. My ears, too, though they usually aren't noticed, hidden in my curls.

“You’re okay,” I tell myself. “You look decent. Everything is hunky-dory.”

It’s been tougher to convince myself of that since the last decree. Living in the Imperial castle with signs of Fae-blood on me has been a trial. At least, the scale pattern on my shoulder is barely visible and my ears barely pointed. Up to now, they’ve passed inspection.

Not so Finnen’s, it would seem.

They wouldn’t. I saw them, even in the dimness of the cell when I spoke with him, and I shiver at the memory. They were clearly Fae ears, sharply pointed and long enough to poke through his pale hair. His face was also Fae in its fineness and the shape of his eyes. If you wanted a picture of a Fae to show, that would be him.

And it drew me... how it drew me. There was something so magnetic about him, about his Fae beauty. I’ve always been drawn to it but with him, it was a punch in the gut.

The cardinal on the raised platform is talking about the Emperor and the Empire and the people and the feast, but the only part I really hear is the one about eliminating the Fae threat, about the decree.

About the executions.

I try to see Finnen and the other prisoners, but the scaffold and the crowd are hiding them from me.

*What good will it do, seeing him? I ask myself. Forget about him. Self-preservation should kick in by now.*

But the cardinal lifts his hands, the crowd goes wild, and there's a commotion in front of the scaffold. "It's time!" he cries.

The servants behind me whisper. One of them shoves me aside to get a better look. I know better than to fight, though I've had my fair share of fighting and the scars to prove it. I let myself bend like a reed in the wind.

That's how you survive the castle and this life. Tall and wiry I may be, but I'm never a match for the bullies here.

"And now!" The cardinal lifts his hands, waits until the crowd's roar wanes. "And now, we will show the world what we do to the Fae-bloods who think to return and steal our lands and livelihoods from us, who think to harm us and take what is ours. Tonight, we show them! Tonight, we kill them!"

I should have expected the political propaganda. Everyone knows that the cardinal wants a seat on the Imperial Council.

And yet I'm stunned when the crowd goes up in arms, yelling and stomping, going wild.

The servants behind me chatter. One of them joins in the yelling.

"Death to them!" the crowd yells. "Kill them."

*Dear fucking gods...*

I take a deep breath and jerk.

Wait, what in the holy fuck? Another scent winds through Finnen's, just as intense. No, *stronger* than Finnen's, and as different as the sun from the moon. It's sweet, so sweet, but

not cloying, no. Sweet and floral like fine-trickling honey, like early-morning sunshine, like the tinkling of crystal bells, like the first trill of a robin.

My body shakes, the tray rattling in my hands, as a jolt of pure lust hits me. It's a spear driving right through me, from the top of my head to my balls, hardening my cock so fast I get fucking light-headed.

What's this scent thing, huh? Never had that before. My favorite aroma until now was that of stew or pastries. Arousing scents were never in my repertoire until now.

Especially not in a situation like this.

“Kill them!” The crowd dances and undulates in front of me, small eddies forming here and there—People pulling back? People surging forward? Impossible to tell—and I'm starting to wonder if I should back away into the passage and deal with the steward's anger for abandoning my post later.

But, *Finnen*.

The guards are moving, their tall hats jutting over all other heads, as they lead the prisoners to the scaffold, and I'm suffocating, drowning.

*You can't let him die!*

*Gods damn it all.*

Bullies may be stronger than me—not that hard when you're raised on broth and stale bread, when you're always in the wrong—but weak I am not. Wiry, yes, made strong from lifting heavy loads and chopping wood, from running up and

down the endless stairs of the castle and carrying buckets of water up and down said stairs.

I throw the tray at the crowd and crash into the people in front of me, shoving them aside frantically. They shove back. I duck under arms, slide sideways between bodies. The scaffold isn't far but it might as well be miles away.

“Finnen!” I yell. “Finnen! Stop!”

But my voice is lost in the sea of noise. Someone elbows me in the stomach and another hits me in the arm. Almost, almost there...

Another eddy is forming in front of the scaffold, but my attention is caught by the men and women lined up to be hanged.

Finnen is second in line, a pale ghost. His hands are tied with ropes and his shirt is ripped, white, tangled hair hanging in his face.

I don't know him. Only exchanged a few words with him. His Fae-blood, his heady scent shouldn't send me diving headlong into danger.

Yet here I am.

“Finnen!” I yell. “I'm here.”

His face jerks to the side, then tilts as if he's heard me.

The cardinal is being escorted off the platform, and I fight to get to the other end, grasping for the wooden planks over heads and arms.

Someone grabs me, pulling me away. A guard, I realize, twisting around. Drawing my hand back, I punch him in the jaw, and when he reels, I return to the platform and this time I manage to get a good grip.

Hand over hand, I pull myself up the planks and climb onto the wooden stage. For a dizzying, disorienting moment, I list on my feet, feeling like I'm standing on a cloud, over the sea of faces.

Hovering.

As if I'm flying over the land and its petty worries, free to explore the sky.

But then a guard yelps and thuds down beside me, startling me back a step, then another. Arrows are sticking out of their chests.

Someone screams.

More guards climb onto the platform across from me. The prisoners stir and struggle against their bonds.

Behind me, more people are climbing.

"Finnen!" someone roars, and it's pure chaos on the platform, people fighting hand to hand.

Who called out his name?

I start toward Finnen and find him swinging his bound hands at the nearest guard with unnerving precision for someone who is blind—but someone pushes me to the wooden floor and I barely keep my feet.

“Hey.” I push back, and the man glares at me—a flash of bright eyes and a mane of pale hair and a scent of bark and spice—and then an arrow hits my shoulder.

*What...? Wait. An arrow?*

“Ow fuck.” I fall, crying out as my back crashes against the floor, the pain taking my breath away. *Damn...*

My eyes start to darken, the night rushing in suddenly, and the scent of sugar returns to haunt me as I fade.

“No!” I hear Finnen yelling. “Don’t! He’s with us.”

What is he saying? It makes no fucking sense, I think as I slip away.

None of this does...



**ARIADNE**

**T**he night devolves into chaos.

One moment I'm being dragged this way and that by the mob, Taj's arm around my waist the only anchor—then Kieran is there and that other scent wraps around me, mingling with my men's and Finnen's, like wood and grass, amber and pepper, making my head spin.

And that's just the moment before the chaos breaks out.

*Focus*, I tell myself. "Where is Finnen?"

"Over there!" Taj says and we move toward the platform. "Are you ready?"

I unsling my bow and grab an arrow from the quiver, thinking of Artume's teachings, of my long hours of practice—when I distinctly hear someone calling for Finnen.

And it's not us.

"Hurry up," Taj grunts, hauling me bodily toward the platform. "Something's going on."

"You could say that again."

Kiaran is ahead of us, mowing a path through the mob. And that's when I see someone climbing onto the wooden stage and making for the line of prisoners.

"Taj! Someone else is on the platform."

"I see him," he says grimly. "Some fanatic going after the prisoners, by my guess. Come on!"

Kiaran is already heaving himself onto the stage, turning slightly to kick at a guard who tries to stop him. More guards on the platform come at him, preparing to throw him off.

Lifting my bow, fitting the arrow, I let it fly. I'm fitting a second one on the string before I see if the first one landed true.

"Good shot!" Taj says. "There he is."

"Finnen, Kiaran, or the other guy?" Narrowing my eyes, I see more guards arriving and I let loose another two arrows.

Kiaran is grappling with another guard and Taj easily pulls himself up on the platform beside him as I fit more arrows and let loose, careful not to hit my guys.

"Guards!" someone is shouting, and people reach for me. "Get her!"

*Damn.*

Kiaran turns and bends over the stage, hands held out. "Come!"

"We need horses!" I hiss, letting him pull me up and glancing about. "Where's Finnen?"

"I got him!" Taj yells. "We should go!"

Easy to say.

“Wait!” Finnen. It’s Finnen beside Taj, his shirt gaping open, pants ripped at the seams, silver hair hanging in his face. “Rhian!”

“Who?” I whisper.

“He’s one of us.” Finnen pulls away from Taj who only tightens his hold on him. “Let me go, dammit.”

“Are you insane? You—” Taj kicks at a guard who sneaks at him from behind. “We have to run!”

“No. Rhian. Ari, can’t you smell it?” Finnen’s familiar bass voice washes over me, sending thrills through my body and my thoughts. “Smell him?”

“Our mate,” I whisper. “Wood and pepper. Where...?”

“He got shot down with an arrow.”

My heart sinks. “I shot him? Oh, Goddess...”

“Help me get him up!” Finnen is down on his knees, sliding his arms around a man as the crowd surges, lapping at the edges of the platform. Guards are climbing up to grab us. Taj and Kieran have their hands full with that, as I rush to Finnen’s side. My eyes are wet, my heart pounding, and I grab his arm to make sure he’s real, that he’s really here, with me.

“Finn...”

“Help him, Ari. I’m doing this as much for you as for him, or myself.”

The man looks very young—which is saying something, as we’re pretty young ourselves, but with his chestnut curls and

soft mouth, his pale face relaxed, his head rolling against Finnen's shoulder as he lifts him up, he looks more like a boy than a man.

Though from Finnen's grunt, I'm guessing he isn't light at all, and in fact, his lanky body is almost too much for my priest.

Grabbing Finnen's arm again, I lead him toward the edge of the platform. I don't know how we'll do this—there are no steps on this side, the crowd is heaving like an angry ocean below, and guards are running toward us.

Desperate, I turn toward the mob and lift one hand. "In Artume's name!" I yell. "Back off. We're priests, helping an injured believer down."

I don't really expect it to work, and a few people frown at me and stay put, but some others back away, making space for us on the ground.

I blink once, my mind not registering that my stupid plan worked. Then again, these people so against the Fae-blooded are usually very religious. They believe our gods protect us from the old threat. Artume's name is venerated everywhere in the Empire. She is considered one of the most powerful and old goddesses protecting the land.

Heaving a sigh of relief, I scramble off the platform and turn. "Lower him to me, Finn. I'll catch him."

"He's damn heavy."

"Just... lower him slowly. It will be okay."

Finnen shuffles to the edge, searching for it with his foot.

“There!” I call out. “Stop. Now!”

He halts and lowers the man’s legs, letting his feet touch the ground, then leans precariously over the edge, getting him down to me.

The man.

*Rhian*, Finnen calls him.

I catch his legs, then his waist. It all seems to be happening too slowly, time stretching even as my heart pounds, but it’s barely enough time for the people around me to back away a step.

Rhian twitches as his feet touch the ground, jerks when my hand brushes over the arrow—my arrow—still lodged in his shoulder, then grunts and grabs at my arms, standing under his own power. His knees give a little, then he straightens.

And I find myself looking up into his wide eyes.

Oh, he’s another pretty one. I don’t know how my body chooses the scents it prefers, the scents it can’t resist, but they do tend to go hand-in-hand with gorgeous men, so I can’t really complain.

Boy, how can I ever complain? My body clenches suddenly, violently, as his scent winds through my senses, so near, so different from my other mates’ and yet so hot and perfect. My insides twist and a throb pulses between my legs.

“Rhian—” I start.

A crash from behind him startles me, breaks through the daze.

*Finnen.*

The people around me are starting to press in, muttering about the prisoners and the Fae-blood, justice and retribution. I pull back just in time to see Finnen being dragged backward by a guard.

“Finn! No!” I prop Rhian against the side of the platform, the planks that hold it up, and grab the ledge to climb back up. “Finn!”

*Oh, please, Holy Artume, help me. Help us.*

Where I touch the wood, I feel warmth radiating out of me. I feel the wood, feel the tree it came from, the flow of life still trapped in it. My palms tingle. The world flashes in colors.

I have to save Finnen. My alpha, my mate.

*Sidde drakai, help me.*

The platform groans. Green sprouts around me, leaves budding on fresh sprigs, twigs growing into branches, twining around each other, pushing between the planks of the platform.

“What the hell?” someone says overhead. “The wood is alive! It’s magic. Watch out!”

Clenching my jaw, I keep climbing. I’m already halfway up, and the people behind me are pressing in. I hear sounds of fighting, and I don’t dare look back.

“Finn! Where are you?”

Someone pulls me back down and I struggle in their hold—a stench of sour onion and urine that makes me gag—but then I’m freed, another pair of hands hauling me away.

Pepper, moss and resin.

*Rhian.*

“I have to get to Finnen!” I wrench myself free of his hold.  
“I have to—”

“Go.” His face white as milk, he props himself with a hand on the scaffold. The small black arrow sticking out of his shoulder is surrounded by a spreading crimson stain.

“Ari!” Taj appears on top of the platform, one arm around Finnen, Kiaran behind them. “We got everyone, let’s get moving.”

“And the guards?”

“They’re out for the count. So let’s get the fuck out of here before they send in more!”

---

Sounds good enough for me. Truth be told, I’m still in a weird daze. Rhian pushes off the scaffold, shoving the crowd back, and I reach for Finnen as my other alphas help him down. They follow, lithe as big cats, climbing down to join us. Kiaran takes over the job of shoving people, with apparent glee, making a path for us.

Someone is shouting orders somewhere behind us. More guards must be on their way.

“We need horses!” Taj shouts. “Or we’ll get crushed to death. Damn you, Kia.”

But we wouldn't have made it this far without Kiaran's help, even in my dizzy state I know as much. Taj is just terrified we won't make it.

Finnen has his arm around Rhian who looks like death, white as a sheet, his shirt soaked in blood.

Deep in my bones, I'm shaking with shock.

I did that. I almost killed him. Was my gut feeling all wrong? Was I not supposed to be here?

The crowd presses around us, swaying us back and forth. They are yelling, demanding executions and sacrifices, as if those ever fix the world.

"Ari!" Finnen stumbles and I catch him before they both go down. "Stay close."

*Focus*, I tell myself again. *Come on. Can't fall apart now.*

"The guards will come riding," Kiaran says. "Be ready."

"They wouldn't send horses into a crowd! Taj protests.

Kiaran laughs.

"Who are you?" people grunt as we push our way through. "What's going on?"

"Make way!" Taj shouts. "We have an injured man with us."

It's not enough. It's too many people, pressing in to see what is happening. A woman screeches. I can't breathe. There's not enough air.

"Here they come!" Kiaran calls. "Be ready."



“Leave them to me,” Taj says, “I’ll get them—”

I reach out my hand and call to the horses. I don’t know how it works, only that I feel the life coursing through them, as I did through the wood before, only a thousand times brighter, vibrating and pulsating through me.

*Here, I think, come to us. Come to me.*

The horses whinny and rear up. I see their manes flying, hooves weaving through the air, people screaming and scattering.

“Holy fucking shit,” Taj says.

The horses canter toward us, knocking people out of the way, with a noise like thunder. It’s as if the world is splitting down in half.

“Look out!” Taj grabs at us, swinging us behind him.

“It’s okay,” I say. “It’s okay, Taj. They’re coming to us.”

“How do you know? Wait, are you doing this?”

“It seems so.”

And the cavalry has arrived. The horses stop in front of us, shaking their manes and stomping their hooves. The saddles are empty, the guards thrown clear off.

“Mount up,” Taj says, and is already grabbing me and giving me a leg up. “Come on.”

I swing a leg over the saddle and take my seat while Kieran helps Finnen up. Then he swings into the saddle behind me, slipping his arms around my waist.

Taj takes his seat behind Rhian, which relieves me as Rhian looks ready to pass out, and we're good to go.

*Sweet Goddess.* I blink around us, feeling the same sense of unreality I had on the platform earlier. Once more we're above the crowd and it parts like water as our horses prance and snort.

"To the gate," Taj says then, taking the lead, one arm around Rhian, the other holding the reins. "Follow me!"

**ARIADNE**

**S**till caught in a sort of dream-like state, I nudge my horse after Taj's, Kiaran's body a solid wall of heat behind me, his arms a vise around my waist.

*Wake up. Wake up, Ari.*

This is all too much.

I grip the reins so tightly they dig into my palms, the slight sting helping clear my head. I suppose until now I'd managed to convince myself nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

I met some handsome guys. They smell good. We had sex. We have feelings for each other. Nothing too out there for an omega.

But smelling new mates over a crowded square, feeling the wood's memories, talking to animals...

No, there's nothing normal about that.

Besides which, just how many men am I supposed to collect for my clan? Most omegas get one alpha, and I have four. Handsome and fascinating as they are, I'm overwhelmed.

I need a moment to think—but I don't have such a luxury right now.

It's a miracle we got Finnen back, let alone found another alpha match.

*Think of that, Ari, and breathe. Stop worrying about the rest until you're in the clear, and sometimes...*

Sometimes you need to take it one thing at a time or go crazy.

“Okay?” Kiaran breathes in my ear, and I shiver, jolted back to the here and now, my body giving a pleasant throb at the feel of his strength behind me, his scent around me.

“Yeah.”

“Hold it together,” he says, as if he's been reading my thoughts. “We'll be fine.”

Grateful for the reassurance, I let myself lean on him, my back to his hard chest, feel the strength in his muscular arms around me and let go of the fear.

Because that's what it is.

Fear.

Of the unknown, of the new and unexplained things happening, of the feelings in my heart. Change is always scary, emotions are strings making you dance, and trust is the hardest thing to find. Change is hard and being different is tough, much more so when you're being pursued for it.

“Fuck,” Kiaran breathes in my ear and grabs the reins from me. “Let me.”

The horse leaps forward and we're moving through the mob toward the citadel gate. I can make out Taj in front of us, and twisting my head, I make out Finnen hot on our heels, white hair flying.

I can't regret any of this. I might be tired and dazed but I won't regret this. I know that for a fact.

Better to have loved and suffered for it than never to have loved at all.

At least, if we survive.

---

"Thank you," I tell Kiaran as we canter through the city streets, turning my head to be heard. "For taking over. I lost my composure for a moment there."

"You did great." He clucks his tongue, pressing his knees to the horse's flanks to slow us down. "Taj! Go left."

"They've probably sent runners to get all the gates closed." Taj obeys, turning his horse around. Rhian is blinking at us, his face white as milk. "Any gate we could break through?"

"I think I know the one."

"Good. Lead on." Taj wraps one arm more securely around Rhian. "Finn?"

"Present and accounted for," Finnen's dry voice rings out as he catches up with us, pulling on the reins. "Why have we stopped?"

“Which way, Kia?” I ask. Behind us, the shouting is rising to a crescendo. “The guards will be on us in no time.”

“The Faerie Gate.”

“The what, now?”

“Just follow me.”

“You must tell us how you know about this,” I whisper. “Kiaran...”

“He can’t wait to tell us, right, my man?” Taj says. “And wait, are you seriously saying there is a gate in the Summer Capital named after the Fae?”

Without replying, Kiaran leads us down narrow streets, dark as pitch, which is answer in itself, I suppose—and I find myself praying again.

In the distance, the shouting intensifies. Riding through the city is a game of life and death. We don’t know if a sudden turn will bring us face to face with a patrol or a guard contingent from the citadel, sent after us.

I have my bow but only one arrow left and shooting from the saddle is going to be tricky. Shooting moving targets, that is, people, was already hard on every level.

I try not to think about it too much.

Not to think of my arrow sticking out of Rian’s shoulder.

I feel sick.

Kiaran still has his arms around me but I wrestle him for the reins. I want to give my horse its head as much as possible,

trusting it will follow Taj. The hooves of Finnen's horse follow close behind us.

But then the dark street explodes into bright lines and shapes.

I gasp.

“Whoa. Relax.” Kiaran nuzzles my hair. “What is it?”

“Lines. Lights. It was dark and then... symbols and outlines made of fire.”

“Combat lines. I see them when I fight. When in danger.”

“You see them, too?”

“Yeah. Nothing to worry about.” He flicks the reins and the horse gallops down the street. “We're changing. Taj said so.”

“Right. Simple as that.”

I remember seeing the bright symbols on the unnamed god's statue.

Does Finn see them, too, when he fights?

“Tell me about the Faery Gate,” I say to distract myself. “How come we can go through there and why is it called like that?”

“It's said the Fae fled the city from there to save their lives. After the war, it was walled up.”

“So then?”

“Humans secretly opened it again for use. Unofficially. Of course.”

“Of course.” I grin, although I feel as if my face is stiff—from the cold, the tension, the fear, the worry. “And it’s fitting that we, of all people, should go through there...”

---

The Faery Gate looks nothing like Fae architecture, which is the style of most of the Temples in the empire. Buildings actually built by the Fae, fluted and airy and open to the elements as much as possible. It is said the Fae communicated with nature in ways humans never could.

I remember the feel of the wood waking up under my palms, the horses’ thoughts turning to me, and shiver.

But even if the story is true, even if the Fae went through it, I remind myself, that doesn’t mean the gate we see today is the original. The city has been built over a lot, over the centuries.

I suppose in the south we’ll see more of their pretty buildings. Inside the Empire, it’s mostly their temples that survived, taken over by the Pantheon church. Their cities were torn down, only parts surviving here and there.

They say that their great cities were mostly down south. That’s where they came from, creatures of the sun and warmth, air and water.

This gate is not much more than a set of tall double doors, shops on either side, lanterns hanging outside giving out just enough light for us to see. In fact, the whole length of the city



wall is lined with small stores, and the gate is lodged between two of them, barely visible.

You wouldn't think it's a gate at all.

But it's open. Wide open, and a couple passes through, talking and laughing. They turn to the left and stop in front of a candle shop.

We sit in our saddles, staring at the open gate. The shopkeepers come out of their tiny shops to stare back at us. One of them is apparently a butcher, because he's holding a huge butcher's knife and it's spattered with blood.

Not the most auspicious of signs, but Kiaran nudges our horse toward the open gate and I take out my last arrow, nock it. If guards are waiting for us on the other side, I'm taking one down with me.

Our heads barely clear the top of the gate as we ride through. Outside, startled people scatter. Chickens cackle and dogs bark, chased away by our horses. We canter through the outer city, through quiet, dark streets, waking up more dogs, big and small, their cacophonous song following us.

"Make them shut up," Kiaran hisses, "or we'll be found."

I doubt he means it as anything else than a prayer to the gods, but I close my eyes, reach for the dogs.

Tell them to be quiet.

*Be quiet! Be still!*

After a long moment, the dogs go silent and the only sound is the beating of the horses' hooves on the muddy street. They

stare at us from the yards and the sides of the street, unmoving like statues.

“Holy shit,” Kiaran breathes.

Yeah, that sums it up.

“No wonder the Emperor wants us all dead,” he says.

“Is it me, or did the dogs all shut up at once?” Taj asks, cantering to ride beside us. “Ari, did you do something?”

“What makes you think it’s me?”

“The look on your face.”

I grimace.

“Would you mind talking less and riding harder?” Finnen canters past us. “Forgive me if I don’t want to go back to the fucking gallows.”

Cursing, Taj gallops after him. “Ari, move!”

Shaking my head to clear it, I snap the reins and we’re off once more.

---

I don’t relax until we clear the lower city’s last houses. And to be perfectly honest, not even then. We keep going, cantering down the main road, the night too dark for us to get off it, and occasionally I steal glances over my shoulder at the twinkling lights of the city we’re leaving behind.

Any moment now, I expect a patrol to come galloping after us, snatch us back and execute us all in that awful square.

I'm going to have nightmares about this for the rest of my life, nightmares to rival my memories of the moment Finnen was taken from us in the first place.

Kiaran mutters something in my ear, putting his hands over mine, his large body caging me, lending me its warmth, which is nice. Even the fire in my belly is subdued, and the cold is seeping into my bones.

The city is large enough that it doesn't seem like we're putting any distance between us. It still looms behind us when we lead our horses up and down gulches and rises, a lingering smudge on the horizon as the dawn finally breaks. Our horses stumble on, exhausted, and my head is pounding. It lolls back against Kiaran's shoulder, and images flash behind my lids.

I shake my head, but weariness is dragging me down and after a while, I start confusing dreams with reality.

I think I see the fort Temple at Artare, the Divine Circle with the statues.

And my mother's face.

A keening cry escapes me as I reach for her.

"This is far enough!" Kiaran calls out. "We stop here."

I open my eyes, blink at the lightening sky. Ahead I see groves but can't tell the kind of trees. "Is it safe here?"

"Safe enough." He clucks his tongue and urges our poor horse toward the trees. "One can't run forever."

---

I blink and we're at the trees. I blink again, and we're under their branches, birds fluttering in the canopy.

"Taj," I whisper. "Finn. And... and Rhian."

"They're right behind us." Kiaran dismounts and ties the horse's reins on a branch, then reaches up for me and I let him pull me down.

"Sorry," I whisper. "So tired..."

The other two horses approach, and Taj jumps off his horse before it has even halted, then turns and hauls Rhian down. "Here we go. Safe and sound, and look at these lodgings, young man, whoever you are."

"His name is Rhian," Finnen grunts, pulling on the reins.

"Right. And we didn't even get to partake in the feast for the Crown Prince's birthday," Taj grumbles and mock-pouts. "All that for you, priest. See the sacrifices we make."

"Yeah, poor you," Finnen says drily. "No venison cooked in wine sauce. Boo."

"I knew you'd mock my valiant efforts, I just knew it."

Rhian blinks dazedly from one to the other. "Am I hallucinating?"

"No," I say, "they're always so unreal."

Kiaran snorts. "Get off. Or do you need help getting off your horse, Finn?"

"I'm fine." Finnen swings his leg over the horse's head, slides down—then folds down to his knees and falls bonelessly to the ground.

“Finn!” My exhaustion is gone, burned off by fear. I push off Kiaran and slide to my knees beside my beautiful priest. I pull his head onto my lap, turning his head, stroking his long hair. “What’s wrong? Finn!”

He stirs, lifts a hand to touch my leg. “Ari.”

“Are you injured? Does it hurt anywhere? No, don’t move yet, just tell me.”

“I’m okay.” He uses his hands to push himself off me and kneels on the soft earth, my fingertips still tingling from the rough silk of his hair. He scrubs at his face. “Fuck, sorry. It’s been a rough couple of days.”

*Okay?* I don’t believe him. The way he’s slightly hunched over, the way his other hand twitches at his ribs, an aborted movement, tells me that he’s been beaten up.

I scoot closer, throwing my arms around him, suddenly choking. “Finn... I wasn’t sure we’d see you again.”

Heedless of any pain, he wraps me up in his arms and crushes me to his strong body. “Neither was I.”

We’re quiet for long moments.

“And Rhian?” I ask softly.

“He saved my life. Brought me medicine.”

“What for?”

“Fever. I’m okay now.”

He keeps saying that, but he really isn’t. The fever must have been from an infected wound, and he’s so thin. How did he manage to lose weight so quickly? He looks haggard.

And still he's beautiful.

And mine.

**FINNEN**

This has to be a damn dream.

I can't be here, under a tree, hugging my omega to myself, drawing in her sweet scent, feeling her curves pressed to my chest. I'm still in the cell in the dungeons, waiting to die.

And yet this feels real, not like one of my dreams. I dreamed a lot in the cell, caught in the fever—of her and the other alphas, of riding through the plain, of air on my face, crisp and fresh, the world open around me.

Full of possibilities.

Full of hope.

“Finn,” she murmurs, and I hug her tighter, relishing the pain in my ribs. Because it makes it real.

But is it?

“What is the matter?” she whispers.

I tighten my jaw, try to keep silent, not to break whatever spell this is, but as with many things lately, I fail. “Is this a fucking dream?” I breathe.

She makes a sound, shifting against me. “It often feels that way to me, too, but no. We got you out of there. We’re back together.”

I stifle a sound of my own against her hair, a sound that comes from my chest and catches in my throat, and rock her in my arms.

I can’t fucking breathe and I don’t care.

My Ariadne.

My woman. My omega.

“Sh,” she whispers. “It’s okay. It’s all right. You’re here now. With us. It’s okay.”

After a while, I realize she’s the one who’s been rocking me, soothing me.

I take a shuddering breath, lift my face and remember that I wasn’t alone in my cell, that someone took care of me.

Panic grips me, rattling my spine. “Rhian? Where is Rhian? Did we bring him along? Is he—?”

“Finn! My priest.” Taj slaps my back, grabs my arm and hauls me to my feet and into a quick but brutal—for my ribs, that is—man-hug that expels the air from my lungs. “Good to have you back, man.”

“Yeah,” I manage, winded, unused to such displays of affection. Priests barely touch. I think I’ve had more touches and hugs in these past few weeks than in my entire life. “I’m damn happy to be back, too. Thanks for mounting my rescue.”



“Don’t mention it,” Taj says, a grin lingering in his voice. “You’re rubbing off on me.”

“Rubbing off?” I ask, incredulous. “Could have fooled me. You’re still the same rude bastard.”

“I mean that I’ve inexplicably grown fond of you and—”

“Finn!” Kiaran roars and grabs me in his arms so suddenly I instinctively try to punch him, my body reacting faster than my mind recognizes his voice. “Welcome back to the family.”

I swallow hard. My voice is strangely thick when I say, “Thanks, Kiaran.”

“And I can’t help noticing you’re not talking in monosyllables anymore, huh, Kia?” Taj says.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.” Kiaran’s voice holds a grin.

“Seriously, though.”

“I wasn’t used to talking anymore,” Kiaran says. “When you don’t use a tool for long, it gets rusty.”

“You mean your brain?”

“Fuck you, Taj.”

“Okay, but only if you let me top you.”

Kiaran chokes.

“Where the hell is Rhian?” I interrupt their stupid banter, annoyed that nobody has replied to my question. A damn good question, at that. “What did you do with him?”

“*Do* with him?” Taj scoffs. “Why, you—”

“I’m right here,” another voice says, a familiar male voice, and something in me fucking lets go, at long last.

“Careful now,” Taj says, and another set of steps crunch over dead leaves and twigs. “I got you.”

“I’m all right,” Rhian says.

“Not really,” Kiaran mutters. “Don’t listen to him. He has an arrow stuck in his shoulder. We need to find a healer, and I have an idea—”

“An arrow! A goddamn arrow?”

“I was shooting arrows at the guards,” Ariadne says quietly, sheepishly, her voice choked. She stands beside me. “I’m so sorry. I thought he was someone from the mob, trying to hurt you, so I... shot him...”

I stroke her hair. I knew he’d been hurt but hadn’t realized the extent of it. “How bad is it?”

“He’ll live,” Taj says, but his voice rises a little, like a question. “Probably.”

“Dammit. Rhian!” I reach for him and he takes my hand. His is cold. “You’ll let us help. You’ll—”

“Don’t worry.” He snorts softly. “I’m not stubborn like you. I’ll take the help.”

His scent winds around me.

Ariadne whines low in her throat, a sound of need and pain. Rhian is ours, and his scent, all our scents, must be driving her crazy.

“Fuck.” Rhian clutches my hand, the word coming out harsh. His fingers are strong and callused like Taj’s. “Kia, you said something about a healer?”

“Yeah.” Kiaran hums. “I may know someone nearby.”

“A healer, nearby?” Ariadne sounds surprised. “How would you know anyone here?”

“Speaking of which, Kiaran,” Taj drawls, “fess up.”

“Fess up what?”

“Did you grow up in Eremis? Do you have family in every city we visit? Or do you make it all up as you go along?”

“Taj,” Ariadne says, reprovngly. “He knew the way. We all saw it.”

“Exactly.” Taj pauses. “Are you some lost aristocrat from the Summer Capital stolen by the jaguars or something? I sense a tragedy waiting to be written into a play here.”

“No, I...” Kiaran hesitates. “I didn’t grow up there.”

“Then how do you explain it? How the hell did you know your way around so damn well?”

“We visited the Summer Capital quite often. We do have a house there. But I grew up here.”

“Here? “

“A small town up on the plain. I’m pretty sure it’s nearby. And there was a healer. Maybe she’s still alive.”

We’re all quiet for a long while, pondering his answer.

“So, are you?” Taj mutters eventually. “A lost aristocrat?”

Kiaran says, “I’ll take care of the horses and take the first watch. Taj, you take the second, I’ll wake you up.”

“Aye, aye sir,” Taj mutters, then, “Is he avoiding my question?”

“What do you think, genius?” I say.

“But what does that mean?”

“Gods, and to think I was almost convinced you’re not a complete idiot,” I grunt. “Now, got any blankets? It’s damn cold out here.”

---

The wind coming down the plain has knives in it, and they cut deep. With Kiaran standing watch somewhere out of sight, we’ve lain down to sleep, the four of us. I have Taj at my back and I know he’s watching over Rhian who’s a bit apart, not to jostle the arrow sticking out of him, but it doesn’t do much to take away from my worry for the man.

I wish I could keep a hand on him, feel his chest rising and falling with each breath—a stupid thing. An emotional thing. It’s the mating bond taking root, I know, and yet I don’t want to fight it anymore. He was kind to me. Even just for that, I’d care. I itch to touch him. Check on him.

And yet I’m too damn weary to keep awake. The thin blankets barely cover us all, barely keep the cold wind at bay, but Ariadne’s warm body pressed to mine lulls me into improbable sleep.

I roll through deep darkness, whispers flying over me, but then the day brightens and I can see. I can see again. Breathless, I look around me, at the fields and houses and hills and forests, and I want to laugh out loud as the colors fill me.

But suddenly I'm back in the cell. Lost in the dark. Lost to despair, cold and stiff, my thoughts twisting like snakes.

I know this feeling. I'm sick again, the sickness that took my sight as a child, fever and chills and pain. It's happening again. I'm dying again, losing my grip on reality.

*No. No!*

*Dammit.*

*Fuck.*

"Finn." Someone is shaking me. "Finn, wake up! It's just a dream."

Gasping, I sit up, panting, groaning. I grip my head and bite down on the howl that is trying to claw its way out of my chest.

"It's just a dream, man," Taj says. "It's okay."

"It's not a fucking dream," I grind out. "I'm blind. Still blind."

Silence falls and that's when I realize that I said something I hadn't meant to say, and for good reason. Because now they will ask. And I will have to tell them.

"What happened?" Smaller hands gently take mine and lower them. "How did you lose your sight?"

"None of your business."

“Finn.” Taj’s voice is sharp. “How dare you?”

“Fuck off, you—”

“How dare you think you’re not our business?” he goes on, voice softening. His hands are strong and warm on my chilled arms. “You don’t have to tell us what you dreamed of, but you do have to believe that we care.”

*Fuck.* He’s hitting below the belt. My breath shudders in my lungs. My fucking eyes burn.

“Finn,” Ariadne whispers. “It’s okay if you don’t want to tell us.”

She’s giving me an out, and though I want it, though I don’t want to relive that pain, I make myself tell her.

She deserves to know how Fae-blood are treated.

How I was treated.

“I... got sick.” I grit my teeth but force the words out. “The doctor said it was an imbalance in my humors.” I chuckle darkly. “Everyone said I just fell sick, that it happens to children. But then I started losing my sight. And one day, I opened my eyes and there was only fucking darkness.”

“Oh Finn...” she whispers.

“My parents think... they *thought* that the neighbors put something in our food. To kill us off, us Fae-bloods. We all got sick, but I was young, so it affected me the most, that fucking...” I stop, my voice going out. My heart is banging around in my damn chest. “That fucking poison took my sight.”

Ariadne's arms come around me and it should be stifling and annoying and petrifying but it feels good. My coiled muscles relax a fraction.

"What did you do?" Kiaran asks and I realize he's joined us.

"We moved close to the southern border. We hid during the day, walked during the night. Made a new home in a small village. And when I had recovered enough, I was sent to the Temple."

"You are a priest?" Rhian says, his voice hoarse and laced with pain. "For real?"

"Not anymore," I say wearily. "Until now I thought... I thought my oath was set in stone, that my prayers might still be heard, but it's all over. It's okay," I tell Ariadne who makes a small sound of distress. "It's all over because I've decided it's over. After all, I'm way too angry and violent to be a priest."

Taj chuckles.

"And I have decided that I'd much rather be with you," I squeeze Ariadne in my arms, lift my head in the vague direction of the others, "and you, than spend my life in loneliness and righteous pride, hoping for a word from the gods. I'm happier running for my life with you than living a life of peace on my own."

**ARIADNE**

**A**s dawn breaks, I hold onto Finn, a huge weight coming off my chest at his admission.

He wants to be with us.

I mean he had said so before, hadn't he? And yet I wasn't sure until now. He's so set in his ways, so much still a priest, that I wanted him to speak the words.

I suppose a near execution after a few feverish nights in the cold cells made up his mind, though I'd have expected the opposite effect.

Gods, I wish all my men had made up their minds.

And what about me? I think that, despite the repeated shocks, I have my mind made up already. This is where I want to be, wherever this is, with my guys.

And speaking of repeated shocks...

I glance up. "I still can't believe what I did. The wood sprouted. The horses listened. The dogs stopped barking."

"Fae magic, baby," Taj says.



I almost grin but don't. "But if the Fae had such powers, how did the humans win the war?"

"The humans are more numerous. Controlling animals is a neat trick but it won't win you the war. Fae always had problems having babies. I mean, if each omega had to go find her clan and can't have children until it's complete... you see the issue."

"What is the issue?" Kiaran is building up the fire, his hair a silver halo against the pinking sky.

"That the Fae don't reproduce so easily," Finn says. "Not as easily as humans, at any rate."

Kiaran frowns down at the flames he's coaxing back to life. "Sex?"

"Yeah, Kia, sex," Taj says, grinning widely. "Something we still need to teach our priest—excuse me, ex-priest friend here."

"Fuck you," Finn mutters.

"Tell me again what happened with the dogs in the city," Taj says, sitting back down beside me and looping his arms around his knees.

On his other side, I see Rhian. He's sitting, his back propped against the tree trunk, his face white, and my heart stutters. He looks so young and handsome, so tired and drained, as if hovering near death.

I did this to him.

I did this.

“She told the dogs to shut up,” Kiaran says.

“And they did?”

“What do you think?”

I open my mouth but can't find anything to say. I lean against Finn, my head on his solid shoulder, drawing in his scent, trying to calm my frayed nerves.

“She also controlled the guards' horses,” Kiaran goes on.

Taj clucks his tongue and turns his gaze to me. “Did you?”

“I think so... yes. I felt them. Felt their thoughts. Seeking approval, seeking a pat on their necks, of their stalls in the stable, their trough and hay... green fields and sunlight.”

“Hm.” Kiaran shakes his head, his locks dancing. “I feel animals sometimes.”

“The *persafin*,” Finnen whispers. “The pooling of power. It gave you the ability to communicate with nature. A gift.”

“A wild, savage gift,” I mutter.

“You speak to the Genii. The spirits of all living things.”

I remember the wood sprouting under my hands and shiver. “Are you saying that all Fae shared such powers? Even with a limited population, I still don't see how they lost the war.”

“How *we* lost it, more like,” Taj says grimly, “because we... We are the Fae, aren't we? Maybe there's a limit to what we can do, and...” He lifts a hand to his head and for a moment I don't know what he's doing. “Fuck.”

“What’s wrong?”

“His ears,” Kiaran says. “They’ve changed.”

“We’re all changing.” Taj tucks his dark hair behind his ears, and I stare, my mouth going dry. Why do I find his now sharply pointed ears so sexy?

Cute, and sexy. I want to run my fingertips over them, feel their shape.

“It will make it harder for us to hide,” Finn says.

“I’ll trim them,” Taj says and I wince at the idea.

“It won’t work. My parents trimmed my ears when I was little,” Finn says. “The points grow right back.”

I shudder. Lift my hand to my own ears, trace their outline. Is it my impression or are they growing pointy, too?

“Ari.” Taj curses softly under his breath.

“What is it?”

“The skin on your wrists. It’s changed color. It’s your scent glands,” Finn says quietly.

“But why?”

“Because they are places where we...” He clears his throat. “Where we will mark you during mating.”

An interesting silence falls between us. Glancing at my mates, I see their eyes growing dark and hungry. A throb goes through me, loud like a gong.

“We should check each other,” I whisper. “See what else has changed. Maybe I have scales now, too, maybe—”

“Calm down, *kora*.” Taj grips my chin. “You’re panicking. What’s the matter?”

It seems making up my mind hasn’t freed me from fear.

“I didn’t realize our bodies would just... change, that we would turn into Fae,” I whisper. “It was all... intangible until now.”

“I thought we were solid,” Taj drawls. “Pretty fucking solid.”

Kiaran snorts.

“But how are we going to make it to the south when we’re so changed?” I go on. “How will anyone accept us? Where are we going to live? To make a family—”

“Ah.” Taj strokes my cheek, just as Finn nuzzles the top of my head. “That’s why you’re worried, aren’t you? You’re wondering where we can raise our babies safely.”

I gape at him, because my mind hadn’t made that leap, hadn’t consciously framed my fear, but now that it’s been spoken out loud...

*Yeah*. Our babies. But also my mates. I want them all safe and sound.

If we survive this love, this bond, the making of this clan, then we need a secure place to roost, to nest.

“To *nest*,” I whisper, the word ringing with a new, broader meaning.

“We’ll make you a safe nest,” Finn rumbles. “We’ll find a safe place.”

They gather around me—Finnen, Taj, Kiaran, putting their arms around me, and their scents soothe me. A low rumbling sound is emanating from their chest, something between a growl and a big cat's purr, and it sends warmth through me, taking away the cold fear.

Whatever happens, I have my mates. They will take care of me. Of us.

We will battle the odds together.

But a groan breaks the safe bubble, a sting in my chest, a rush of renewed fear.

“Rhian,” I whisper, shoving gently at Kiaran's chest, trying to see our wounded new mate. “How is he?”

“I can hear you,” Rhian says, his voice a breath. “I'm not deaf or dead yet.”

My chest tightens. “Let me go to him.”

My alphas draw back one by one, eyes a little dazed, slow to react. And one by one they turn to look at Rhian.

“How is he?” Finnen asks.

“Again, I'm telling you I'm...” Rhian coughs, a rattling sound. “Ow, fuck. Telling you that I'm right here. Stop talking over my head.”

“I don't like that cough. Time to find that healer of yours,” Taj says, “huh, Kia?”

“Yeah.”

I crawl on all fours over to Rhian. He's sitting with his back to the trunk and watches my approach warily from under

dark lashes. I kneel beside him, finally take a good look at him in the light of the brightening sky.

“Hi.” I put a hand on his arm. “I’m Ariadne.”

“Rhian.” His voice is a rough thread, fraying at the edges, but despite his awful pallor, he manages a faint smile. “A pleasure.”

His chestnut curls are matted with sweat and grime but bronze strands glint here and there, and his eyes are like leaves and honey, green and gold and pretty. With his smooth cheeks and soft mouth, he’s almost as pretty as a girl but for the sharp line of his jaw and the thick dark brows.

If he didn’t look so drained of blood—his clothes are soaked with it, I realize, lifting my hand and staring at my crimson-painted fingers—he’d be devastatingly handsome.

He still takes my breath away.

*The pleasure is all mine*, I think.

“You smell good,” he whispers. “You smell right. You all...” He coughs weakly. “You all smell right.”

“You bet we do,” Taj mutters, “but you... What are you?”

“What do you mean?” I wipe my bloodied fingers on my pants and stroke a curl out of Rhian’s eyes.

Scooting closer, Taj sniffs at him. “He’s not an alpha, that’s for sure.”

“He’s not?” But now he mentions it, I know he’s right. I didn’t think much about it. All I knew from the moment I

smelled Rhian's scent is that he was one of us, that he belonged with us. "But then what is he?"

"A beta," I believe, Finnen says quietly.

*A beta.*

"How would you know that?" Taj demands. "He just smells... different."

"But he smells right. And he's not an omega, and he's attracted to us which means he's not a zeta, so that can only mean he's a beta."

"How do you know he's not an omega?"

"Not sweet enough," Finnen growls, "all right? Is your nose blocked? Can't you smell the musk on him?"

"He's right," Kieran chimes in. "Doesn't smell like an omega or an alpha."

"Will you all just fucking stop sniffing me?" Rhian grumbles quietly and it's funny, the way he ducks his head, a light flush touching his cheeks.

Cute.

Dangerously attractive.

"What does a beta do?" I wonder out loud.

"Now you make him sound like a toy," Finnen says.

"A sex toy," Taj adds.

Finnen chokes a little. "Will you be serious for once, soldier?"

"Will you relax for once, priest?"

I snort, pat Rhian's shoulder—and realize he's passed out cold. I let out a sharp breath.

“What's going on?” Kiaran comes to pat Rhian's head. “Shit.”

“We need to go,” I choke out, suddenly deathly afraid. “Or we might lose our mate for good.”

---

This time Kiaran has Rhian. He hauls him onto his horse and climbs behind him, maneuvering him so that Rhian's back is resting on his chest, Rhian's head resting on Kiaran's shoulder.

I ride with Finnen, his chest a solid wall of heat at my back.

Despite his injuries and exhaustion, Finnen is already looking better and feeling him close is reassuring. No matter how worried I am about Rhian, the fear for Finnen's life and the pain of having been away from him still hasn't left me.

The story of how he lost his eyesight broke my heart. The tale of his past, all the pain hiding between the lines, it makes me want to cling to him, press kisses all over him, overwrite the sorrow with joy and pleasure. I want to make him understand, feel to the marrow of his bones, that I love him. That I wouldn't hurt him.

And despite the worry, having slept with my mates, touching them, smelling them, and now with Finnen at my back, the heat between my legs returns, as is the ache in my belly.



This is ridiculous. One of my mates may be dying, the others are battered and hungry and tired, and my body still demands its dues.

“Stop it,” I hiss at myself.

Finnen’s lips touch my nape and I shudder. “Did you say something?”

My Gods, does this guy have supernatural hearing. “Just talking to myself.”

“Is that a daily occurrence? Should I worry?”

The light purr in his low voice is making matters worse. I swear I feel it deep in my stomach, in my core, everywhere. It sends pangs of desire through me so strong they keep translating into pain.

Painful need.

Agonizing arousal.

Desperate lust.

“You’re shaking.” His arms tighten at my waist, his cock hardens against my back. “Dammit, Ari... You’re perfuming.”

“Can’t quite help it, you know,” I grind out.

“This is going to be a hard ride,” he mutters, his tone somewhere between a grin and a groan, “isn’t it?”

Can’t deny it. And he remains hard behind me all the way, making me hornier and hotter than ever. I swear I’ll self-combust by the time we find this healer and we’ll be lucky if I don’t mount Finnen the moment we dismount to relieve the ache.

*Like an animal, I think. No reason, no control. Just need.*

Kiaran is leading us east, where the land stretches flat and verdant alongside the river and its tributaries. In the far distance, I can almost swear I see the shimmer of water. The big ocean. But it can't be. Can it? Are we that close to the border now? I mean, we are on higher ground...

What I don't see is a town nearby, or a village. Any sign of human occupancy, apart from a few scattered farms.

But Kiaran leads the way without hesitation, controlling his horse easily. It's as if he's remembering more than just his past, like skills he learned while growing up, before he was cast away to die.

Including horse riding, it appears. And educated speech. Who knows what other surprises he has up his sleeve? It's exciting to see him revealed, piece by piece, and now that I've thought that, my mind keeps unveiling him, undressing him as I saw him before, all hard planes and ridges, and his cock hard and trembling, his eyes dark with desire—

"This way," he says and presses his heels into the horse's flanks, one arm around Rhian who's still lolling in his hold like a ragdoll, making me fear the worst.

We ride toward a dark clump of trees—olives, I think as we approach, a sure sign we're almost in the south—and then through it.

A hamlet appears behind it, a small collection of low, stone-built houses clustered around a square with a lone oak tree and a fountain. Small fenced gardens burst with green,

and around spread fields and pastures. Behind, them, I see a manor looming in the distance, flanked by more trees.

Before reaching the first house, Kiaran dismounts and drags Rhian down from the horse. Swinging our beta up in his arms, cradling him as if he weighs nothing, he starts toward the hamlet and the rest of us scramble to follow suit.

“Kia, wait!”

“Let’s hope that healer is still alive,” Taj mutters, grabbing my hand the moment I dismount and Finnen’s, too. “And that she hasn’t moved away since our Wildman was a boy.”

“Always brace for the worst,” Finnen grumbles and it shouldn’t make me smile, but he’s back, and I missed his grouchy attitude.

Now, I just need to keep us together and alive to get that fairytale happy ending.

*Easy-peasy, right?*

---

**ARIADNE**

“**W**hat do you want?”

The old woman holding the door open is blinking at us myopically. Her white hair is hanging in two braids over her shoulders, her long dress is a patchwork of bright colors, and her face is like scrunched-up parchment.

“We’re looking for the healer.” Kiaran shifts Rhian in his arms. “Maris? That was her name.”

She squints at him. “I’m Maris. Hadn’t realized my reputation had reached so far, my lord. I’m just a humble village healer.”

“Will you let us in?”

“Oh, sure, come right in.” She steps aside and gestures us in. “Place the girl on the table there so that I can examine her.”

“It’s a boy, actually.”

“Just put him there. Is he sick or wounded?”

“Wounded. He has an arrow in his shoulder.”

“Nasty things, arrows.” She follows Kiaran to the table, shuffling her feet. “Don’t I know you from somewhere? You

seem familiar.”

Inside a fire is burning in the brick fireplace against the far wall, and there are colorful rugs on the floor and two seats covered in red blankets. A bed is at the back of the cottage, peeking behind a curtain.

“I’m Kiaran,” Kiaran says. “And this is Rhian. Now can you help him?”

“We have coin,” Taj says and I wonder how much he has left after spending it right and left on this journey to pay for our lodging in the inns, our food and clothes.

“I cannot guarantee to save a man with an arrow in his shoulder,” she mumbles and coughs, wiping at her mouth with her fingers. “Coin or no coin.”

“Then do your best,” I plead, coming to take Rhian’s slack hand. “Please.”

He looks so still, so... empty somehow. Empty of life. And it’s breaking me.

*Artume, you can’t take him. Not before I get to know him, be with him.*

“Why are you crying, girl?” The healer frowns at me. “You either love this young man very much or you caused his suffering. Which is it?”

“Can’t it be both?” I whisper.

“I see how it is.” She gives me a gummy grin that unsettles me. Her rheumy eyes seem to see way too much.

“Do you?”

“Are your arrows tipped with poison?”

“What? No.”

“Are they barbed?”

“No.”

“Good. Maybe he does stand a fighting chance after all. Go sit by the fire, let me work.”

Nobody budes. I’m still holding Rhian’s hand.

“We’re staying right here,” Finnen says, feeling for the edge of the table and actually putting a hand on Rhian’s shin. “It will help if we’re close.”

“Help whom?” she mutters.

“Help Rhian.”

“He’s your mate.”

Finnen nods. “Possibly.”

“But also hers.”

“Yes.”

She squints down at Rhian and I’m starting to worry she can’t see well enough to help him and not butcher him in the process. “This is interesting.”

“Is it?” Finnen bares his teeth. “Just fix him up and take the coin, my lady. That’s all that you need to do.”

“But you’re acting like a clan, and only Fae-bloods do that. I can’t just—”

“I’m Kiaran Derya D’ Adraj.” Kiaran folds his muscular arms over his chest and looks down his nose at her. “Stop asking questions and just do what you’re told.”

“Holy fuck.” Taj whistles softly. “Look at all that bad attitude.”

I gape at Kiaran a little. He never struck me as arrogant, but now he oozes aristocratic entitlement and huffy annoyance.

The healer’s brows fly up.

Then she cackles. “No way. Kiaran Derya is dead. He died of the sickle sickness when he was but a boy.”

“Is that what my parents told everyone?” A dangerous grin tilts Kiaran’s mouth. “Now, *that* is interesting.”

“Kiaran Derya used to play around here, with my son, Erij. Kiaran Derya always said—”

“I’m a dragon, a D’ Adraj, a bolt of lightning in the sky,” Kiaran finishes.

Her cackling dies. Her face drains of color. “How did you know...? That’s not possible.”

“Just do your job and save him.” Kiaran turns away to face the fire. “Carry your load. Isn’t that what Erij always said?”

“May the wild goddess bless him, he did.” She wipes her hands on her dress, her expression turning uncertain. “If you are Kiaran Derya, then welcome back, my lord. And of course I shall do my best to help your friend.”

---

She cuts the fabric around the arrow haft protruding from Rhian's shoulder and peels the shirt off him. His chest is strong and pale, smeared with blood.

Over one pec, he has a trail of scales.

If the healer notices, she doesn't mention it. Instead, she presses around the shaft, feeling the arrowhead inside the flesh.

Rhian groans softly, lashes fluttering.

"I'm not sure he's strong enough to make it," the healer says and my heart drops to my feet.

"We're here," Kiaran says. "He will make it."

"What does your presence have to do with his strength?" the woman asks. "No offense, my lord."

"We are his mates," Finnen says. "We may not be bonded yet but like draws on like, or so the old books say."

"It's a clan thing, mistress," Taj drawls. "You wouldn't understand."

I shoot him a glare. Not the best moment to annoy the healer, spoil Rhian's only chance at surviving this, but he doesn't grin or wink. He looks dead serious, and I realize he has placed a hand on Rhian's thigh.

"He belongs with us," I say. "Please, save him."



She shakes her head at us, her long braids twisting like snakes. Strings of small bones hang from her ears and they click and rattle. “As you wish.”

“What do you need us to do?”

“I need to dig in with the knife,” she tells me. “You need to be ready the moment I pull the arrow out to staunch the blood.”

“With what?”

“Your hands. Until I bind the wound.” She tsks. “He’s a pretty one. Too pretty to be human. I didn’t need to see the scales to know his true nature.” She pulls out a small blade from a fold in her skirts. “The same nature all of you lot share.”

Finnen frowns. “My lady—”

“Your secret’s safe with me. For Kiaran Derya’s sake, who’s come back from the dead.” She touches her forehead with her middle finger. “For the sake of my son, may the gods bless his spirit, who often spoke of his lost friend.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper as her words sink in. “I hadn’t realized you lost your son.”

“He was Fae-blood, too. The soldiers took him when he was fourteen. Your family may have saved your life by sending you away.”

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about,” Kiaran growls, “so shut up and help Rhian.”

Without another word, she presses the blade into the wound, cutting it wider. Rhian jerks, eyes flying open, a pained grunt leaving his lips. If possible, he grows even paler as blood runs down his chest, and the healer moves the blade to the other side of the arrow shaft, cutting again.

Then she digs her fingers into the wound and wrenches out the arrow with a wet squelch. Blood gushes out.

“Fuck!” Rhian’s back arches off the table.

“Press down,” the healer instructs me and in a daze, I put my hands over the wound and press. “I’ll be right back.”

Warm crimson spills over my fingers. I can feel the thudding of his heartbeat under my palms. His skin is slippery with blood. My thoughts spiral into dark tunnels and black ends.

Then she’s back, shoving my fingers away and applying a poultice and a square of woolen cloth on top, then a piece of smooth wood. “I’ll need bandages,” she says, “and I don’t have fabric. Better shred one of your shirts. Quickly.”

Kieran is the first to react. He pulls off his shirt and tears it into long strips, then helps the healer wind them around Rhian’s chest to keep the bandage and the piece of wood in place.

By the time they’re done, Rhian is limp once more, passed out cold on the table, and we’re all bathed in his blood.

Tears are gathering in the corners of my eyes. “Will he make it?”

“He’s young. It’s possible. If infection doesn’t set in...”

“Right.”

“But he can’t stay here,” she says. “None of you can. I’m sorry.”

“Not even for the sake of your son’s memory?” Taj says softly.

She shakes her head. Looks away.

“Fine, then we’ll go,” Taj says.

“Where?” I demand. “We can’t move him yet. He needs time to recover.”

“I know a place,” Kiaran says.

“Where?” I ask, but I think, *his family*. His parents live around here. Is that what he has in mind?

“Come on.” He reaches for Rhian but Taj beats him to it, sliding his arms under Rhian’s back and knees, lifting him off the table.

“How much do we owe you?” Taj asks.

“You don’t.”

“Don’t think that exonerates you from sending us away,” I say.

“Nothing can save my spirit,” she whispers. “It’s too late.”

I cast her one last look before we leave her house. She’s standing by the bloodied table, shoulders hunched. I wonder if she was the one who had told the soldiers her son was Fae-blood so they’d come and take him away.

I wonder if we share the same guilt for doing something wrong while thinking it was right. I put an arrow through my mate. She abandoned her son.

We both have to live with the guilt, but as I reach the door, I turn once more and say, “What if your son is still alive?”

She doesn’t reply.

The door shuts behind us.

---

“Where are you thinking of going?” Finnen stumbles over a hollow in the ground, and I grab his arm to steady him. He still looks like hell. Because of Rhian, our attention hasn’t been focused on him, and I still need to check his body for injuries he likes to hide.

“There.” Kiaran points and we all turn to look.

“The *manor*?” Taj says.

“It’s your family home, isn’t it?” I whisper as I slide my arm around Finnen to make sure he doesn’t stumble again. “This is where you grew up.”

He shrugs. “Rhian needs rest. We all do. We need a break.”

“Sure, but... Aren’t these the people who sent you away to die?”

“Well, from what we know from Kiaran’s story,” Taj says, “apologies, *Kiaran Derya D’ Adraj*’s story, his parents sent him to stay with his cousins and his aunt and uncle. His aunt and uncle were the ones who left him to die in the wilderness.”

“And why was he sent there in the first place?” I glance at Kiaran who is quiet as he unties the horses and brings them over to us. “Summer vacationing? Was it something you did every year?”

“Kia. Say something, dammit,” Finnen mutters.

“I...” Kiaran frowns, pats the neck of his horse. “I don’t remember.”

“What don’t you remember? If your parents had decided to abandon you or if you traveled every year to your cousins’—?”

“I fucking don’t recall, okay?”

I start, “But you remember other things, you—”

“Yeah, I remember lessons and horse riding and philosophy lessons.”

“But you don’t remember if your parents loved you?”

“Don’t we all want our parents to love us?” he asks bitterly. “I spent years thinking they are good people, but how can I trust my memory on that? And what does it matter?”

“Doesn’t it?” I frown. “What will you do, blackmail them like you did with your uncle and aunt?”

“If they love me,” he whispers, “I won’t need to. And if they don’t, then they deserve it, don’t you think?”

Finnen chuckles. “He has a point. I didn’t take you for a philosopher.”

“I was taught the arts of the past,” Kiaran says, his voice a low rumble. “I just remember bits and pieces. But I suppose

what you learn as a child stays with you. After all, my family has money. The Duke and Duchess D' Adraj."

I open my mouth, close it. Open it again. "*Duke and Duchess?* Are you serious?"

Taj whistles. "I can't believe I dressed a duke's son in a dress and lived to tell the tale."

"I can't believe I let you dress me in a dress." Kieran smirks. "Do you like guys in dresses, Taj?"

"Or is it only commands you like?" Finnen purrs.

Taj splutters, then laughs. "Okay, these are topics for another day."

"Yeah," I say, casting a concerned look at Rhian who's lying still in Taj's arms. "It is. We should get going."

"Then lead the way, my dear Duke Wild." Taj nods at our Wildman. "Can't wait to meet the in-laws."

## KIARAN

**T**he in-laws.

I don't know if I'm more shocked about what Taj said or about finally coming home.

The latter, fucking obviously.

It's just that my mind is doing weird leaps and somersaults between the past and the present, dazing me at each and every turn.

Just last week, I was living in a cave with animals as my only company, running with the wolves and talking to birds, a cold emptiness inside me that nothing could fill.

And now I'm riding with my mates and our omega to my ancestral home to see what else memory is hiding from me. Will it be an encounter with friends or foes?

Will they willingly help us or send us away?

At some point, a man's mind can break. At least, living with the animals I had a vague idea that my parents hadn't meant me harm. Then again, my memory had been hazy, as hazy as pea-soup fog. Now I know better.

But what I know best is that I'd do anything for my mates.

And that's why I'm leading the way. Digging my heels in, urging my horse onward, the others following me on the other two mounts, toward the stately building overlooking the area. Built on a slight rise in the land, surrounded by ancient oak trees and fields and pastures, it's at least three-story high with tall, white-framed windows and a slate roof.

I know this house.

I know what's inside.

I remember my *room*.

I remember the salons and the kitchens.

But I don't recall my parents' faces, their voices.

It's throwing me off.

As we approach, dogs start baying. They run up to us, barking, fearlessly winding between the horses' legs. My horse whinnies and tries to dance away from them, and damn I miss the stallion I had before. He was a beast but he wasn't afraid of tiny insects with a big ego trying to bite at his hooves.

A man walks briskly toward us, whistling for the dogs, and they lope back, still barking. They surround him, running in mad circles. I'm starting to think they're having fun at our expense.

"Who goes there?" he calls out, tipping his straw hat back. "What do you want? This is D' Adraj land."



“Guests looking for hospitality,” I say. “Family coming to visit.”

“Family?” He frowns up at me as we meet halfway. “Are you related to the D’ Adraj?”

“You could say that. I’m their son, Kiaran.”

“Their *son*? The D’ Adraj don’t have a son. Not anymore.”

“He begs to differ,” Taj says, nudging his horse to come stand beside mine. Rhian is leaning back against him, eyes slitted. Good to see him conscious. “Now will you let the duke and duchess know they have visitors? It’s been a long day.”

The man takes us all in—meanwhile, Finnen and Ariadne’s horse has also made its way to my other side—obviously noting the filthy, bloodied ripped clothes and wild hair we’re sporting.

His gaze returns to me, having marked me as the leader of this ragtag group—or as the craziest of them with my wild claims, who knows.

“I will tell them,” he eventually says, whistling again for the dogs who are baying and growling and trying to bite everything in sight. “But I can’t promise anything. Your story, you may want to rethink it, or they’re more likely to have me kick you out.”

“You and what army?” Finnen grinds out and Ariadne shushes him.

“Wouldn’t they hear him out, first?” she asks.

“Maybe at another time,” the man says. “But with their eldest daughter getting married—”

“You have a sister, Kia?” Taj asks.

*That’s news to me.*

“Your *sisters*,” the man says, giving me a suspicious look. “Both of them. If you’re the D’ Adraj’s son, how is it that you don’t know about them?”

“Good question,” I mutter, “and though I have a good answer, I’m not about to discuss this with you. Take us to my parents. Now.”

There’s a roar inside me, inside my voice, inside my words. It echoes inside my head with the crackling of flames, and the words turn to fire. It flashes around me, smoke curling, and the man jerks back, eyes widening.

“Right this way, my lord,” he croaks and turns toward the manor, gesturing and already hurrying away from us. “I’ll let everyone know of your arrival.”

---

Nobody speaks. I urge my horse forward and the others follow, but the silence has thunder in it. As we approach the gates, Finnen calls out my name.

“I smelled smoke,” he says when I pull on the reins. “What happened?”

I stare hard at the manor, hoping for an answer from the heavens or the land. None seem forthcoming.

“He breathed fire,” Taj says, a note of something like awe in his voice.

“That’s not possible,” I say and stop because I’m the one who felt the fire coming out of me. How can I deny it?

And yet how can it be fucking real?

“Dragons,” Finnen says. “Fucking dragons.”

No idea what he’s going on about. I don’t want to think. Don’t want to deal. Not when I have other matters to contend with.

The man yells something and people appear, stopping their work to gawk at us. As he pushes the gate open, they gather together, staring. I heave a sigh of impatience that comes out as a growl.

Sometimes I think I’m turning into Finnen.

I wonder how he thought to become a priest when he has zero patience with annoying people.

I wonder how Ariadne decided he was her mate. If it was just the scent. Is the scent enough to convince you that you want and need someone? Is our entanglement due to our scents or because we saw ourselves in each other?

Dammit, I need to stop distracting myself with big unanswerable questions and focus on the present.

“He says he’s the duke’s lost son,” the man is saying to a frazzled-looking woman with a stained, white apron. “He’s come back.”

“Goodness, such bad timing.” She wrings her hands together, throwing us a wide-eyed glance. “On top of everything.”

“You’d think your parents would be happy to have you back,” Ariadne says.

*Right.*

Maybe that’s the answer I was looking for.

Maybe not.

I nudge my horse down the path leading to the house, through gardens with statues and fountains. One statue draws my gaze. I stare.

*... a garden with a fountain in its middle and a statue of a king holding up a sword, pointing to the sky...*

I lead my horse right up to the steps of the manor, my mind a storm, a violent eddy, no clear thoughts bubbling to the surface. More people approach, coming out of small doors in the main building but also from the stables and small houses at the back.

I feel like I’m drowning.

“Open the door!” I shout, dismounting and grabbing the heavy knocker. It’s shaped like a flame and I hesitate for a long moment. “I demand to see the duke and the duchess.”

The door creaks as it’s pulled open from the inside. I move back a step as metal glints in the opening.

Sharp metal.

“Watch out!” I throw out an arm to stop my mates from coming any closer as two guards step out, spears raised and scowls on their faces. They wear leather from head to toe and seem to think themselves unbeatable.

I don't like this.

“We come in peace,” I say. “I'm the duke's son.”

“The duke has no son,” one of them spits.

“Then you don't know the whole story.” I refuse to yield another step. “Do you want to fight us?”

He glances at my companions and purses his lips. “Only if you promise to give me a good time.”

Arrogant. Stupid. I could take him out with a single punch.

But then the man we first saw approaches. “He breathed fire!” he says, his voice shaking. “We all saw it.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Eban?”

“He's Fae-blood. All of them must be.”

“Fae-bloods don't breathe fire.” The other guard narrows his eyes at us. “I'll spear them through, here and now. Skewer them and throw them out.”

I hiss, baring my teeth at him. “You won't live to take another step, you miserable shit, I fucking swear it on the gods. If you touch my mates, I'll end you.”

His face purples. “You don't get to tell me how to protect this house—”

“And you don’t get to threaten my mates and live,” I growl and the heat returns. It’s violence and fire and also arousal. I’m all too aware of my mates’ scents, especially our omega’s, and dammit, my dick is thickening in my pants. I want to fight and fuck and do it all over again.

“Whoa.” One of the guards steps back, lowering his spear so that it’s aligned with me, pointing at my chest. “What’s going on?”

The heat is coming out of me in waves. The world is turning red.

“Kiaran,” someone says and I think it’s Taj. “Calm down. Do you hear me?”

*Flames. Flames and smoke. I need to—*

“What’s the matter here?” a light voice asks and a woman pushes her way between the guards. “Who is that?”

“My lady.” Suddenly everyone is bowing. “You should go back to your rooms. We’ll take care of this little matter.”

The girl is taller than Ariadne, with pale hair and eyes, skin white as milk. She has something stately and statuesque about her, maybe in the way she holds herself, like a queen, and yet it makes me think of ruffling her hair and teasing her.

I don’t even know her.

I don’t want her. It’s nothing like that. I just feel... akin to her. And I know who she is. I’d have guessed, I think, even without knowing.

“You needn’t bother yourself with these ruffians,” the guard is saying. “With all the wedding preparations—”

“Nonsense,” she says. “I’m never too busy to welcome guests.”

“But my lady—”

“Good day,” I say and her gaze sharpens.

“You...” She walks right up to me, no fear in her clear eyes. “You look somehow familiar.”

“As do you,” I say.

“Insolence!” the guard barks. “This is the duke’s older daughter, Marienne.”

“And he says he’s your brother, my lady,” Finnen says and I turn to find him with his arm around Ariadne, eyes half-closed. “The duke’s son.”

“Brother? Wait, no. *Kiaran*?” She pales. “It can’t be. Mother said you died.”

“I came close quite a few times, I assure you,” I drawl in a fair imitation of Taj. “But no, still alive and kicking, as you can see.”

She still looks shocked half to death. “Yes... I can see that.”

“Is that all she has said about me? That I died?”

“She said you died very young.”

“How?”

“You got lost in the woods one day. They never found you. They thought a wolf got you.”

“Ouch,” Taj says. He’s hauling Rhian along, an arm around the more slender man’s hips. “Good story. Not even close, though.”

“Not so,” I mutter mildly. “A wolf almost did get me once. But that was later.”

“And who are you?” she says, glancing at Taj, then at Rhian who looks white as a sheet beside him.

“Tajevi Krath, my lady.” Taj grins and sketches a quick bow, probably because it will annoy the guards. Maybe my sister, too. “At your service.”

Her brows go up. “Tajevi Krath. Really?”

“That’s my name,” he says cockily. “Really.”

“My lady,” the guard tries again. “They are Fae-blood. They stink. And this man who claims to be your brother, he breathed fire.”

“Oh?” She scrunches up her nose. “I’d have loved to see that.”

My mouth twitches. This is fucking ridiculous. But it makes sense that I’d have a ridiculous sister. I’m half-mad, after all. Must be in our blood.

The guard rallies, despite her obvious dismissal. “But Fae-bloods—”

“We’re the same as you,” I interrupt him. “The same I was when I was given up for dead.”



“Kia...” Ariadne shifts behind me. “Is this a good idea?”

But Rhian groans and I do need to protect my mates, give them a respite or we will never make it across the border. We need information, and provisions, and fresh horses. And besides that, I want to meet my parents and sort out what is real and what not.

“Yes,” I say. “I think it’s a good idea.”

Ariadne sighs.

“Marianne.” I like the sound of her name. “Will you let us in?”

She steps even closer, examining my face. “You do look a lot like Father. I’m sure Mother and Father will be so happy to see you again and hear the tale of how you survived. So yes, come right in.”

Damn, I wish I could believe that...

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“You just *let them in?*” This other girl is cast in darker hues, and is a little shorter. Her face is cuter. In her dark green dress with a gem pendant hanging on a silver chain around her neck, she might even be prettier than her older sister.

“I did.”

Right now, though, she looks like a pissed-off little banshee. “Mother will have a fit! And you should be getting ready for the feast!”

“He says he’s our brother! And one of his friends is hurt and needs our help.”

“You’re out of your mind, Marianne!”

“Ody, please.”

I’ve taken Rhian from Taj, since Finnen also looks a little unsteady on his feet, and I heft him in my arms, worried that he doesn’t seem to be fully conscious yet.

“While you debate,” I say, “this man may die, unless you give us a warm room with a bed for him to rest. He was wounded and has lost a lot of blood.”

That seems to get the attention of the annoying younger sister. “Oh. He’s so pretty!”

I manage not to roll my eyes. “That’s what the old healer said, too. It won’t help him get better, though.”

“So what’s it gonna be?” Taj folds his arms over his chest. “Can you give us a room? You can have your little quarrel later.”

“Shut it, Taj,” Finnen says. “My ladies, in the spirit of divine hospitality, taught to us by Hestea the goddess of the hearths and homes, won’t you find it in you to open your house to us for the night? I call blessings on you and see joy in your future if you allow your hearts to open in the same way.”

“Are you a priest?” Marianne asks. “You sound like a priest.”

“I used to be.”

The two sisters glance at each other and seem to reach an agreement.

“Come.” Marianne gestures toward a grand staircase. “Mother and father will be notified but meanwhile come and rest.”

“All right.” Blinking dazedly at this turn, I follow them up the stairs. “Come on, guys.”

“What was that speech, and what did you do with the grumpy, snappy Finnen we have all come to know and love?” Taj mutters.

“This is called knowing when to be polite, my friend,” Finnen says. “Not all ladies like your barbarian grunting and cursing.”

“So you admit that some do.” Taj smirks. “Now can we talk about Kiaran’s little fire-breathing incident from earlier?”

“Shush,” Ariadne says. “Let’s just make sure Rhian has a bed to rest in, first.”

The two sisters lead us to a row of doors and two maids hurry to curtsy in front of them.

“The Blue Room,” Marianne says. “The fire is already lit.”

“But my lady, that’s meant for your father’s guests.”

“Let me deal with my father. “

“Just because you’re the favorite...” The younger sister makes a face.

“Come on, Ody. You know that’s not true.” All business-like, Marianne bustles ahead and opens a door bearing the

carving of a stag on it. “This way. Bring your friend.”

I follow hot on her heels, tightening my arms around Rhian. He mutters something, stirring in my hold, and I hope he won't try to climb off me right now.

The room is set in dark tones, blue wallpaper, blue carpets, blue bedcovers and canopy. The fireplace is lit, three armchairs set in front of it. The window is letting in gray light.

Carefully, I bend my knees and place Rhian on the bed, straightening him out. His shredded shirt hangs off him in strips, stiff with his blood, the bandage around his torso coming loose. His face is blank, smoothed out as he lies there, passed out cold once more. I arrange the bandage, make sure the piece of wood is pressed on the wound to staunch the bleeding.

*Damn.*

Then I go and lean on the wall by the window, trying to hide the fact I feel as if my knees are about to give out. It's not the fact of carrying Rhian, though he's pretty damn heavy for someone so slender.

No, it's my mind that weighs on me. My thoughts and fears.

“We'll leave you to rest,” Marianne says, “and go find father and mother, tell them the news.”

“Yeah, go tell them,” Taj mutters. “That their lost son has returned bearing not gifts but unwanted guests.”

“Taj.” Ariadne grabs his hand, presses it between both of hers as the two girls and the maids step out. “Settle down.”

Taj frowns at the door as it closes, leaving us alone. “It’s just... something isn’t right about this place.”

“Haven’t you realized yet,” Finnen says, “that from now on, no place will feel right, not until we cross the border? We’re outsiders. Outcasts. Hunted. Prey.”

I let out a quickly bitten-off bark of laughter.

And that has them turning toward me like hounds scenting blood.

“Kiaran,” Ariadne says. “Are you all right?”

I start to nod but stop. I probably sound like I’m losing it completely. “Yeah, I’m good.”

Big fat lie. I’m home but I don’t really know this place, or these people. I don’t recall these passageways, these rooms.

To be perfectly honest, I’m not sure that I don’t miss the wilderness, the cold and empty spaces and the certainty that I’d die alone, because then I wouldn’t have to worry about others’ safety, about their feelings and their connection to me, and yet the thought of losing my mates makes me sick.

And on top of all of that...

“I set the fire,” I whisper. “I set the fire to my cousins’ house. I remember now. My mouth... My cousins annoyed me and flames jumped out of my mouth.”

“Kiaran...”

“My family was right to cast me out to die,” I choke out, shivers racking me. I feel so damn cold. “I’m a fucking freak.”

Ariadne's eyes are wide and dark, fixed on me. She crosses the room to take my hand. "Not your fault you manifested Fae traits so young."

"I've never heard of Fae blood producing flames before," Taj says.

"Like I said before, we're descendants of dragons." Finnen pulls his long, white hair back from his face, frowning. "Scales, pointy ears, fire. It makes sense."

"Maybe to you."

"Think about it. We're all—"

"Insane?" a voice says from the bed and we all turn to see Rhian watching us, propped on one elbow, brown curls in his eyes. "I agree."

## TAJ

“You’re awake,” I say inanely, because he very obviously is.

Rhian is awake.

I don’t know what to think of the new addition to our clan yet and it hasn’t helped that he’s been mostly unconscious and out of the conversation since we met him. The entire reason I am here with these guys is Ariadne. I mean, okay, on the way I sort of fell for the guys, too, but...

What do I do with a beta in this equation?

“Rhian.” Ariadne hurries to his side. “How are you feeling?”

He gazes at her as she takes a seat on the bed. “Gods above, you’re a pretty vision. And you smell...” He sniffs. “Damn, you smell good. Holy fuck, so good...”

“He’s definitely better,” Finnen rumbles, perching on the other side of the bed.

“I bet you he’ll pop a boner any moment now,” I mutter, watching Ariadne lean in and tuck a curl behind the man’s ear.

I'm joking. He still looks like death warmed over.

But I bet he would if he could, as her scent rises, filling the room. It's always there, always teasing my senses, rising and falling like a wave, sometimes a pleasant sweetness, sometimes a slam shot of honey and burnt sugar going straight from my lungs to my cock.

Like now.

She's perfuming.

We all groan, a choir of painfully aroused alphas yowling like cats in the moonlight, about to pounce.

She's been perfuming all the way here, but outdoors while riding through the plain, her scent was a distant tang on the air. Here it's a chokehold on my senses, a crushing grip on my dick.

"Fuck," Kiaran says, and yeah, that's exactly what I want to do.

Rhian glances at us, brows lifting, and if he can't feel her scent like a punch to the stomach, I don't know if he's our mate for real, half-dead or not.

A beta. A beta who's lost so much blood he was passed out until now. Probably explains why he can still think with all of us about to grab our omega and fuck her right on top of him on the bed.

"What are you?" he whispers, turning back to Ariadne. "Why do you smell so sweet?" He grips her arm, hauls her down until they're nose to nose. "It makes me want to kiss you, lick you, take you. Do you feel it, too?"



*Ah.*

Still don't know what to make of him, though.

"She's our omega," Finnen says, shifting on the bed, his hand between his thighs, obviously pushing down on an aching erection. "We're her alphas. And you..."

"I'm not an alpha," he says.

"We noticed, trust me. You're our beta."

He blinks long lashes. "I'm what, now?"

Fuck me, he didn't know.

"All I know is that I want you," he whispers, catching Ariadne's hand and pressing it to his cheek, then to his lips. "I mean, damn, I feel so tired I can barely move, but you make me burn."

"Welcome to the clan, my friend."

Ariadne moans softly as he presses soft kisses to her fingers, then the palm of her hand. "Rhian..."

"Gods dammit," Finnen breathes, shifting again on the bed, running one hand over Rhian's outstretched leg. "Someone stop me before I lose control."

"We're all about to lose control." I grit my teeth, my cock like an iron bar in my tight pants. "Kiaran, do something. We're about to have an orgy in your family home."

"Fuck," Kiaran says again, and I have to agree once more.

"We're about to," I say, stepping toward the bed. Damn, the sexual tension in the room is thick enough to cut with a

knife.

Her scent is so strong on the air I can taste it on my tongue—cake and syrup, golden honey and blossom mead. Rhian's scent intertwines with her, giving it a mossy note, and then the spice of Finnen and Kiaran underlays it all, dark and sticky like black toffee.

I stand behind Ariadne, place my hands on her shoulders, and she leans back against me. I want to turn her around, push down my pants and watch her pretty mouth close around my cock. I want the others to watch, or to touch, to tangle around us. I want Rhian to submit to me, I want him to play with her and get her ready for me.

I want them all.

I want everything.

“Finn,” I say, “and Kia, get in here, get on the bed now.”

“I *am* on the bed, you idiot,” Finnen says, but he leans in, reaching over Rhian to tug on a lock of Ariadne's hair.

Kiaran says nothing as he stalks to the foot of the bed and grabs one of the bedposts, his hand kneading the bulge between his legs, hair tousled and eyes dark.

Rhian's eyes widen and I'm not sure if it's alarm or lust I see in them. I think it's both, but he's new to this, to us, so he gets a pass, especially with three large alphas suddenly crowding him and an omega almost in full heat touching him.

An omega and three alphas who are apparently a scent match for him. A beta should close the circle, complete the

clan. Is this it? Are we now done with searching? Will Ariadne go into full heat right here and now?

I should worry about being in enemy territory, in every sense of the fucking word, about not having a nest for her, not having a home, a fortress to protect her, still on the run, still not at the border—

The door opens with a creak and we all freeze.

A maid comes inside and stops, eyes going round. “Good Goddess,” she whispers and I can only imagine the picture we make, gathered around our omega and our beta, tents in our pants, positively feral with arousal.

“What?” I growl at her and she flinches.

Another maid comes in, also stopping, and then more people.

Aristocrats.

Long velvet gowns and cloaks trimmed with fur, frock coats and embroidered vests and polished shoes.

The couple standing there staring at us has something familiar about it.

Becoming even more familiar when Kieran steps away from the bed with a muffled curse and awkwardly tugs on the hem of his shirt. I’ve never seen him like this.

Self-conscious.

Nervous.

Well, it’s true, the family resemblance is undeniable. His father is an aged, embittered version of Kieran, though the

blue eyes seem to belong to his mother.

Do we belong to our parents, our families? It's not as if they give up parts of themselves to make us up, not like they miss those parts and we owe them.

Then again, it might be my own bitterness talking over my parents who sent me away. And maybe I'm resentful of Kiaran to a point, because he has a chance to reconnect with his family, while I'm never seeing mine again, ever.

I don't even know where they are.

Which is probably for the best, but I'll never know for sure, will I?

My family, and the army, and everything I have ever known is lost to me, and no matter how happy I am with my mates, I wouldn't be anyone worth knowing if I could just erase the past and forget the people who forged me so quickly, would I?

Asking myself the questions probably isn't a good sign.

Then again, I've never thought of myself as a good person, either. Makes me wonder what these guys see in me. I wish I had the guts to ask.

His two sisters enter last, looking around with raised brows.

It's an epidemic. The raised brows disease. Wherever we go we are the cause of shock and surprise.

*Oh, feh and woe.*

Maybe we'll go down in history for that alone. Wouldn't that be ironic? Being Fae-blood and all but known for—

“We were told someone impersonating our dead son is here,” the middle-aged man says, all pomp and haughtiness, resting his hand on a mahogany walking stick he didn't even use as he stepped into the room. A vanity piece, the handle decorated with bone. “A shameless impostor.”

*Oh right.* We were in the middle of a trial of sorts. My dick distracted me first, and then my mind took a hike.

“Now, wait a moment,” I say.

“How dare you,” the duchess says, turning her blue gaze on me. “Our son is dead. Playing on our sorrow for profit is shameful. Shame on you.”

“Profit?” I blurt out, incredulous. “Why, lending us one of your hundreds of rooms is stretching your finances somehow?”

“You don't even look like our son,” she says with a sneer.

“Me? I should hope not.” I point at Kiaran. “He, on the other hand, is a spitting image, don't you think, your *Dukeness*?”

This is putting a real damper on my hard-on, let me tell you. And that's a good thing, because it's weird arguing with your mate's stupid parents while sporting an erection hard enough to poke out an eye.

Kiaran steps in front of me, spreads his hands a little. “It's me, Kiaran Derya. Don't you know me?”

The duchess pales. She brings a hand to her mouth. “Oh gods.”

I mean, the similarity to her husband is striking. Uncanny. She’d have to be blind not to see it.

“Mama,” Marianne says. “He’s our brother, isn’t he?”

“But he’s... dead...”

“Or so you hoped?” I suggest.

“Taj! Shut up.” Kiaran’s voice cracks like a whip, though he doesn’t turn around.

“Okay, fine.” I shrug. “You deal with them.”

“Excuse our mate,” Finnen says. “He’s wary of parents in general.”

The duchess makes a gasping noise.

“Our son,” the duke says again, “is dead. This man is an impostor.” He gestures at the maids. “Take them out of here.”

“Did you send me to my death?” Kiaran asks softly.

“I beg your pardon?” The duchess still hasn’t lowered her hand from her mouth.

“Did you send me to my aunt and uncle telling them to get rid of me quietly?”

“How dare he? Guards!” The duke turns back toward the door. “Guards!”

“You know me,” Kiaran goes on. “You know who I am, but you didn’t expect me to come back. After all this time, you

relaxed, thought it was over. That your family name would remain untainted. But here I am.”

There’s a crack in Kiaran’s voice, faint, maybe not audible to those who don’t know him well, but it goes right through him.

He had hoped they hadn’t been the ones behind his demise, that they’d be glad to see him return. Maybe that was foolish.

But it’s human. Having Fae blood doesn’t erase our human side. And I wish I could have spared him the hurt.

“Kia,” Ariadne whispers and steps to his side. She doesn’t say it but it’s clear. We’re with him. Whatever happens, we have his back.

The silence stretches.

“My son,” the duchess eventually says, “had a birthmark —”

“Karina!” The duke turns his furious gaze on her. “What in all the gods’ names are you doing?”

“He had a birthmark,” she says again, stubbornly, lifting her chin, taking a step forward. Her eyes are on Kiaran, half-defiant, half-beseeching.

“Where?” Ariadne steps forward, as if to place herself between Kiaran and his parents. For a moment, I don’t think the duchess will reply. That she’ll ignore Ariadne, ignore all of us.

But then she sighs. “On the back of his neck. A strange pattern. Like scales.” Her voice breaks. “The sign of Fae

blood.”

Kiaran’s head is bowed, and as I step around him so that I can see his face, I realize he’s breathing hard.

I reach for him. “Kiaran—”

He turns around, giving his parents his back, and lifts his pale hair. “Like this one?”

*Oh gods...*

“So that’s where they were,” Ariadne says. “The scales. I had wondered.”

The duchess ignores her in favor of lurching forward and grabbing Kiaran’s hand. “It is you,” she whispers and when he turns back around, she gives him a tremulous smile. “Kiaran.”

“Anyone could have a similar mark,” the duke snarks.

“It’s him,” the duchess says. “It’s our son.”

“Well, this is perfect.” Marianne steps forward, beaming. “Perfect timing for my wedding! You are of course all invited.”

I almost laugh out loud, especially seeing the souring expression on the duke’s face.

Instead, I clap Kiaran on the back, then glance at the bed where Rhian and Finnen are still sitting. “Thank you for the invitation, my lady. We can’t wait, right, everyone? It’s going to be so much fun.”



**ARIADNE**

Taj is chuckling, and I'm still thinking of the scales on the back of Kiaran's neck.

The Fae mark that almost had him killed as a child.

And I'm thinking of the flames he breathed.

Of his pale sloe eyes.

His beauty and strength.

His kindness.

Is it wrong to be proud to have Fae blood? Just because humans are scared of us, shouldn't we celebrate our lineage, our strengths and our particularities? Why should we see the world through the eyes of the many? Why not see it through our own?

It's easy to be swept away by the popular opinion, the canonized version, the winner's version of the events, the populace's angle on what's normal and accepted.

And even the populace agrees that the Fae are the most beautiful.

And now I have four just for me.

*Oh dear.*

The bolt of want going through me is no surprise as I gaze at my men. The throbbing in my belly never stopped when everyone barged in on us.

The only problem is working around the constant ache, the constant desire for my mates to think straight.

Realize that Kiaran's mother has accepted him as her own.

That his father refuses.

That they both knowingly sent him to die.

That we're in their house, vulnerable and yet desperate for a respite, especially for Rhian and Finnen who've been through hell.

And also...

"A wedding party?" I whisper as it finally starts to sink in, that we are invited to the wedding of Kiaran's sister. "Now?"

"I know, right?" Taj grins at me. "Woe is me. I have nothing appropriate to wear to a wedding! How will I ever show my face to such an event when—"

"We can't stay." I glower at Taj, wondering why he's acting up so much. "We need to reach the border as soon as possible."

"And miss Lady Marianne's wedding? No way," Taj says.

"Speaking of fire..." Finnen gets up, his glower about to set the room on flame. "Taj, dammit. You know we can't linger. It's a matter of... heat. We're running out of time."

“Heat?” The duchess frowns. “It’s winter.”

“Relax, priest,” Taj mutters. “We can’t keep running, you know that.”

Finn huffs. “Don’t be an idiot, this isn’t about—”

“I said we’re staying until we recover,” Kiaran interrupts, “and we are. Taj, shut up.”

Taj shivers. “Fuck, I love it when you get all bossy. Your word is our command, my lord Kiaran.”

Finnen makes a choking sound.

“They can’t stay,” the duke finally says, stamping his stick on the floor. “Marianne, this is outrageous.”

“Will you inform my future husband, father, that you refused to let our long-lost brother attend my wedding? And not only him, but also Tajeve Krath and his friends?”

The duke gapes at her for a long moment, mouth forgotten open. “Are you serious?”

“Father, did you hear what I—”

The duke shakes himself and turns to Taj. “Tajeve Krath , the war hero?”

“*Ah*. Fuck, I knew I should have invented a name. I was lulled into a sense of false security,” Taj mutters, then pastes on a smile. “You were in the army, too, Your Grace?”

“Drake Crescent Brigade.” The duke executes a wobbly salute and for the first time, his scowl melts into pleasantness. “It’s always an honor to have a war hero in our home.”

Kiaran shoots me a look. Then he winks.

*What in the world?*

“Oh. All right. Great. Well...” Taj clears his throat. “The honor is mine, Your Grace. As is traveling with your son. A great man.”

Kiaran shoots him an incredulous look, as if to say, *‘have you lost your mind?’*

But the duke still seems pleased and the tension in the air dissipates in degrees as he turns to his wife. “Send up supper. And wine. And we must find clothes for your guests to wear at your wedding, daughter. Ody, will you see to it?”

“Yes, Father,” the younger daughter says, making a face. “Of course.”

Ody is suspicious of us, unlike her older sister. I wish I could tell her that we are harmless, that it’s all good, but we are fugitives, the army and the Church after us, and she must know it. They all must know it. The Imperial decrees about Fae-bloods must have reached this sleepy manor, too.

So all we can do is graciously accept the invitation, take the chance to gather some strength, maybe get to know our new mate a little better if he’s willing, and then... be on our way as soon as possible.

May all the gods, human and Fae, help us.

---

Taj and Kiaran prop Rhian up on pillows in the bed, while Finnen is talking to a manservant about bandages and ointments. He seems to know a lot about herbs. Probably one more thing he had to study to become a priest. He's impressive—in his knowledge, his perseverance, his absolute stubbornness and refusal to give up after losing his sight, his family, his world.

In his decision to follow me, be with us.

All of them are.

My mates.

They are incredible. The better I get to know them, the more I fall for them.

And my body wants them more than ever.

Maids come and go, carrying trays of food and jugs of wine, and the ache in my belly burns like before. I want them all out so I can be with my men. I want to kiss Rhian, see if his taste matches his scent, see if I really want him like my body tells me, see how we fit together, me and him, him and all of us.

Don't they feel it? Is it only me?

I feel trapped in this stately manor with the fields stretching around it in every direction, the copses of trees and the hamlets dotting the landscape. Trapped because any way we run, we will be out in the open with no place to hide, and I sense danger.

Danger is lurking like a beast, waiting for us. The hounds are after us, and I need a dark, warm hollow to hide with my

mates, I need to burrow and curl up with them like an animal in its hole.

I choke on a whimper when a whiff of Taj's scent reaches me, and I turn away from the window I've planted myself in front of to find him coming my way.

I'm drowning in desire, my skin stretched too thin over muscle and bone, my insides clenched so tightly I might break if they don't touch me, if they don't own me.

"Taj," I manage.

"Are you all right? Your scent isn't letting me breathe." He discredits himself instantly by drawing a lungful of air, letting it out in a shuddering exhale. He cups my face, presses his forehead to mine and groans. "Gods, you make me want to bite you, bite so hard I draw blood. I want to sink my teeth in you, sink my cock in you, take you in every conceivable way."

"Please," I whisper, "please..."

"Fuck, I'll take you right fucking here." He pushes me back against the window sill, his mouth crashing on mine, hungry and demanding, and suddenly my other alphas are there, too, crowding us, Finnen's hands landing on my hips, Kieran's on my breasts, their scents mingling.

We're missing Rhian but I can't spare enough headspace to look at him, see if he's about to join us or if he's still too exhausted to get up, which would concern me if I could think past the mind-numbing lust—

Someone clears his throat very loudly and pointedly. "Excuse me. We've brought some clothes, on the behest of

Her Grace the Duchess for you to try on. For the wedding.”

It’s four men, carrying between them two carved chests, their eyes almost bugging out of their heads as they stare at us.

Oh goddess, more people. I want to scream. Scream for them to all get out and give us some much-needed time and space to get naked. I need my men to take me, to fill me up, to undo the knot of tension in my belly, to turn the painful throb between my legs into pleasure. I want to map their strong bodies, to taste them, to make them lose control, lose their minds, drink in the sounds they will make as they lose themselves into pleasure...

The servants seem to shake off their daze. They walk into the room and place the trunks before the fireplace. They open the lids, letting the precious fabrics folded inside gleam with colors and golden thread in the light of the jumping flames.

“My lady. My lords.” The manservant who spoke earlier bows. “I will send in two maids with sewing experience to adjust the garments as needed. Don’t hesitate to ring the bell if you require any other assistance.”

They all bow again and turn to go, and then as my head clears a little, I almost scream again—this time at myself.

What was I thinking?

I wasn’t, that’s what. What if this is it, my heat, now we have Rhian, too? And what if I get pregnant? How bad a timing would that be?

Pretty damn bad.

Although I don't feel like I'm in full heat yet, I think as Taj draws back with a curse and glares at the leaving servants. It's as if something is still missing.

Not sure what it can be.

What more I could ever wish for.

Except for a cozy nest, that is, a safe place for all of us.

There's a small yelp and the servants all but run out, slamming the door shut behind them, and that's when I realize that all my alphas are growling.

“What the fuck is going on?” Rhian asks and I turn to see him still seated on the bed, a tray in his lap, eyes round as saucers. He has an adorable flush on his cheeks.

*Adorable.*

Now that's a word I never thought I'd use for a man.

A tall, muscular man I'm fatally attracted to.

And I suppress a snicker when my alphas' heads snap around so fast they almost come off, to look at him.

“It's an alpha thing,” Finnen says—okay, growls—and stalks to the trunks by the fireplace, then stops and feels for the armchairs. “The growling part.”

“And the sexing part?” Rhian mutters.

Taj guffaws. “That, too. Why, don't tell me you don't want to join in.”

Rhian's hands fist in the covers. “I could lie and say I don't.”



“But why would you want to lie?” Taj looks delighted.  
“Why not admit it?”

“So this clan you spoke of before...” Rhian eyes us a little mistrustfully and leans forward. “I didn’t imagine it? You were... Ow.” He clutches at his bandaged shoulder, grits his teeth. “Dammit.”

“Take it easy.” I push past Taj and the others to get to him. I take the tray off his lap and set it on the floor “Lie back down.”

He lets me push him back against the mount of pillows, his face pale. Goddess, his eyes are so pretty, and they’re trained on me as if I hold all the answers.

“You’re Ariadne,” he whispers. “And they are Finnen, and Kiaran and...”

“And Taj.”

“Right. The war hero.” Rhian manages a crooked little smile that melts my heart. “A hero, a duke’s son and a priest. I’m afraid I don’t have any title, my lady.”

“Shush. Who cares about titles?”

“I’m afraid...” He coughs a little, and it scares me because he pales even more.

“Afraid of what?”

“Afraid that this is a dream,” he whispers, lashes lowering.  
“That it never happened.”

“I’m so sorry you’re in pain,” I breathe, and then I admit,  
“I shot that arrow.”

“You did?” His eyes open wide again. “Why?”

“I thought you were one of the guards. I’m sorry, I—”

He touches two fingers to my lips, silencing me. His smile returns. “It was the best gift anyone has ever given me.”

“What? Rhian—”

“If it means I can be with you, I just...” His mouth trembles. He turns his face away, his hand falling on the covers. “You all make me feel warm inside. I’ve felt cold all my life.”

He’s breaking my heart and I don’t even know his story. I curl up beside him and put my arms around him. “Rest. We have a lot to do and you’ll need your strength.”

“Like go to a wedding?” He shifts and manages to slide a corded arm underneath me, gathering me to his side.

“Like go to a wedding.” I smile up at him, and I’m not surprised when my alphas surround us. Guarding us. “And other stuff.”

“Like running away,” Finnen says. “To the south. If you’re up for that.”

“I will be,” Rhian whispers and closes his eyes. “If you’ll have me.”

**ARIADNE**

The wedding is to be held right there, in the manor—the ceremony and all. No Temples exist in the vicinity, apparently. The Summer Capital’s temple is the closest one but it’s easier to bring a priest over to officiate.

From the window, I can see the preparations for the feast taking place. The weather will be good, according to word sent by the Temple’s moon tellers, so despite the cold, the tables are set outside and bonfires are being prepared, ribbons hung and streamers attached to poles.

There’s a raised platform to one side, either for the couple to stand on and be blessed or for musicians to play, but all I can see in my mind’s eye is the scaffold with the gallows.

I shiver.

“What’s on your mind?” Finnen asks.

“You mean apart from finding Rhian, meeting Kiaran’s family and discovering he’s a duke’s son, and not to forget, my worry over going into full heat while on the run?”

His mouth quirks. “Yeah, apart from all that.”

“The unnamed god,” I admit. “I remember his voice in my head. *Sidde drakai*. He said, ‘*Drakai evenen. Drakai inassa. Drakai inonen.*’”

“He said that to you?” Finnen hisses.

“Yes.” Realization dawns. “You know what it all means, don’t you?”

“It’s old Fae, southern Fae, recorded in the scriptures from before the war.”

“So tell me!”

“I’ve told you before, *Sidde drakai* is his name. It means, Star of the dragon.”

“*Sidde Drakai*,” I whisper, savoring it, feeling it in my bones. Star of the dragon. The dragon god.

“*Evenen* means blessing. *Drakai evenen*, the dragon’s blessing. As for the meaning of *inassa* and *inonen*...”

“What about it?”

“*Inassa* means queen, in the old Fae tongue. And *inonen* means... savior.”

“Why would the god say that?” I frown. “Sounds a little melodramatic if all he wants me to do is have some babies.”

“Who knows the gods’ minds?” Finnen says. “Come, try a gown on or the tailors won’t have enough time to adjust it.”

I appreciate the distraction. “Did you try anything for yourself?”

“Yes. Don’t worry about me.”

“How can I not?” I touch his face with my fingertips, my heart pounding. “We almost lost you. Sometimes I can’t believe we got you back—”

“And right on time,” he whispers, his sightless eyes haunted. But he captures my hand, presses it to his cheek. “I’m okay, Ari.”

“But you’re hurt, should probably be in bed with—”

“Rhian?” His mouth curves into a smile against my hand.

“You want him,” I whisper.

“Of course I do. So do you.”

“Yeah.”

“And he wants you. We all want each other, isn’t it obvious?” Finnen doesn’t wait for me to nod—then again it must be written all over my face that I do know. “And again, I’m fine. The salve Rhian gave me removed the infection. The wound is healing nicely.”

“Show me.”

“Not now. Come.” He lowers my hand, tugs on it. “A gown. Let’s get through this wedding so we can be on our way.”

A sudden fear strikes me. “Finn, you’re not trying to hide some life-threatening injury from me, right? Please, don’t be, because I…” My voice cracks, my eyes fill with tears. “I don’t know if I could bear losing you again.”

“Girl. My omega. My love.” He grips my chin and brushes his mouth over mine. “Are you crying?”

“No, I...”

“For *me*?”

The incredulity in his voice almost breaks me. “Yes, of course for you, you stupid...” I beat at his chest with one fist. “Don’t you get it? Don’t you know how I feel about you? You were the first alpha I chose, and you are just the most stubborn, annoying, strong and proud and amazing man I ever... mfff...”

His mouth captures mine, and though he doesn’t kiss with Taj’s skill or Kiaran’s passion, his intensity burns me. When he pulls back, he’s breathing hard, his own eyes wet.

Kiaran whistles.

“Not fair,” Taj calls out. “We want to join in.”

“What’s keeping you?” Finnen whispers, still staring blindly at me. A tear rolls down his cheek and I reach up to wipe it.

“These... pins and what not,” Taj grumbles.

I finally turn to look at them and stifle a laugh. There is Taj in the middle, in a dashing set of clothes, fine shirt, shiny pants, and a frock coat, his eyes wild and hair standing up like a hedgehog’s spines while a manservant stitches one sleeve.

“Join in the torture,” Taj goes on. He sounds like he’s drunk.

Then again, Taj often sounds that way.

Rhian snickers. He’s seated in one of the armchairs by the fire, already dressed up in finery, and Kiaran is examining a

shirt as if he expects squirrels to have made a nest in it.

I glance back up at Finnen who's shaking a little and trying to hide it.

*Aw, my heart.* My strong, unflappable Finnen. I slide my arms around him and rest my cheek on his broad chest, and with a sigh, he wraps me up in his embrace.

"You're mine," I tell him and his breath hitches. "Mine."

"Yours," he whispers against my hair, his voice a rasp. "My queen."

---

"Please, keep still, my lady," the seamstress says, holding up the needle and thread. "I don't want to pinch you."

"I can't breathe," I mutter. "What is this torture device?"

"It's a whalebone corset. A stiffer corset than the ones mostly used in the Empire. All noble young ladies wear it."

"Why?"

"Uh..." She glances at my men, but when no help comes from that quarter, she returns her gaze to me. "To make your curves look better?"

"It's tight. And bothersome. And what about my breasts? They're out." I struggle with the bodice, then give up. It's uncomfortable but it seems I will have to endure. "But my breasts... How curious." I cup them through the thin chemise that barely conceals anything. "Were they always so big?"

“It’s the effect of the corset, my lady,” the servant says, lowering her eyes to the seam she’s stitching. “Like I said, it will showcase your curves.”

“It’s showcasing my *breasts* a lot,” I grumble.

Then I lift my gaze and find my men watching me with hungry eyes.

*Oops.*

Their scent rises, musky and spicy, and my body answers, a wrench deep inside of me, a yearning and a yank toward them that makes me gasp.

My perfume joins theirs, the ache in my belly intensifying.

How are we going to make it through this wedding? We should have fucked earlier, I think, and almost lose it. I’m about to roll on the floor laughing—or push away the maid and rush my men, take them to bed and to hell with everything else.

Obviously, this is the moment the bride-to-be chooses to enter the room, saving me from the dilemma, effectively taking my options out of my hands—and yes, I know my body is insane right now and it’s a good thing she came in when she did, before I did anything that would jeopardize our stay here.

After all, it’s Kiaran’s family and I’m sure he wants to get along with his sisters, at least. Besides which, Rhian still looks frightfully pale and Finnen may insist he’s fine, but one should never trust Finnen when it comes to judging his own capabilities. He’d never say he’s unwell, even if he had a sword sticking out of him, and he desperately needs the rest.



We all do, to be honest.

Even if it means dressing up and mingling with the crowd.

**FINNEN**

“**Y**ou’re mine.”

She said that.

She cried for me.

Just about broke me to fucking pieces.

*Dammit.*

Never had anyone call me their own since I was sent away to the Temple, back when I was but a child. The Temple is a cold, cruel place and I got used to it. To the lack of emotions. The lack of contact. The need to barricade myself behind thick walls so that the hatred and callousness wouldn’t touch me.

Fucking fat load of good it did me in the end, though it did save my sanity as a child.

Sort of.

“Would you look at that?” Taj comes to stand beside me, throwing an arm over my shoulders.

He also said something of the sort, didn’t he? Back when we were looking for Ariadne. That he’d fight for me. It had shocked me. I had barely believed it.

“At what?” I choke out, leaning a little into him. Allowing myself to try it.

“At her. There’s nothing like watching a girl make herself pretty, observing herself in a mirror,” Taj says. “Don’t ask why, I don’t know why but it does something for me. How about you, Finn?”

“What?” I mutter. “You like watching me make myself pretty?”

“I sure do.” He laughs and claps my back, grabs both my shoulders. “But I mean, doesn’t that make you horny? Seeing her like that?”

“I can’t see, Taj,” I remind him. People tend to forget it. It annoys me that I have to remind them.

“Damn, man. That sucks. You should be able to see her. She’s so pretty.”

I suppress a sigh. He’s like a child sometimes and I have to remind myself that hitting him over the head with a stick won’t accomplish anything.

But *gods*, sometimes I think it would be so damn satisfying.

“Shall I describe her for you?” he goes on, and before I can open my mouth to tell him to go to hell, he breathes in my ear, “She’s looking at you.”

“What?”

“Okay, she’s just facing this way.”

I elbow him. “Fucker.”

He grunts, chuckles. “I’m serious.”

“So will be the punch in your face.”

“Okay, listen and stop grumbling. She’s wearing a satin gown of dark green that matches her eyes.”

“Her eyes are green?”

“Very dark green, with flecks of cinnamon and amber.”

My own eyes burn. Damn all these emotions boiling over all of a sudden, catching me off guard. The exhaustion of my fucking capture, compounded by the worry for Rhian and the stress of getting here aren’t helping me find calm.

“So many colors,” I whisper when he falls silent, willing him to say more. Needing him to say more.

Maybe he realizes it. Maybe he reads my mind. “She’s trying out a hairstyle for the wedding. She has her hair piled up in one of those fancy knots women like—her hair is dark, by the way.”

There’s a knot in my throat. “Black? Dark brown? Dark blue? What?”

A soft chuckle. “Dark brown. But like her eyes, it’s streaked with gold and copper.”

“And her gown? Tell me about her gown.”

“It’s pine green, you know, more grey-green than yellow-green, and it has tight sleeves and golden embroidery on the bust. The waist is tight, the skirt flares at the hips. The cleavage is deep...”

My throat is dry. “How deep? Do you see her—”

“Tits? A hint of them. The dark valley between them. The pale mounds of them. Her skin is so smooth, it’s like white silk and cream.”

*Fuck.* I can almost see her. My cock stiffens. I grind my molars together. Wish for the flashing lights to at least show me her outline, but it seems I’m not stressed enough, go figure, so there’s nothing but darkness around me.

“What else?” I demand.

“Seeing Kiaran with his family... It makes me think of mine,” Taj says.

That stops me cold. “You never talk about them.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Then tell us,” Ariadne says, approaching us, her perfume reaching us before she does, the rustling of her long gown traveling with her. “Do you miss them?”

“*Miss* them? I want to wring their fucking necks,” Taj says, in that same pleasant voice, and I shiver. “Make them dig their own graves and fall in them.”

“Taj...”

“How bad was it?” I ask quietly, though I know the answer already.

“Damn fucking bad.”

“Want to talk about it? The—”

“No, I don’t fucking wanna talk about it,” he snarls, pushing away from me, his tone final. “Not everyone gets a

second chance, you know. And if my parents asked for one, I'd tell them to go to hell.”

“Taj...” She makes a small choking noise. “Did they hurt you before they sent you away?”

“And how,” he growls. “I don't wanna talk about it now, my pretty.”

But from her small yelp, I know he has pulled her to him.

“I'm an orphan so I never knew my parents,” Rhian says from my other side, startling me. A light touch feathers over my hand and I jerk. “Sorry. “

“I didn't hear you approach,” I say. “You move like a damn cat.”

He gives a soft snort. “I've been a servant all my life. It's an acquired skill.”

“Is it?”

I can almost hear the shrug when he says, “The lords and ladies like their servants to be invisible, and that also means soundless and odorless. What they really want is magic, but of course they don't want Fae-blood around them. They don't want anyone with real power, because then who would they have to bully?”

My mouth tilts up in a smile. “True words.”

“What about your family, Finnen?” Rhian asks.

“Gone,” I mutter.

“Your parents are dead?”

I nod. Swallow hard. “I can’t...” I can’t deal with it yet. I can’t really believe it. “In my memory, they are alive, smiling down at me. That’s the image that’s stuck in my mind, from before I lost my sight. That’s how they’ll always live in my memory and while I don’t think about them dying, they’ll always be alive. It doesn’t make any fucking sense, I know.”

“No. It does. It makes perfect sense to me,” Rhian says. “That’s how I remember my sister, too.”

“Is she dead?”

Rhian sighs. “Yes.”

“And your parents?”

“I don’t remember them. Nobody knew anything about them to tell me as I grew up. They said I have no family left.”

I don’t like how thin his voice becomes when he talks about this. It’s as if it frays more with every word.

So I reach out and find his shoulder, squeeze it. “You have a new family now.”

“That’s right,” Ariadne says, her warm voice filling up the empty spaces between us, thawing the cold spots inside of me. “Now you have us.”

“I still don’t know why you’d want me,” he mutters.

“Yeah,” Taj says, “I mean, what are betas exactly? And... this may sound racist, but what are they *for*?”

Turning around, I reach for Taj and grab him. Well, okay, his arm. I shake it. “Were you dropped on your head as a baby? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“I might have,” he says and shrugs. “It’s not like I can remember, is it?”

Gods give me strength.

“It’s okay,” Rhian says quietly. “I have the same question.”

“See?” Taj pulls away from me. “Ariadne asked that question before, I was only repeating it. When will you relax, priest?”

“When we cross the border,” I roar, “and find a safe place! What do you think?”

*Fuck.*

Breathing hard, I step back, lifting my hands—to keep them away from me, to keep myself from doing anything stupid like grab onto them and bury my face in their necks, come apart.

But Ariadne is quicker than me, launching herself into my arms and I tremble, I fucking shake as I haul her against me, crushing her to my chest.

“It’s okay,” she whispers, her arms around me. “It’s okay, Finn.”

“What is?”

“To come apart.”

“I can’t,” I breathe and my voice catches, “dammit. I fucking can’t. It already happened once, I can’t—”

“We’re here. We got you. Let go, Finn.”



Rage equals sorrow, sorrow equals fear, fear equals having something to lose.

Someone to lose.

And for the first time in an eternity, I have a lot to lose.

I can't afford to shatter now, no matter how tempting the offer.

So, regretfully, I pull back, cup her smooth cheeks, kiss her mouth softly.

“Betas,” I say, “are nurturers.”

“Finn—”

I rub the pad of my thumb over her soft lips, silencing her. “They are protectors, too, but they don't produce knots and they have a softer side, unlike us brutes.”

“You're not brutes,” she says against my thumb, and fuck, my cock stirs again.

“Yes, we are. At least when you go into full heat, we will be. And that's when a beta is needed. To make sure that, as we lose all control, we're fed and warm and safe.”

“So I'll be a servant again,” Rhian mutters.

I cock my head in his general direction. “During her heat? Gods, Rhian, I didn't say you won't participate. Only that you're less likely to turn into an animal, like us. After all, we'll be servants to our queen. You'll be the only one with a clear head.” I tsk. “At least that's what I've read. We won't know until we try, right?”

And I'm ready to try.

So I do what I've been fucking dying to do since I escaped the gallows.

I bend my head and kiss her.

And that unleashes the beast in me.

---

Is this...

Fuck, is this how it's going to be?

Can it get any more intense than this? Not possible. Not fucking possible. As it is, my damn thoughts are unraveling. Time is losing shape. Space is losing solidity.

I'm breathing hard, my hand on my cock, my mouth pressed to her scent gland at the juncture of neck and shoulder, my teeth aching with the need to bite down hard. I'm vaguely aware that I pulled the clothes off her and tasted her between her legs, because her sweetness lingers on my tongue.

But then I lost time.

I found myself kissing her neck.

I found her turning around, to offer me her back, her neck, her ass, and I lost myself touching her everywhere, exploring her curves, finding the spots that make her moan, writhe, cry out.

Now I'm molded to her back and I press my cock between her ass cheeks, press my teeth down on her silken skin. Between her legs she's so hot and wet... I slide my cock back and forth, stroking her folds, and she whines and shakes.

*Gods.*

I feel like I might die of arousal.

Kiaran is sucking on her breasts, licking and teasing. His cock bumps against mine between her legs. Taj has an arm slung over his shoulders, jacking off slowly, eyes glittering.

“Finn...” Her head tilts to the side, and I growl deep in my throat. My gums burn, my canines throb. I bite down, barely breaking the skin, and my cock jerks.

She cries out, rocking against me, on my cock that’s still sliding back and forth against her pussy, and on Kiaran’s. She’s coming, and we haven’t even started fucking yet.

But that’s too much for Kiaran, it seems, because he pulls her off me and throws her down to the carpet, then mounts her. The sounds are unmistakable, flesh slapping on flesh, her whimpers and his rhythmic grunts, and by now I can almost see them, limned in silver, his broad back and wild hair, her legs wrapped around him.

I’m frozen in place, watching. For me, it’s a rare spectacle.

“Finnen,” she moans then, and I drag myself closer.

“What is it?”

“You. I want you.” I realize she’s reaching for me, her small hands closing over mine, over my hard cock. She lifts her head—and I see its shape, the darkness of her eyes in the flashing lines filling my vision—and she takes my cock in her mouth.

I open my mouth, no sound coming out of me as pleasure grips me, pleasure poised on the edge of a knife, so intense it's almost pain as her lips wrap around my cock and suck, as I brace myself with a hand on Kiaran's shoulder, and then...

Then Taj wraps himself against my back, his hand slipping between my ass cheeks, and the last coherent thought leaves my mind when he presses his fingers into me. Fuck, a circle so complete, except...

“Where is Rhian?”

## ARIADNE

K iaran thrusts deep into me, wrenching a cry from my throat, muffled around Finnen's thick cock—which in turn drags a groan out of him, and then Taj who's wrapped around him mutters a curse.

We're entangled in pleasure, each one of us managing to touch as many of us as possible.

My alphas.

*Something's missing, I think dazedly, something...*

*Rhian?*

I can't spare much thought to his absence from our circle, too busy pleasuring Finnen, too consumed by pleasure as Kiaran thrusts fast and hard into me, feeding the need, spinning the wheel of desire, but...

Finnen groans like a wounded animal, fucking my mouth, gritting his teeth and so obviously losing control that it triggers my release. I moan around his girth as I come, clenching hard around Kiaran's cock.

And both men lose their minds, starting to come, too. Finnen in my mouth. Kiaran in my pussy.

As Finnen slumps forward, Taj curses again, catching him around the waist, his own hand a blur between his legs, dark hair in his eyes as he finds his release, painting my breasts and neck with his cum.

And then I see Rhian. He's kneeling a few feet away from us, by the foot of the bed, a big tent in his pants. He's staring at us, eyes wide.

"Fuck me," he whispers.

"That could be arranged," Taj breathes, glancing at him.

The shocked look on Rhian's face makes me laugh, and I beckon for him to join us. I'm ready for round two, ready to explore Rhian's body, to have Taj take me, or maybe I can suck his cock like I did with Finnen.

Both Finnen and Kiaran seem to be out for the count right now, sprawled on the carpet, blissed-out expressions on their faces. That also makes me laugh.

Is it normal to get the giggles after sex?

"Rhian," I whisper and he crawls over to me, cupping my face, brushing his lips over mine, and I wonder if he will taste Finnen on my tongue.

If he'll enjoy it. If he likes guys, or if he's only into girls. If alphas are his thing, or omegas, or both.

Only then the door opens, and yet another maid enters.

*Oh goddess.* I groan softly in frustration.

She gasps, seeing us there, naked and obviously well-fucked, but she manages a small curtsy. "My lady. My lords.

We're about to bring in a tub for you to bathe."

"By all means." Taj waves a hand airily, then realizes it's covered in cum and chuckles. "We are into filthy sex, we filthy animals. A bath would be great."

---

I'm sitting on the bed, a sheet wrapped around me for modesty's sake as the manservants carry inside the copper tub and fill it with bucket after bucket of hot water.

Modesty. *Ha.* Funny, that. I mean, they did enter to see me getting nailed by a guy on the floor while the others kneeled around me, their cocks out.

And this tub business reminds me of our time in that inn with my alphas, although back then Finnen had still been unsure and holding back, and Kiaran had been an unknown.

Now they both seem at ease with their desire and Kiaran has accepted his place in our family, in our clan.

Steam rises from the tub, curling in the air, warming it even more. I think I'm going to burst into flames, still caught in desire and arousal.

I need more.

It shocks me every time, this physical need, so intense it borders on pain.

Though my alphas manage to appear decent, having tucked their cocks back into their pants, just the sight of their muscular chests makes my insides clench, and Rhian... He

never even undressed from the waist down and is still wearing his half-torn, bloody shirt, the bandage peeking through the shreds.

Yet he pulls my gaze like a magnet pulls on iron.

More water splashes into the tub, startling me. Servants come and go, dark flashes, distracting blurs of movement.

I need to talk with Rhian.

The sex distracted me completely—big surprise—but I want to talk to him, I know I have to, to hear more of his thoughts, find out more about his past.

He seems so pleased to be with us, but his comment about being a servant again threw me off.

And he did keep back as my alphas pleased me and fucked me.

Uncertainty?

Diffidence?

Or physical exhaustion?

Is it because of what Finnen said about my heat, and his role in it?

I mean, sure, I understand his misgivings, especially in the light of Finnen's crude explanation, and it's not like *I* would know what really happens when I go into full heat.

It looks like none of us does.

So yeah, like I said. I understand. I have my own misgivings, though as time passes, not only have I stopped



trying to escape the inevitable—not sure you can stop a heat from coming on—but I’m embracing it. I want this. I want my men, I want my nest, I want to have their babies.

And I want Rhian’s, too.

Such a weird thought. It still shocks me, after all the time I’ve spent on it, though circumstances seem to be moving faster than my sluggish mind.

Time to get over all these shocks, I think, and accept myself. Accept my needs and desires, my emotions and instincts when it comes to my men.

“Get out,” I tell the manservants coming in with more buckets of water. That’s a hell of a big tub. “Get out!”

“But, my lady...” One of them glances down at the steaming bucket he’s carrying.

“Empty those into the tub and get out of this room, now!”

My men stir, glance at each other, and slow smirks spread over their faces. They move closer to me, their scents rising, winding around me.

I draw a deep, shuddering breath.

After a moment’s hesitation, the servants all hurry to comply, emptying the rest of the buckets of hot water into the tub and filing out the door.

Kiaran actually follows them, shoos them out and closes the door. After a moment’s consideration, he turns the ornate key and locks it, too.

He braces a hand on the door, exhales.

Then straightens and turns to grin at me.

At us.

“Will Ser Taj teach us about pleasure today?” He stalks over to us, eyes dark and pale hair disheveled. “Or would he rather take commands from us? What’s on the day’s order?”

“I doubt you need teaching, Kia,” Taj mutters, “unlike our priest here.”

“What are you implying?” Finnen seethes. “That I need more lessons than a savage who grew up alone with the wild animals?”

“Animals do fuck, you know,” Kiaran says. “I watched a lot of animal porn growing up in nature.”

“Oh Gods...” Finnen rubs his face. “Don’t tell me you’re about to start giving sex lessons like Taj now. *Do it like an animal*, or something like that. I couldn’t survive that.”

Kiaran snorts. “You never know.”

But Taj doesn’t seem to hear them. He pulls me to my feet and tilts my chin up, his gaze on my lips. “Look at you... Fuck, girl, you’re so goddamn pretty.”

Heat seeps into my face. It matches the heat building in my body, unfurling inside my belly, flaring in my blood. “Taj...”

He hauls me against him, making me gasp, and kisses me hard. His cock is hard, pressing into my stomach as he devours my mouth. His arms tighten around me, crushing my body to his, and I think he’ll fuck me right there, throw me back on the bed and rut.

“So... lesson?” Rhian asks. “What’s that about? Taj?”

Taj pulls back, a dazed look on his face. “What?”

“Lesson.”

“Lesson. Right. Uh...” Taj blinks. Licks his lips, eyes gone black with arousal. “I don’t fucking know. Ari, what do you want?”

I want to keep kissing him, I want him inside of me, but at the same time...

I glance at the tub. Hesitate. “I’d love to bathe first of all. Before the water cools down. Will you join me?”

“Bathe?” Taj frowns. “Right, bathing!”

“He’s lost his head,” Finnen mutters. “Gone.”

That seems to bring Taj back to himself. He bows his head to steal one more kiss from me. “Let’s be clear about one thing. If you wash our scents off you, we’ll have to take measures.”

“Measures?”

“Replace our scents, on and inside of you,” he growls, swinging me up in his strong arms. “Then again, that was the plan all along. So gather round, boys. This is a lesson about pleasure and how to best offer and receive it.”

“Sex in a tub,” Finnen says. “Haven’t we tried that before? We don’t fit. And now there’s more of us.”

“Who said anything about sex?” Taj says.

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“We’re going to bathe her. That’s your amazing fucking lesson that you’re about to teach us?” Finnen looks more than a little mystified as Taj leads me to the steaming tub. He starts when Kiaran takes his hand and pulls him after us. “Let go. I got this.”

“But you would don’t need to,” Kiaran says quietly, not letting go. “I got you.”

“I…” Finnen flounders and I smile, my eyes burning, as Taj lowers me into the tub. “You just…”

“You’re my mate,” Kiaran says. Tugs on Finnen’s hand. “You can lean on me sometimes, you know.”

“And on me,” Rhian, taking Finnen’s other hand.

Warm water closes over my body, just as warm relief closes over my heart. I slide down to sit in the copper tub, the water teasing my breasts, and all I can think of is that I’m going to start crying with happiness.

“Look at them,” I whisper, choked. “Look at all of you.”

“We are your clan,” Taj says, looking at them, too. “And damn if these guys haven’t made me care for them.”

I slide my hand up to his cheek, his strong jaw. “You mean it.”

“I’d never lie to you.”

“And are you really going to give us a lesson in pleasure?”

“Well, for the first time in ages, we can take it slow.” He winces, reaches down and I lean over the edge of the tub to see him adjusting himself in his pants. “A little slow.”

“Until we lose control,” Kiaran says with a feral grin.

*Right.*

“So we get a chance to... woo you a little. Try to win you over.”

“You won me over from the start,” I whisper. “I don’t need you to prove anything to me. I—”

“I want to show you all kinds of pleasure.”

“There’s no greater pleasure,” I inform him, “than having you all here with me. Just... join me. I tug on his hand. I want you.”

But he is determined to blow my mind and make me forget my own name, it seems. He grabs a sponge and a bar of fragrant soap brought by the maids and creates some lather.

Finnen’s stony expression may have something to do with it, I think, this competition between them, and I want to tell them to lay off it, that I love them both as they are, and that I don’t expect any of them to be a sex expert or anything of the sort—but I forget all about it when Taj runs the sudsy sponge over my skin.

Every pass of the rough sponge makes me shiver. I’m relaxing in the warmth of the water, but when he runs the sponge over my nipples, they perk up again and pleasure pools between my legs.

They have all gathered around the tub, avid curiosity in their eyes. They look more like kittens or puppies rather than grown, hulking alphas—and a beta—as they splash their hands in the water, batting at each other, though their gazes are locked on me, darkness swirling in their depths, watching and waiting to jump into the game.

And being the focus of their attention doesn't feel weird, not anymore. It feels good and right.

And Taj keeps running the sponge over my breasts while his other hand strokes my belly, then my thighs.

“Touch her,” Taj growls. “Feel how silky her skin is. Feel how soft she is. Caress her everywhere, relax her so she can take us later.”

As if I haven't taken them already without all this preparation, I think fuzzily, but I can't deny how good it feels to be treated so gently for a change.

“Now is our chance,” Taj goes on, “to fuck her slowly and deeply. When she goes into heat, all bets are off.”

“You know that because you read about it?” Finnen mutters. “Can't recall reading anything so specific about heats...”

“That's because you're a priest,” Taj says, using the sponge to rub circles around my nipples. They ache and burn. “I bet the Temple only provided censored, priest-appropriate material.”

“Fuck you,” Finnen says but he sounds distracted. He has one hand in the water and small shivers go through him.

“Here,” Kiaran says, grabbing Finnen’s hand and putting it on my shin. “Feel that?”

“Fuck me,” Finnen whispers this time, blind eyes widening. “That feels... *fuck.*”

Taj chuckles darkly.

“And you.” Kiaran grabs Rhian’s hand, places it on my knee. “Yeah?”

Rhian moans softly. I can’t help noticing that his other hand is somewhere between his legs. Can’t see well from my angle inside the tub.

As they run their hands through the water and over my legs, my feet, my arms, my breasts, it feels wonderful. The heat is gathering inside me once more, gentler this time, not about to burst like an explosion. My breath starts coming quicker, need building between my legs.

Taj dips his hand between my thighs and I slowly spread them, gasping when he runs a fingertip over my folds.

“Watch,” Taj says. “Are you watching?”

Finnen makes a small sound, but I can’t look anymore, my eyes closing as that same blunt fingertip, callused and rough, stops at my clit and circles it.

*Oh, good Goddess...*

Then he dips his finger into me and I moan, helpless against the onslaught of pleasure where I’m burning for them, gripping the tub as my hips rise to meet that first, sweet thrust.

“Fuck, feels fucking amazing.” Taj’s voice has gone breathless. “Finnen, here.” Another hand comes between my legs. “Feel it.”

“Oh...” I moan.

Finnen is touching me now, his scent intensifying, enveloping me.

“You taught me this before,” he rumbles, his voice a rough grating of sound, but his hand moves, his finger touching my clit, making me gasp.

“And you remember that?” Taj lets out a breathless chuckle. “I thought your mind exploded that night.”

“I remember everything I’m taught,” Finnen says, an obstinate edge to his voice, even as it trembles with desire.

“Good to know,” Rhian mutters, curls in his eyes, a crooked smile on his lips, as he runs his hand up my leg, toward my thigh.

“Having plans for Finnen?” Taj moves his finger in and out of me, slowly, oh so excruciatingly slowly, and I can’t frigging believe he can hold a conversation as I’m falling apart. “Do tell, pretty beta.”

“Holy shit,” Rhian breathes and I don’t know exactly what is going on, only that his hand moves higher, joining the others between my legs, as is Kiaran’s, hard and big and scraping at my inner thighs, his breathing shallow.

Another finger joins the one inside of me, and as they plunge deep, I start shaking, my insides clenching hard.



My head falls back against the rim of the tub. Rough fingers are stroking my legs, my feet. Someone is rubbing at my clit, someone at my inner thighs, Taj is still fingerfucking me while the sponge is met with another hand circling and pinching my nipples.

And as he fucks me with his fingers, another hand moves lower, stroking between my ass cheeks.

*Oh, gods above!*

The pleasure breaks over me like a river, slow at first, then picking up speed, each tightening of my belly stronger than before, until I'm yelling and I don't even know what I'm saying, rocking inside the tub, splashing water everywhere.

What a relief.

Gods, what a release from the constant burning ache in me.

Experience tells me it won't last, especially since it wasn't a real coupling, but all I can do is lie back against the copper wall of the tub and try to catch my breath, their touch all over me comforting and soothing.

"And now," Taj says, his voice a painful rasp, "we take her on the bed and fuck her."

As blissed out as I might be right now, that sounds like a good plan...

**TAJ**

I splash into the tub to lift her out. She lolls in my arms like a rag doll, and I'd be worried if not for the big smile on her face and her arms winding around my neck.

“You bathe,” I tell the others. “And wait for your turn.”

“Asshole,” Kiaran laughs and she glances back around to where the guys are fighting who will get out of their pants and into the tub first.

I got first dibs. I'm smug about it and I don't give a shit.

After all, I'm the teacher. The maestro. They do need to watch and learn, and even if I'd have fucking loved to give them a hand with washing—I've never made a secret of wanting them, too—I'm sure there will be time for that.

Later.

Eventually.

She's warm and wet, soft and pliant as I lay her down on top of the dark satin coverlets, staining them with water. Her hair spills around her, dark silk, her pale skin rosy and flushed.

She's bright and burning.

Shiny and perfect.

Her pretty eyes are shaded by her lashes as she watches me undress. I practically tear my pants off me, my hard cock catching in the folds. I almost castrate myself in my rush to lie naked on top of her, feast on her and pleasure her again.

Bathing her had been nice, but only as a prelude, an introduction to all the things I want to do with her.

And even as I do so, as I spread her shapely legs and settle between them, I hope the others will hurry up and come join us.

Because I want her for myself, but I also want her for all of us. We are a clan. She is our omega. Our girl. Our woman and our leader.

She is our heart.

And she is the most delectable thing I've ever encountered in my fucking life. I want her so badly I almost came twice as I was touching her in the tub, and now my cock is wet and aching, leaving trails of precum on her milky skin.

“Ari...” I bend my head to her breasts, plump for a girl so slight, her nipples rosy and standing erect and hard from my earlier attentions. She whimpers when I close my lips over one and suck, her legs lifting, her knees digging into my sides. “So sweet...”

She tangles her fingers in my hair, tugging on my head so she can kiss me. She moans against my mouth when my cock slides against her belly.

Can't take any more of this self-inflicted torture. Grabbing her wrists, I pin them over her head with one hand, while I guide my cock between her legs with the other.

"Oh gods, yes, please," she groans as I push into her, the roughness of her normally soft voice startling a grunt out of me.

My cock twitches and jerks, caught in her dark, hot passage, her scent closing over me, over us. It's fucking with my mind until I think I'm diving deep underwater, her body folded all around me, her eyes full of stars gazing into mine.

*Oh, fuck me...*

She moans and I realize I'm thrusting into her, hard and fast, my body moving of its own fucking volition, not even waiting for me to catch up.

*Damn good...*

And then the others are there, climbing onto the bed, gleaming naked bodies, muscular and scarred and damn hot, reaching for us, and she starts to come, a look of astonishment on her face.

*Different from being fucked on two fingers*, I think smugly, but then I grind my teeth to stop a howl because my balls clench and my cock spasms and I bow over her, biting down on the smooth column of her neck where she smells best. My teeth press into her skin, the primal urge to mark her taking over me.

I feel like my entire damn body is being turned inside out, I'm coming so hard. I thrust deep into her and hold, spilling

my seed, and my gums ache as I growl against her flesh.

“Hey, hey,” someone is saying, the words echoing distantly in my ears. “Stop. Stop, dammit, Taj!”

Strong hands wrench me back and away from her. Snarling, I claw at them, trying to get back to her heat, her body, her scent. My fingers ache the same way my gums do and I somehow know without looking that I have now claws as well as fangs, and my back itches.

“Taj!” Finnen shakes me so hard my bones rattle. “Taj, listen to me, you stupid fuck.”

“What...?” I blink at his angry face, grab his wrists and he hisses. “Finn—”

“Control yourself. She’s not in heat yet.”

“He’s right, Taj. Stop.” Kiaran grins at me and grabs his cock. “My turn.”

Rhian, though, has already knelt beside her, his fingertips trailing over her mouth, her cheeks. Damn, they look so good together. So beautiful and elegant and sexy.

But...

“Finnen goes next,” I say.

“You’ll hold our hand as we fuck or what?” he growls.

“What are you complaining about?” Kiaran mutters, his hand moving slowly over his hard-on. “We’re the ones waiting our turn, not you.”

Rhian moans softly, still touching her face, his curls hiding his eyes. His cheeks are flushed, as is his cock, jutting out

from between his strong thighs, swollen and dripping.

Finnen bares his teeth at me, an almost grin. “I don’t like taking orders. That’s Taj’s kink.”

Leaving me a little breathless, dammit, at the thought of Finnen ordering me about, my spent cock stirring again.

*Fucking hot.*

“I want to see Finnen fucking our omega,” I say, glancing at the others. “Don’t you? He hasn’t fucked her yet.”

“Neither has Rhian,” Finnen mutters darkly, still gripping me, giving me another shake.

“He’s the new guy. He’ll have to wait in line. Won’t you, beta?”

Rhian lifts his chin, spearing me with those green eyes, but scoots back, bowing his head. Submitting. It brings a deeper growl into my throat. He’s a beta. Like an omega or a delta, he has to submit to an alpha, but that doesn’t mean they always do—and dammit, I like it too damn much.

Finnen shoves me away from him with a grunt. He’s annoyed, but our priest often seems annoyed. What he really feels is nerves. It pisses him off that he doesn’t have experience in this, that he’s caught flatfooted time and again, and that he has to look to someone else for guidance.

Sympathy almost makes me reach for him, tell him that it’s okay not to know everything, not to be able to do everything, that he has survived and that’s already fucking amazing. That he’s incredibly strong and fucking impressive.

All I say is, “Go on. You know how it’s done.”

“Gods damn you,” he snarls and then he’s releasing me so that I fall on top of Kiaran who grabs me and laughs—then he lies on top of Ariadne.

“Remember to stick your cock in!” I’m laughing, too, but then I’m reaching for my own stiffening cock because damn, watching Finnen with our omega is something.

His pale body is perfectly shaped, his hips narrow, his ass tight, his back and shoulders broad, his legs long and muscular. His biceps bulge as he slowly lowers his hips and spears into her. One long, perfectly controlled thrust that has her moaning brokenly and scratching at his back.

His white hair curtains their faces as he kisses her, swallowing the sexy sounds she’s making, muscles straining in his thighs and ass as he fucks her into the mattress, elbows braced by her head, one of her legs wrapped around his hips.

*So damn fucking hot...*

“He didn’t need much instruction, did he?” Rhian whispers, rubbing at his chest under the bandage that he hastily tied back after washing in the tub.

“Sex is natural,” Kiaran says. “Animals do it all the time.”

“Do you know how many unconsummated marriages there are within the aristocracy?” I say, my voice choked. My cock is diamond-hard again. “Humans are too restrained by social norms.”

“I won’t ask how you know,” Kiaran says. “And fucking hell. They should get out in the nature more.”

“Yeah. They should.”

Ariadne starts to shake, and Finnen groans against her mouth, his thrusts becoming frantic. The slapping of flesh on flesh, the scent of her mixing with our musk and spice and the nutty smell of cum is making me dizzy. Finnen stills and I know he’s found his release. Her body trembles underneath him.

They both have, and I’m jacking off seriously now, my hand slipping over my thick cock, the beginnings of a new orgasm tightening my balls.

“Finn,” Kiaran growls, grabbing him and pulling at him. “Move.”

“What...?” Finnen sounds as dazed as I felt after I came inside her sweet pussy. “The fuck...”

Kiaran hauls him bodily off our omega who moans loudly as Finnen’s cock is yanked out of her.

Then she moans again, the sound long and broken, when Kiaran grabs her legs, throws them over his shoulders, and plows into her. I almost fucking wince at the violence, the way he grabs her arms and slams them onto the mattress as he rocks into her, his pale hair wild around his face, his back with the scale mark tensing, muscles bunching and releasing in his legs.

But she moans his name, moans for more, lifting her body to meet his thrusts.

*Goddammit.*

*Damn hot.*



“Shit,” Finnen says, leaning back on the bed, fondling his half-hard cock. “Just from the sounds, I’ll be ready to go again in no time.”

“Can’t you see them at all?” I want to know. “Can’t you see those... flashes you mentioned once?”

He licks his lips. He looks so damn debauched right now I’d gladly fuck him, too. “I can see her outline. Their outline. It comes and goes, though. I think it’s because...” He sighs, gripping his cock.

“Because you already came?”

A flush touches his cheekbones. “Perhaps.”

Gods dammit all, these guys are hot in every possible different way. Kiaran with his wild side, Finnen with his iron-clad resolve and virginal blushes, Rhian... well, remains to be determined but he looks sweet enough to eat with a spoon, and then our omega.

Gods, our omega is the most delicious thing I’ve ever seen or tasted.

Speaking of whom...

“Rhian,” she whispers, reaching for him as Kiaran lifts himself off her and sprawls on the bed. Her eyes are dark like the skies, her mouth bee-stung and wet from our kisses, her breasts marked by our teeth and stubble.

She looks damn gorgeous, but—

“Wait,” I say. “Rhian, wait. You’re wounded.”

He blinks wide eyes at me. “But—”

“Come on, Taj,” Finnen mutters, “you’re being cruel.”

“Am I? He’s bleeding.”

Finnen draws a sharp breath. “Oh shit. I smell it now. How bad is it?”

Rhian looks down at himself. “It’s nothing.”

“Rhian. You almost died.” Ariadne sits up, concern replacing the languid, heavy-lidded look on her face, and takes his hand. “Let me see.”

“It’s not that bad,” Rhian says.

“I’ll redo the bandage.” I tug it away, wince at the ugly wound underneath. It’s bleeding sluggishly. “Pack it better.”

I climb off the bed to find more bandages before he can refuse. I sense a stubbornness in him to match Finnen’s, though it’s couched in more submissiveness and grace, probably due to his upbringing as a servant in the castle.

We need to talk about that. About who he is. His story.

I gather my supplies and return to him. Ariadne is checking the wound for infection, prodding it and smelling it, making Rhian grimace. His brows gather like a thunderstorm and I bet he’s about to tell her he’s fine again, so I take over.

Big bad alpha and all. Can’t refuse me, can he?

“Here we go.” I sit on the edge of the bed and try not to ogle our omega’s breasts, her hips, her cute belly button, her heart-shaped face, her shiny hair, all the things that get my cock hard. With her, it’s everything. “Sit still and let me rewrap this.”

He lets me, scowling slightly, and I steal glances at his face as I pack the wound again and wind the long bandages around his lean, muscled torso. I bet he must have broken hearts back at the Summer Capital, servant or no servant. With his hard jaw and those eyes, he's any woman's—or man's—wet dream.

“All done.” Taking a risk, I stroke his curls back. “You’ll get your turn with her. Focus on getting better first.”

“You—”

I throw an arm around his shoulders, ruffle his hair. “Yeah?”

“I just want to kiss her!” he explodes, and damn, it’s cute.

“Let the man kiss her, you bastard,” Finnen mutters, a grin tugging at his lips.

“Taj...” Ariadne turns to me, eyes flashing. “Come on, don’t be an ass.”

“I wouldn’t dream of standing in the way.” I lift my hands, then fold my arms over my chest. “Go on.”

“What, you’re going to watch?” Rhian demands.

“We all are,” I inform him. “Aren’t we, guys?”

“Ah-huh,” Kiaran says.

“You bet,” Finnen agrees. “As much as possible. Why, don’t you want us to?”

Rhian turns pleading eyes on me, as if I control this situation. I may pretend to, but they all have me wrapped around their little fucking fingers.

“Dammit.” I say. “Guys, let’s give them a moment of privacy. It’s their first kiss, after all.”

“Anyway, you should go wash yourself.” Kiaran shoves at me, grinning. “Go on. You stink.”

“Right now, we all stink.”

“Yeah, but you stink worse.”

“Fuck, the water is ice cold.”

“Tough.”

**ARIADNE**

**K**issing Rhian is like kissing the rain and the green fields. He doesn't have that dark licorice layer in his taste like my other men. His hands, cupping my cheeks, are hard but his kiss is soft and tentative at first, almost chaste.

He's simply pressing his lips to mine, eyes closed, long dark lashes fanning on broad cheekbones, and I part his lips with my tongue, a trick I learned from Taj.

He moans, opening for me, his tongue meeting mine, and goddess, I had wondered if his taste matches his scent and it does, mossy and green, peppery and light.

It suits him.

It suits me.

Light but hot, barely spiced and yet turning my blood to molten lava. I lean into him, gripping his corded forearms, loving the strength in them. He may not be as hulking as my alphas, but he's tall and strong for a man, and I like that about him.

I like my men strong. Or my omega brain likes it, hard to tell. It makes me feel safe. It makes me feel like they'll protect

our nest and babies.

Drawing back, I gaze into his green and gold eyes, manage a smile. “You—”

“Wow,” he breathes, his gaze moving from my lips to my eyes and back. “Holy shit. I want...” He leans in, and we kiss again, and it’s lighting me up. I move my hands to the back of his neck, stroking the silky curls there, opening my mouth to his questing tongue.

*He learns fast, I think dazedly. Damn fast. Or he was only holding out on me before.* He has me moaning and tugging on him so I can straddle him, touch him everywhere, get him inside of me—

“Someone’s at the door,” Taj says.

We’re still kissing. My body is on fire, my belly aching with need, Rhian’s taste and scent flooding my senses. I can feel his erection as I press closer to him, and I want him, I want—

“My lady?” A maid is standing at the now open door, gaping at me, eyes all but bugging out of her head.

At us.

At Taj who has obviously just bathed and is dripping wet, shiny droplets running down his body, over every delicious plane and ridge.

At Kiaran who is lounging naked by the bed, his back to the wall, arms folded over his chest, a sizable hard-on between his legs.

At Finnen who is standing with a hand braced on a bedpost and his hand on his hard cock, stroking slowly.

At all of us. A picture of decadence and vice.

An orgy in the making.

We break apart, both me and Rhian breathing hard. My breasts feel heavy and achy, the throb between my legs agony.

“What...? What do you want?” I manage.

The maid straightens and looks away, trying to school her stunned face into something more neutral. “My lady. Gentlemen. Your garments are ready and we are here to help you dress. The wedding is about to start.”

“Oh no... How about a quick one?” I whisper hopefully. “A quick fuck with Rhian.”

Kieran laughs.

But as more maids enter, carrying our festive clothes, their faces a picture as they also take us in, I realize that there’s no chance of more sex tonight.

Looks like time is up.

---

Flanked by my men, I step out of the manor and into the midst of the wedding celebrations.

Although it’s beautiful with the hanging lanterns and the bouquets of flowers on the tables, perfuming the cold air, I helplessly turn to glance at my alphas and my beta.

There's something about strong, muscular men dressed in dark satin and white silk that makes my knees go weak, as it turns out. Their broad shoulders and chests fill out their frock coats, and their long, muscled legs fill out the dress pants perfectly.

And that's not all...

Fae blood doesn't only translate into pointy ears and scale patterns, or even into alphas and betas and omegas, heat and rut. It also means males have practically no beards. Even Kieran's had been scraggly at best, back when he lived in the woods. Now fully shaved, their hair brushed and pulled back allowing the fine bone structure of their faces to shine through, they are breathtakingly beautiful.

Fairytale princes come to life.

Childhood dreams I had written off as fantasies when I became an acolyte—find a handsome husband, have a cute family—suddenly becoming reality, and I want to laugh madly at myself.

Me, with four husbands? With a family? I had almost managed to convince myself I was destined to be a loner, an acolyte and eventually a priestess of the wild goddess.

Yet here I am, ogling my men, a familiar ache in my belly and my heart full to bursting.

I step up to Finnen, tweak the lapel of his coat.

“What is it?” he asks, his blind eyes gazing somewhere over me.

I pat his lapel. “Now you're perfect.”



He chuckles, obviously about to crack a sarcastic joke about himself.

Rising on tiptoe, I kiss his cheek. “In fact, you were already perfect.”

He falls silent, his eyes wide. Always caught off-guard when I say something nice to him. Before, he used to rely on sarcasm and irony, brushing it all off. Now he believes it, believes me when I say I care for him, that I want him, and it shocks the hell out of him.

I glance at the rest of them, so handsome and fierce, standing around us, a wall between us and the crowd gathered for the wedding, and my heart thuds.

“Okay, we’re here.” Taj, a silvery grey foulard around his neck bringing out his eyes, pats his shaggy dark hair. Even swept back, it still falls rakishly into his eyes. “Now what?”

A nervous gesture, for sure. I’ve pinned the tips of their ears under their hair when I brushed it for them, making sure they don’t show, but you can never be certain.

Mine are also trapped under my hair and I’m nervous, too. I felt the delicate points earlier and it made me more aware than ever of how much we’re changing. And how fast.

“Food,” Kiaran says, and he almost looks like his old feral self as he bares his teeth and nods at the long tables laden with dishes. His blue eyes gleam. With the white collar of his shirt turned up, his long black coat, he looks like a dangerous ruffian about to rob a coach—or turn into an animal, especially when he blatantly shows off his sharp canines like that.

“And drink, too, one should hope,” Finnen mutters, his back stiff, his suit encasing him like armor, his white hair and eyes shining like polished Arran marble. “I will need a drink to get through this.”

Rhian is quiet. He’s still pale, dark crescents under his eyes. In his formal suit, with chestnut curls falling on his brow, he looks very young.

Sometimes I forget how young we all are. Barely adults, though life put us in adult roles early and we forgot to have a childhood, and although my alphas’ physique is intimidating, fooling the onlooker’s eye, they’re not much older than I am. Their hearts are still young and unfinished.

*Maybe that’s part of a beta’s role, I think as we move through the gathered crowd. To remind us what we really are, so human and fragile—Fae blood or not. Human, flesh and blood, need and lust—*

Kieran slides an arm around my waist, and I glance up at his handsome face, his twinkling eyes. “All right?”

I nod, breathless, as Finnen takes my hand and brings it to his lips. “Ari, settle down.”

“Don’t know what you mean,” I whisper, though I do.

I want them.

I can’t stop wanting them.

It’s getting worse.

I pull away from them, turn my steps toward the long tables. *Feed the need in other ways, I tell myself. Distract*

*yourself. Stop thinking about them.*

Easy to say. I'm so aware of my clan, my mates, their scents winding all around me, hitting me hard, I clench down below, again and again. Despite having come a number of times, I'm more aroused than ever. My undergarments are soaked.

*Empty your mind, I desperately tell myself. Breathe in the fresh air. Enjoy the food and drink, the music and the happy people.*

*Survive this wedding.*

I brace with one hand on the edge of the table, suppressing a groan. What we did was so good, but it's already not enough. I need their cocks in me, no, I need their *knots* in me, I need them to take me fast and hard, to lock our bodies together in a tangle of lust and love that will last for nights and days.

Goddess, if this isn't my full heat yet, how am I going to pull through *that*? I'm wet and too hot. Feverish. I'm burning up. I fan myself with my hand, feeling faint.

A man sampling finger food from a tray looks up and freezes, staring at me. The small ball of dough he's taken falls from his hand to the ground, and his eyes darken.

"Good gods," he whispers and inhales deeply, then takes a step toward me. "That scent. Like honey and caramel... Is it you? Is it you smelling like that?"

*Shit.* I back away from him. He looks rabid. Maybe he's into his cups.

But as I turn around to flee, another man steps into my personal space.

“Honeysuckle,” he whispers, eyes wide, nostrils flaring. “Honeysuckle and toffee cake. How can you smell like that? I want to eat you up.”

*Oh Gods, no.* I never thought about my scent affecting other men, men who aren’t my mates. To be fair, I’ve never been in heat or close, never perfumed like I am now. Never imagined the effects.

Another man joins us, muttering something about sugar and honey.

“Stay away from me.” I pat the table behind me and find a knife. I lift it. “Stay back!”

But they don’t seem afraid of my flimsy little knife. They don’t seem to be thinking or caring. Only thinking with their little heads, as a priestess back at the Temple used to say, and for the first time, I understand exactly what she meant.

“Get back!” I yell, lifting my knife and preparing to climb onto the table and run away into the lantern-lit gardens, find a place behind a bush to hide.

As if you can hide smell behind a bush. Maybe I should jump into a fountain, gown and all.

But I’m quickly running out of options as more men crowd me, eyes dark and blank, big tents in their black pants and an acrid scent about them—because they want me, but they aren’t my mates.

I feel like a fox caught in the middle of a pack of hounds.

That's when I hear my name being called.

My alphas—and beta—to the rescue. I've never been one to care about being a damsel in distress but right now...

“Ari! Ariadne!” It's Finnen, but where is he? The crowd is hiding him from me. “Ari, are you okay?”

“She smells like fear,” I hear Taj rumble. “Ari!”

“Ariadne!” Kiaran comes my way, plowing a path among the guests, followed by the others, shoulders like bulwarks and thunder in their eyes. “Are you all right?”

Not sure but I almost weep with relief when he shoves the unknown, creepy men aside and grabs me in his arms. The knife falls from my hand, clattering to the ground.

Kiaran takes a look at my face and hauls me against him with a groan. “You're safe.”

Again, not sure. I feel as if the entire male portion of the gathering is staring at me with that same dark intensity.

“It's your scent,” Kiaran says. “It's all right.”

“How can it be all right?” I whisper but relax a little when my other mates arrive, their deep, dark scents reaching me before their hands find me, patting me, checking I'm okay before they stand guard around me.

Rhian is with them, I realize, his lighter scent twining with the alphas' muskier ones, his face set in determined lines. He really is almost as tall as them, his shoulders not as broad but still pretty big and strong.

A measure of calm sweeps over me, though I wonder if my mates will have to take on all the men at the wedding to keep me safe.

But there's a commotion near the manor.

"Look, look!" someone shouts. "The bride and groom!"

A distraction.

The crowd parts, clapping and whistling, to let the couple walk through. Though I'm short and my men are standing in front of me like walls, I catch glimpses of them as people shift.

She's resplendent in a cream gown, a silver tiara on her head, and a radiant smile on her face. There's something of Kieran in her. And her groom may look unremarkable, at least to me, but the smile on his face seems genuine, and what more does anyone really want except for someone to really want them and care for them?

I'm glad for her.

Something catches my eye—a soft-looking cushion on a bench. My eyes narrow and a need to have it snakes its way through me, making me move toward it.

"Ariadne." It's Rhian, following me, while my alphas are with their backs to us, watching the couple approach. Taj is saying something, and Finnen is snickering. "Where are you going?"

"I just need... something."

"Something? What do you mean?"

I reach for the small cushion, grab it and clutch it to my chest.

“Ariadne?”

“Just call me Ari,” I say absently.

“Ari... what the hell are you doing?”

His wide eyes are funny. I grin at him. “It’s for my nest.”

“Oh.” A flush rises to his cheeks. “Do you need help?”

“Help stealing cushions?”

The flush deepens. “Any help you require.”

*Aw.* Gods, he’s sweet like a honey bun.

“We should get back to the others,” he says, taking my hand. “Coming?”

I follow him, trying to tuck the little cushion into my belt.

The couple wave at the people as they make their way to the middle of the garden where an arch decorated with roses stands. There they turn around and wave a bit more and I’m starting to wonder if we could escape the gathering, go back to our room and have sex—one-way mind, but if your body insisted so vehemently on it like mine you’d understand—when she lifts a hand and the crowd falls quiet.

“My friends.” She smiles. “It’s my great pleasure to have here with us my brother, long thought dead, now returned to us.”

“Oh shit,” Taj says.

“Rejoice with us for his return.” Taj and Finnen step in front of Kiaran as her gaze searches the crowd. “He’s here... somewhere.”

The crowd laughs.

I don’t. I think of how his parents sent him to his uncle and aunt, surely with instructions to expose him in the wilderness. I think of him when we first met him.

I think of the scars on his arm and his thigh, of how close he must have come a thousand times to dying before he even became a man.

“Thank you all for coming to see us get wed. But the priest from the Temple still hasn’t arrived.”

More laughter.

“He’s not far, though, and should be here soon. So eat and drink and be merry for a while longer, and let the music play!”

“At least she hasn’t mentioned *me*,” Taj mutters.

But that relief is short-lived because the duke walks up to the couple and beams at his guests.

“We have another guest of honor tonight!” he says in a booming voice the people in the nearby hamlets must be able to hear. “Commander Tajeve Krath is among us, the war hero who single-handedly saved his regiment and his general from certain death in the battle of Uvila, not caring about saving his own life and indeed injuring himself in the line of duty and barely making it out alive...”



“Not bad,” Finnen says, and he doesn’t even sound sarcastic. “Not bad...”

“Shit. Shit!” Taj glances around nervously. “You wanna bet he’s invited all his military buddies to the wedding? Someone is bound to recognize me and even worse, someone’s bound to know I defected. We need to go, now.”

“Uh... oh shit.” Kiaran backs into Taj.

“What’s going on?” Finnen mutters.

“Crazy lady alert.”

“Lady?”

Then I see her. A lady indeed, in a purple gown and matching hat is sniffing at Kiaran.

Actually sniffing him.

“What do you want?” Kiaran snarls. “Go away!”

Her cheeks are flushed as she steps closer. “You smell so good. Like... spiced wine and the woods.”

“Back off,” he says again.

But she throws herself at him, wrapping her arms around him even as he pushes her away.

That’s not the end of it, though. More ladies are approaching, their eyes wide, nostrils flared.

And more men, in the same state.

*Oh, dear goddess.* We’re all perfuming. I’m all honey and sugar, they’re all spice and musk. We’re driving the guests crazy. Ladies are swooning right and left, and the men, now

that the speeches are over, are back to staring at me, coming for me.

We're driving everyone crazy. The men put me at their center, but I don't know how they can hold off the wave of people pushing toward us.

But a new commotion distracts us all.

"The priest is here!" voices ring out from the crowd. "The Temple has arrived. It's time for the rite!"

**ARIADNE**

“**M**ake way!” a man shouts. “Make way for the Temple!”

Despite the lingering hunger in their eyes, the men and women gathering around us move back to clear a path. Flickering flames catch my eye and then I stare as a familiar scene unfolds before my eyes.

The theatrics of the Temple, turning every simple task and rite into a drama taken right off the stage, into a scene from mythology, from the ancient times when the gods walked the earth.

Two acolytes appear first, holding their torches high. They are girls, young and with that androgynous grace of early adolescence, their thin white dresses translucent, their hair loose on their shoulders.

They are followed by a group of acolytes, both boys and girls, dancing a night rite to all the gods and goddesses of the creation.

I remember that dance. I took part in such processions years ago, before I grew into a woman and the priests and priestesses turned to younger girls to train.

And following them is the Temple priest, come from the Summer Capital to officiate over the wedding ritual—something he obviously couldn't do without an entourage. So humble of him.

Sarcastic, me? I suppose Finnen has been rubbing off on me.

In the same vein of humility, the priest is dressed in one of the fancier outfits I've ever seen, all gold and silver and black, a dazzling display from his silver satin shoes to his tall golden hat, eclipsing even the bride and groom on their very special day.

Then again, I was raised in an outpost, a country Temple. Not even our prelate wore garments this rich.

This priest is coming straight from the southern capital, carrying with him a whiff of luxury and importance a small Temple could never dream of competing with.

Strangely, though, he's not alone in his glory.

A lady is standing by his side—no, not a lady, an acolyte, I think, too young to be a priestess and though her robes are rich, too, threaded with gold, they have the simple shape of a follower of a god or goddess, and...

I know her.

Goddess, I know her and I thought I'd never see her again, but here she is, staring right back at me. She's stopped walking but the hatred flaring in her eyes is like a punch to my gut.

*Ismere.*

*No.*

I try to take a step back but there's nowhere to go, nowhere to hide, and I'm too flummoxed and winded to move anyway.

What is she doing here? With the priest from the Summer Capital? Why would she be in the capital at all?

And that's when it all falls into place and all my questions swoop back to hit me, answered, at last.

Yes, she'd been pleased when I was taken to the dungeons and later, when I was sent away to be executed. Whether she'd ever been my friend, that's still not clear, but it doesn't matter.

I know that she played a part in this, in my betrayal. Finnen's, too, I think as her gaze swings to him, full of loathing.

She betrayed us because she hates Fae blood—but also, more practically, for a position in the Summer Capital Temple, with better opportunities to rise in the hierarchy—and she probably traveled there with the promise of a front-line seat to our execution.

No wonder she's angry. The show was canceled as we never showed up.

*Boo.*

“We have to go,” I hiss, grabbing Finnen's hand. “Now!”

“But we can't—”

“She knows us. She's here. Ismere from the fort of Artare. She knows who we are.”

“*Fuck,*” Finnen says with feeling.

Yes, exactly. This is even worse than the Duke outing Taj to every military person in the crowd. This threat is immediate, because who knows how many more people the priest has brought with him?

And that's not even the worst of it. I bet the duke will gladly offer all his men to chase us down if the priest demands it, wedding or no wedding.

"Ariadne," she says at last, breaking the tension spanning like a tightrope between us. "Fancy meeting you here. And *Ata* Finnen. I'd say I'm shocked. A priest and an acolyte holding hands. Then again... oh, right. You ran away together. After being sentenced to death for being accursed Fae blood."

The priest beside her stops in his tracks. "What did you just say?"

"They are runaways, Your Grace. They must be captured and sent to Eremis immediately. The gallows men have been waiting for them, and um..." She wags a finger at us, her eyes raking our entire group. "I believe these men are also fugitives."

"But..." The priest's plump face is contorting with disbelief and anger. "This is outrageous. Duke D' Adraj would never aid fugitives. He's always been a true son of the Temple."

"What is going on?" Two of the duke's men approach us.

And we are hemmed on every side by the heaving crowd. Taj and Kiaran and Rhian are shoving back people who are

still trying to approach us and more of the duke's men are making an appearance.

The duke climbs onto the platform with the couple to be wed and roars, "What is the matter here?"

"Fugitives!" Ismere shrieks, pointing at us accusingly. "By Holy Atla's grace, get them!"

The duke's men lower their spears, coming at us, and Taj is pulling at me, yelling something I can't hear through the buzzing in my ears. Kiaran is swiping right and left, felling men like saplings, and Finnen is trying to lift me in his arms.

"We're done for," I whisper, even as I try to push him away. "It's over."

"No. We are not helpless," Finnen whispers in my ear.

What does he mean?

Oh.

*Oh!*

We have powers others don't know about, and although we're still discovering what we can do, it should give us an advantage—if only I could focus on a strategy.

As if I'd give up on us, even without special powers.

*For shame, Ari. For shame. You've never been a coward. Snap out of it.*

It's just that... I've never had so much to lose, and it scares me shitless.

“Who are you?” One of the men prods at Finnen’s side with his spear, and how dare he? That breaks the paralysis, the daze, the vicious spinning eddy of my thoughts.

What can I do?

Control animals—but no animals are around here except for stupid humans.

I can make plants grow. That has some merit.

And I can... perfume... harder?

“Ari!” Taj is already fighting his way through the crowd. “Follow me! Finnen, Rhian, protect her! Kia, with me!”

As we finally start to move—the whole thing from the moment I saw Ismere can’t have lasted more than a few blinks but it feels like hours have passed—I consider my options.

*Plants, I think, lots of plants in a garden.*

Finnen has an arm around me and is hauling me through the throng of people, elbowing and kicking anyone trying to close in on us.

“To our horses!” Taj says. “To the stables!”

Our only salvation, the only way to get away.

It’s hard to focus on finding the plants’ energy, their system of roots underground, the juices flowing through them as I stumble almost blindly along.

“Fuck!” Taj halts suddenly, throwing out his arms to stop Rhian and Kiaran.



Another group of men is advancing on us from the opposite direction, brandishing spears and swords.

Behind us, the wedding party is devolving into screaming chaos, and I can only imagine more men are making their way toward us.

But at least we have finally stopped moving and I can feel the plants. I yank on their calm undercurrents, waking them, asking them to move. Roots tremble underground, shoots rise through the packed earth, probing and piercing, growing as fast as I can make them grow.

“What the fuck,” Finnen whispers, crushing my hand in his, tilting his head to the side, sightless eyes wide. “What the... The plants are growing. They are... I can feel them.”

“Help me,” I breathe. “My powers are yours, yours are mine, isn’t that how it goes? *Persafin*. We are one clan. Help me, Finn.”

“Not sure this will work,” he mutters, but his power joins mine. It’s a jolt, a splash of heat and light pouring into me, filling me up, pleasure and pain and the feeling the world is a pearl cradled in the palm of my hand.

But the surge is slow, too slow, the transformation unfurling inch by inch. Tendrils poke out of the ground, rise toward the light, wind around the men’s legs.

Rosebushes rustle as they expand and men yelp as thorns stab them.

It’s not enough.

Plants aren’t meant for battle.

The men cast narrow-eyed looks at us but they keep coming. “Mow down the Fae-bloods!” one of them yells.

Capturing us alive doesn't seem important to anyone anymore. This is a fight for life or death.

“Finn,” I whisper.

“Get behind me,” he says.

“No way. We fight together.”

“Come on,” Taj says, “come and get us if you can,” but he's empty-handed. We dressed for a wedding, not a war, and the men attacking us have weapons.

But then Kiaran opens his arms and turns in a circle, a crazed grin playing on his face. “You!” He bows his head, his eyes going dark and feral. “Come play with me.”

“Kia,” Taj starts, but then Kiaran lets out a roar I remember all too well from when we first met him. It makes my blood run cold even though I know it's not directed at us.

*Battle craze.*

“Drakoryas!” The cry goes through the crowd as Kiaran falls on them, a whirlwind of a man, punching and elbowing and biting, a scent of acrid smoke spreading, spreading like wildfire, spreading like the terror of a lion in a herd of deer. “A Drakoryas!”

“This way,” Taj says, grabbing Finnen's elbow and Rhian's arm and hauling us all along. “To the stables.”

“But Kiaran!”

“He'll be fine. He's giving us a chance to flee. Hurry up!”

We run, the sounds of Kiaran beating the shit out of the duke's men echoing behind us. Taj is right. If we get to our horses, we'll come back and pull Kiaran out of the fray without any real problem and gallop away.

But of course that would have been too easy. Too straightforward. Too fortunate and convenient.

The beating of hooves clues us into what exactly we're about to face, because of course the duke would have cavalry and would set them on us to round us up quickly. Like every good political man, the duke must know how to best use a crowd's energy to his benefit.

Capture the freaks.

Display them to gain more favor.

Maybe whip them a little, to get their blood flowing and make the crowd wild.

Then lock them up and proceed with the wedding of his daughter.

But we're not done yet.

*"We are not helpless."*

I search for the horses' minds as they canter down from the stables, cutting through the gardens surrounding the manor, find their excited minds, their restless energy, and tap into that.

*Stop, I think. Stop.*

But they don't. They won't, too excited to heed me.

Until more power pours into me, and there's Kiaran running toward us. He grabs my hand, his palm rough and

slick with blood.

“You’re not the only one who can speak to animals,” he breathes. “Let’s turn them away.”

That’s easier to do, he’s right. He’s had more experience with animal minds, I think, as we tell the horses to run away, run into the night, out the gate and through the meadows and fields.

*Be free!* we tell them, and they heed us this time, the men’s cries of alarm fading along with the beating of hooves as their horses carry them away, into the night.

It would seem that we won. At least this bout. The stables are a few yards away. And yet...

The duke’s men are closing in around us, the crowd behind them, a swarm pressing in on every side. Torches send shadows dancing, the flames glinting off naked blades.

This is bad.

So bad.

It’s Taj’s turn to snarl and roar. “Rhian, with her!” He falls in line with Kiaran and Finnen and lifts his fists, shakes them. “You want a fight? We’ll give you one. Come at us, little humans. See if you can compete with three grown-ass alphas.”

He sounds... glad to fight. I want to laugh, but I also want to cry, because I’m scared for them. For all of us.

But something’s changed. My alphas charge and I realize they look different somehow. It’s as if they’ve all been

infected with the Drakoryas battle lust, growling and snarling like animals, but it's more than that.

Their hands... are clawed. Big curved claws gleam like blades as they attack the men who break ranks and fall back.

Some of them scream and run away.

Are those... *fangs* jutting from my alphas' mouths? And wait, is that smoke rising from their nostrils?

*Fire.* I remember Kiaran breathing fire. The unreality of it hits me hard and I open my mouth to curse, or pray for some revelation, only to find that something hot is also coming up my throat.

I clap my hands over my mouth, stunned. It feels like I'm about to... retch or something.

Retch fire.

Of all the changes, somehow this one shocks me the most.

"Ariadne?" Rhian slides his arms around me, hauls me back. "Ariadne! Are you all right?"

Not so sure.

Maybe.

*It's normal, I tell myself. A normal progression, changing us into... what? Full Fae? Or animals? Dragons, perhaps. But maybe it's just small changes to ensure the survival of our little clan.*

It's just not something anyone has ever talked about and it freaks me out.

“It’s okay,” Rhian says, his voice receding into a deep, soothing purr. “It’s going to be okay.”

*Is it, though?*

“Back!” Rhian hisses, hauling me against his body, “back! We should—”

But his words are lost in the Duke’s men yell as they charge on us, on my alphas who roar their defiance in reply.

And all hell breaks loose.

**RHIAN**

**T**he fucking alphas are insane.

Okay, truth be told, I'm in awe of them, but my awe verges on alarm, and not just because of the claws they've sprouted and the smoke drifting from their nostrils, no. They know no fear, damn them.

They pounce on the amassed paid soldiers in the duke's service as if they can't be touched by death, and the clash echoes in my bones. I swear I almost feel the earth shake as the three of them slam into the men, swatting their weapons aside as if they are toys and taking them down to the ground.

But it's still only three alphas versus a small regiment of barely trained and yet very motivated humans. Servants, like me, they know that their lives and the lives of their families depend on getting us to the duke, so they won't back down. I hope the three alphas can still think enough to realize that much, despite the berserker fever that seems to have taken over them.

As for me... I grab our omega, shove her aside as a spear sails past us, and drag her away from the battle.

“This way!” I yell, turning her, using my body as a shield when a man comes charging at us. I twist and slam the edge of my palm into his face, hear his nose crunch.

I’m a servant and a beta but I’m not helpless. I’m strong from all the manual work I’ve done over the years, and I’ve gotten into my fair share of fights.

I’ll protect her. I’ll keep her safe.

“Rhian! No!” She tries to pull me back to the battle, but I’m having none of it. The stables are our only chance, so I drag her that way.

I’m her best bet right now. I may be the only level-headed of my mates at this moment, with the alphas so high on battle lust and the world around us going to shit.

Was it Finnen who said it, who predicted it? A beta will keep a clear head. A beta keeps the clan alive and together. Well, I sure hope he’s right because at least during sex I kind of lost my mind.

I shove a way through the crowd while everyone watches the crazy fight, set my jaw and tell myself it doesn’t matter.

Finnen doesn’t know everything about betas. For that matter, none of us do, myself included, but I’m doing my best. We push through the people and they stare at us, puzzled, probably wondering why we’re moving the other way, leaving the spectacle they are trying to reach behind us.

It doesn’t matter, because for some reason these people matter to me. As little as I know them, and with the added



bonus of an arrow shot by Ariadne into my shoulder, I don't know. I still like them.

More than like them.

More than want them.

I can picture traveling with them, before finally settling down in a small farm or village and making a family and a life there with them.

*How is that possible?* I think, pulling Ariadne past a table where a thin manservant has sat in the confusion and is stuffing himself with the delicate wedding pastries set in porcelain platters for the guests. *How can I picture it so clearly? I never once imagined leaving the castle, leaving my miserable life there and finding people I'd care about.*

*And who'd care about me.*

*Do they, though? It's all gone by so fast, it feels almost like the hand of fate, but I've never believed in fate, I—*

*Holy shit.* “Ariadne? What are you doing?” I hiss, yanking on her hand. “Stop. Stop!”

She's grabbed a shawl from one of the high-backed chairs at one of the nobles' tables and is pulling it over her shoulders. “I want this.”

“No, you don't.”

“I really do.”

“Now is not the time to be stealing items for your nest!”

“Why not?”

“Because we’re fleeing for our lives?” I grunt, yanking on her hand again. “Come on.”

“No, we’re not going! Not without our mates.”

“I’m not leaving them behind!” I say, exasperated. “But we need to get to the horses.”

“Why didn’t you say so?” she huffs.

“Ariadne.” I haul her against me, gaze down at her pretty, upturned face. I brush my fingertips over her soft mouth. “Do you trust me?”

She hesitates for a long moment, which I suppose is fair as she barely knows me, then nods. “With my life,” she whispers.

Good, because that’s what it will take.

With a brief nod of acknowledgment, I bend and swing her up in my arms. “Here we go.”

“Wait!”

No more time to waste. I clutch her to my chest, a precious cargo, her sweet scent making me dizzy as I sprint across the grounds toward the stables, the soles of my low boots hammering way too loud on the packed soil.

But she’s wiggling in my arms. “Wait, wait! Put me down. Stop!”

“What the fuck, Ariadne?”

“I said put me down!”

Have I missed something? Is she mad? I can understand—sort of—the obsession with soft things for nesting. I know

omegas get like that as their heat approaches. But this?

“We need the horses!” I shout-whisper, exasperated. “The others need our help and—”

“Let go!” She wiggles in my hold and gritting my teeth, I put her down.

“There. What’s the problem?”

“I just... There’s a scent...”

*Keep a level head, I tell myself. Keep a level head, Rhian. Don't lose your shit now.*

“A scent? What scent? Why is that important now? Surely you must... *Ari!*”

She turns and marches back toward the fray. “You asked me if I trust you,” she mutters, “but how about you trust me, too?”

“With what? Your smelling ability?”

“With me being your omega.”

*Shit.*

“Halt! Stop! Hey, where the hell do you think you’re going? I’m supposed to protect you, dammit. Ariadne!”

“I said, call me Ari.”

Tall, lit torches are stuck in the ground, the flames sputtering—is it drizzling or fog winding white fingers around us?—and smoking, flickering over her dark hair and the shimmer of her long dress.

“What the fuck... Ari. I said stop!” I rush and grab her from behind. “I’ll throw you over my shoulder and carry you away, I swear.”

She struggles to free herself. “You can’t! Stop and just smell it, Rhian! It’s an alpha scent! It smells good, it smells... right.”

“What? Okay.” Nonplussed, I hesitate, my arms around her, her own honeyed scent jamming my thoughts. “But—”

“Do you think I like it?” she snaps. “Do you think I like how my body controls my mind, how being an awakened omega means all my decisions have changed their focus to... to...”

“Babies?” I supply.

“Yes!” She twists in my hold, turns around and glares at me. “Babies and sex and men!”

I laugh. I can’t help it. She looks so cute, a furious little sexy thing, against a background of said alpha men fighting tooth and nail—literally—against a small army of humans.

And then I smell it, too, a deep spiced musk that both attracts and repels me. It speaks right to the instincts that govern me, deeper than my conscious mind, of predators skulking in the night, stalking prey.

Stalking me.

My hackles rise. If I feel like prey, why do I feel this wrench in me, pulling me toward the smell? My damn cock stirs, starting to harden, and Ariadne draws in a sharp breath, a flush rising to her cheeks.

“One of us,” she whispers, “an alpha. He’s here.”

“Ari,” I whisper and have to swallow hard, past the tang of her and the unknown alpha coating the back of my tongue, “don’t—”

A sound has me moving, pulling her behind me, turning to face whoever is coming. It’s the clapping of hooves not of one but more horses.

A tall, broad-shouldered man steps out of the shadows, slowing down when he sees us. Golden skin, dark eyes, long black hair. He looks as wild as Kiaran. He looks like Kiaran’s shadow, a study in darkness.

The big shapes of the horses loom behind him, pawing at the ground, the whole incongruous group faintly illuminated by the flickering flames of the torches.

Is that...

“These are our horses,” I breathe.

He has to have heard me because he arches a brow, the strong lines of his face twisting as he smirks. He has a scar on his cheek, I realize belatedly, distorting his mouth a little.

“Oh, apologies.” His voice is low and rich. “These fine animals belong to you? I was just stealing them but then...”

“Then?” Ariadne steps out from behind me.

“Then I smelled something fucking delicious and...” He blinks. Licks his lips. Frowns. “And found myself here. Seems like...” He draws a long breath and groans a little. “Damn, the smell comes from... you. Who the hell are you two?”

“Shouldn’t we be the ones asking?” I mutter. “After all, you’re stealing *our* horses.”

“Nothing personal. I didn’t know they were yours. But you know what they say.”

“What?”

“Finders keepers.”

“You’re a thief.” I step in front of Ariadne again and prepare to deck him, scent or no scent. “And we don’t have time for this. We need those horses. Give them back.”

“Whoa, slow down.” His dark eyes glitter. “Why should I take your word for it? How do I know they are yours? For all I know, you’re trying to steal them, too. Well, I got there first.”

“You asshole!” I lift my fists, so fucking pissed I see red.

“Actually, the name is Aless.” He gives Rhian an interested once-over. “Pleased to meet you.”

We’ll see how pleased he’ll be when he meets my right hook, but before I get a chance to say another word, Ariadne tugs on my elbow.

“Rhian, look! Goddess, we have to save them!”

*Oh shit.* Kiaran, Taj and Finnen are in trouble. They’re still fighting but now they are encircled by the duke’s men and more riders are arriving, blades flashing.

We’re out of time.

“Those guys... are with you?” Aless mutters.

“They’re ours,” Ariadne says fiercely. “And so are you. But Rhian is right, we don’t have time for this. The horses!”

“Hey,” he starts, “wait a moment—”

She’s already vaulting onto one. She’s so quick, I have to rush after her.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Aless hisses. “I stole these horses. Get off—”

“Are you coming?” I mount and yank on the reins. “You’re one of us, so help save us.”

“No fucking way!”

“Help us or we’ll run over you.”

“Rhian,” Ariadne says, breathless.

*Right.*

*No time.*

I dig my heels into my horse’s flanks. “Then get out of the damn way.”

Cursing, he releases the reins and moves aside, then as I canter past him, he swings himself onto one of the horses.

I grin. “Let’s save our alphas’ stupid asses.”

“Their sexy asses.” Ariadne laughs out loud as we charge into the fray. “For our clan!”

For love, babies and glory.

**ARIADNE**

**W**e've found him.

Another alpha, and his scent seems to have *clicked* something in me, shifted something into place, changing me forever.

As I mount the horse and press forward, I shiver with the change. My body tries to distract me from the task at hand, aching in a weird way, a strange pleasure rolling through me.

I feel complete in a way I never have before. I feel like I was missing one of my limbs and now it's back. Now I'm whole.

But I can't focus on that now, not while my alphas are in danger. My heart hurts with the thought, of them offering their lives so selflessly to save me. The idea of them getting wounded, or worse, dying, is a wedge in my mind, driving me crazy.

Satisfied that Aless seems to be following us, I press my mount onward, right into the heat of battle.

I feel my horse's mind, a nugget of focus, a thrill of fear, and inject trust into it.



*It's fine, little horsey. Keep going.*

Two more of the horses Aless stole from the stables trail behind us, and I snag their thoughts, making sure they follow us.

And then I feel the other horses' minds, simple, one-track kernels of determination. The horses of the riders heading right for my alphas who are still fighting, enclosed inside a throng of men, standing back-to-back, never giving up in this impossible battle against the odds.

We're not coming a minute too soon. I see blades flashing around my alphas, I see their bloodied faces and slowing movements, the fatigue coming through despite the battle craze, and I know we made it to them right in the nick of time. It's a miracle they managed to keep so many men back for so long, as it is.

"Make way!" one of the riders shouts, brandishing a spear, slowing down his horse to make it through the press of men closing in around my alphas. "The freaks are ours. We'll take it from here."

"No, you won't," I say and with the feeling of completeness comes a new sense of power. It's been there for a while but quiescent, almost dormant.

It's wide awake now and I only have to dip my proverbial fingertip in it to wake it up.

*Go back, I throw the thought at the horses. Turn around and go back to your stables. Back! Go back!*

I still can hardly credit it when the horses neigh and rear up, then turn and canter away, ignoring the surprised shouting of their riders.

No matter how many times I flex this new muscle, it still comes as a shock.

And then another shock when I point at the duke's men and let more of that power out. The ground shakes, new shoots springing out, but also boulders emerge from the ground, pushing out of the earth like monstrous seeds, one after another, rolling against the men, obstructing their way.

Rhian mutters a curse, lifting a hand, and a streak of fire strikes. Then another. It's like lightning springing randomly from the air.

I think of fire and smoke and flames, feel Rhian's mossy energy, moss and stones and the heat of the earth, and more rocks roll.

Even our horses startle and whinny and paw at the ground.

I feel my alphas' energy, then, kind of muted and speaking of exhaustion, joining ours, and a wall, a shield of fire rises around us and around them, the duke's men running away, screaming in fear.

"Come on!" Rhian beckons at our battered alphas to join us. "We don't have time. Hurry up!"

"Fuck you," Taj says, wiping blood from his mouth, grabbing Kiaran and Finnen and staggering toward us. "You pretty motherfucker. We're coming. Wait up, will you?"

I laugh softly.

“What is this?” Aless mutters, his voice nearly breathless.  
“What is...? Fuck, what’s happening?”

I don’t have time or thought to spare for his shock. I’m pretty shaken myself, and Rhian’s face is pale, twin spots of color on his cheekbones. I wonder if we should dismount to help our alphas up, but they seem to be holding up okay, considering.

Taj shoves Finnen at my horse, and while he mounts up behind me with a quiet groan, Taj and Kiaran swiftly swing themselves onto the two extra horses. Finnen settles behind me, his arms going around me, and I sigh in contentment and relief at the contact with him, his scent surrounding me, and the knowledge that all of them are all right.

And we’re finally set to leave.

“Shall we?” I nudge my horse around, toward the path leading out of the manor’s hardens.

But then a woman calls out Kiaran’s name and someone curses.

“Kiaran! Wait!”

It’s his younger sister, Ody.

---

“Ody.” Kiaran turns his horse around to face her. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t go. You’ve only just arrived. You’ll break Marianne’s heart and it’s her wedding day.”

Kiaran's jaw works. "You know I have to go. Please..." His shoulders rise and fall. "Please, tell Marianne I'm sorry and I hope she leads a very happy married life."

"Father is a hypocrite," she whispers. "And mother is a coward. I'll never forgive them for not telling us about you. And for sending you away."

"I'm Fae blood, Ody." Kiaran's horse dances in place, eager to gallop away. "Which means you may be, too, even if you haven't shown any signs yet."

"But—"

"If that happens, though I pray it won't, and if our parents kick you out, come find us in the Rising Moon Lands. Okay?"

"Okay," she says dubiously. And as he nudges his horse to go, she holds out something for him. "Take this."

Her pendant.

"No, Ody—"

"Take it. I want you to remember us. To remember me. We would have loved you, you know."

His face contorts in something like agony. He bends sideways from the saddle and grabs the pendant from her.

"Thank you, little sister. May we meet again one day." He hangs the pendant around his neck and straightens, then without another word, leans forward in the saddle and canters away.

"South," I whisper, following him.

“South!” Taj says, and this time we’re off, out the gate and back out into the wide, hostile world.

---

It’s simply surreal, galloping under the stars and passing clouds, the rolling moon playing peekaboo with us, through the dark landscape of trees and meadows. Five horses, six people, comprised of four alphas, one beta and one omega.

Three alphas I know well enough by now, a beta I’m getting to like, and a new alpha I know nothing about except for his given name and the fact he’s a horse thief.

The events of the night blur in my mind.

The tub, the sex, the pleasure.

The wedding, the crowd, the hungry eyes in the lords’ and ladies’ eyes.

The priest and Ismere.

*Goddess, Ismere...*

The fight, the magic, the flight.

Meeting our fourth alpha.

Can we trust Aless? The usual question about scents and instincts and fate buzzes around my mind. My body has chosen him as one of us, as—I think—the last of our mates to close the circle of our clan, but that doesn’t mean he’s necessarily good for us. That he’s a good man.

Or that he'll agree to not only stay with us but become part of our growing family.

I don't even know if he wants me. If he wants us. Liking us would be good, but only as a first step. Attraction. Desire. Affection. Can't rush such feelings, such ties, or they'll unravel before they even form.

If this is fate, my fated mates, the ones for me, why do I have to go through so much doubt every time?

*Trust the gods*, I tell myself. *Trust—*

*"Sidde drakai,"* a voice says in my head. *"Drakai evenen. Drakai inassa. Drakai inonen."*

"Dragon god!" I breathe.

*"Ikene drakai olonen."*

"What does it mean?" I whisper when silence follows the words inside my head. "What does *Ikene drakai olonen* mean?"

Finnen's arms tighten around me. "It means He belongs to the dragon."

I shiver. "Is that an answer?"

We slow to a canter. Dogs from a dark hamlet to our left bark at our passing. A howl echoes in the distance.

Once the moon sets, we have to stop. The dark will be absolute. Kiaran is still leading the way, so if there is shelter, I'm sure he'll find it.

*Kiaran.*

I can't imagine what he's feeling. Finding the manor, finding his parents and sisters, dressing up to attend his older sister's wedding, getting the pendant from his younger sister and being told he could have had a home there... Barely finding his family only to lose it again right away.

*"Ikene drakai olonen,"* the god's voice murmurs inside my head again.

*I know. I know, okay?* I know Aless belongs to the dragon, too, that he's one of us. Or is he speaking of Kiaran? That's not the answer to everything, though.

But maybe it is. Maybe it is as simple as this. We are family, too. We are children of the dragons, of the old Fae, and we have found each other.

*"Ikene ae olonen."* The god's voice sounds somehow vaguely amused.

I don't need Finnen's translation this time to understand the words.

*'He belongs with you.'*

With us.

It may not solve everything, may not answer everything, but I know this in my bones. My men belong with me and I with them, and as long as we love each other, we'll be happy.

**ARIADNE**

**K**ieran's choice of a camp for the night turns out to be a group of silver pines. Under their branches, there is a bed of pine needles which makes for a passable bed when you're too exhausted to care about comfort.

At least it's not the bare cold, hard ground, and it's not overly wet.

My standards for beds have never been very high, but right now they're non-existent.

I only want my men with me. That's all that matters. I almost lost them one too many times.

Only Aless keeps apart, lying on his back a ways off, shooting us suspicious looks from under his dark bangs.

It probably didn't help that Taj tied the reins around his ankle, to make sure Aless doesn't steal them again and runs off into the night.

Yeah, not trusting each other yet, even though he followed us here without another word.

Too much to process right now, though, to analyze and pick apart. I sink into deep sleep the moment my men's scents



close over me, their arms thrown over me and around me, like protective charms to thwart all evil.

I drift through layers of dreams, transparent veils that part to let me pass and seamlessly melt over my head, traverse a memory of me as a child running through the laundry of the Temple, in the sunshine, the white pieces of fabric like clouds, the world turning into a safe playground.

And then I sink deeper, into darker places.

A Temple, I think, though it's unlike any I've ever been before. There's something... alive about it, even though the corridors are deserted, the marble tiles under my bare feet dirty.

And yet not cold.

I stop, stare down at my feet. Wiggle my bare toes. The floor is warm and wonderfully smooth, like a polished pebble. Beyond my field of vision, there's something bright, so bright it gilds the edges of walls and furniture. I swear I can hear the rustling of foliage and the chirping of birds.

A garden.

Scents waft into the building, besieging my senses—citrus blossoms and rose petals, wet earth and running water. Ponds and trees and bushes and life.

But my feet refuse to turn and take me to the garden. No, they insist on taking steps forward, inside this dusty, sterile hall.

It doesn't feel evil and scary. It only feels abandoned. Left behind. The walls have tall niches for statues, but they stand

empty. The unswept floors are precious and full of colors, muted by the thick layer of dust. This used to be an important place of worship, of power.

Nobody is here now.

But as I walk on, I see that at the end of the hall, on an ornate black throne placed on a dais, sits a man.

He wears no crown and his garment is a long black mantle, edged with gold, like his throne. His hair is made of gold and his eyes are burning.

The dragon god.

“*Sidde drakai*,” I breathe.

As I slowly approach, I realize that leathery wings jut out on either side of him. Are they attached to the throne or to him? I’m not sure.

I’m staring at the god and more details come into focus, taking my breath away.

Like his ears which are long and pointed, decorated with golden studs and hoops.

Like his feet which are bare but aren’t human, instead scaled and clawed like a beast’s.

This is an ancient being, pulsing with the same power I have felt rising in me when my mates were in danger, the same power that pushed the plants to grow and touched the animals’ minds. A god, forgotten for so long, because his people were exterminated and nobody could hear him or remember his name.

*“Sidde drakai.”* I go down on my knees in front of him, bowing my head. “You called?”

A rustling, like leaves, like wings. His clawed feet shift in my line of sight and I lift my head.

*“Drakai evenen,”* he says. *“Drakai inassa. Drakai inonen.”*

The voice, familiar by now, echoes inside my head, but also inside the hall, bouncing against the walls, dispersing in low whispers that chase one another around pillars and through doors.

His lips have yet to move.

The fire in his eyes flashes.

“How may I serve you?” I whisper. “What do you need me to do?”

This time his voice seems to hold a thread of laughter as the words spill into my mind and this time, I understand them on a level deeper than language:

*“Ekatenin ro, ekatenithorin, amme.”*

*Do what you are already doing, child.*

---

I wake up with a gasp, still seeing that flicker of brightness at the edges of my vision, still seeing the god’s handsome features, his leathery wings and clawed feet, hearing his amused voice inside my head.

And come face-to-face with Rhian.

“Whoa!” I jerk back and he grips my chin, stopping me from lying back down.

“Are you all right?” he asks. “You were mumbling something in your sleep.”

“And had your hand on Rhian’s crotch,” Taj says from my other side.

“I did?” A throb starts between my legs. My body doesn’t know how to be embarrassed, apparently, though my face has no problem flushing and giving me away.

“Typh’s depths,” Taj chuckles, “how did you think he woke up to hear your mummings?”

*Oh, dear goddess...*

“It’s okay,” Rhian says, then coughs. “I didn’t mind.”

“If you did, I’d be concerned about you,” Taj says and his scent swirls around me, musk and smoke and decadent spice.

“We still need to talk about personal boundaries,” Finnen mutters from somewhere to the side and I turn to find him cross-legged on the bed of needles, rubbing at the crust of blood on his hands.

They all seem busy with something and very awake.

“Did I oversleep?” I whisper.

“Dawn is only just breaking,” Rhian says and his scent of green earth and pepper hits me right in the chest, then curls lower, making my belly tight.

But their faces and hands glow with light. I frown, open my mouth to ask if they see it, too, but Taj chooses this moment to speak again.

“And what is that?” He’s wiping at the blood spattered all over his face with his sleeve. “That colorful piece of cloth around your waist. Where did you get that?”

“Oh, this... old thing. I...” Heat rises to my face. “I... took it. From the wedding feast.”

“You what?” Taj stares at me, then snorts. “Back at stealing nesting stuff?”

“Shut up,” I mumble, embarrassed and yet not sorry. I stroke the soft length of the fabric tied around my waist. “I lost the other things I gathered. This is... I need it, Taj.”

His grin fades. “I know, love. I’m just saying—”

“I helped her,” Rhian says quietly, each word falling like a stone into a pond.

Taj’s brows rise. “I see. You’re complicit. A partner in crime.”

“Stop teasing him, Taj,” I say. “He’s our mate. He understands me.”

“Hey, I understand you, too.” Taj thumps his chest. “Me, mate. Me, your alpha. You wound me to the heart, kitten.”

“She needs a nest,” Rhian says. “This is just a nest marker.”

“Nest marker?” I whisper.

“A substitute,” Finnen says.

“Yeah, that,” Rhian agrees. “Until we make her a real nest, she needs these small things to calm herself.”

“How do you know so much about nesting?” I ask, ignoring the part about calming myself. I’m very calm, thank you very much. I just needed this shawl. Nothing to it.

And having my mates here, so handsome and battle-worn isn’t making me horny. Not at all. I’m not thinking of climbing them like trees or shoving them down on top of the pine needles and straddling them, riding them.

Not at all.

See? So calm.

“I heard tales,” Rhian says quietly. “A man who had been across the southern border, a traveling tinker and vendor, he came to the castle a few years ago and liked to sit with us servants by the fire and tell us of his adventures.”

“What else did he say?” I whisper.

“About nesting? That he’d met a clan whose omega had demanded they build her a domed underground nest with pillows made of eiderdown and spider silk, brought from the Orient, and rugs from the curly black sheep living on the mountains up north and—”

“That sounds like a tall tale,” Taj interrupts, but he sounds troubled. “Don’t believe every word you hear.”

*Hm... A domed nest. It does sound nice...*

“Not only about nesting,” Finnen says, “though... good to know.” He has a strange expression on his face—not quite

horror, but an approximation of it. It's funny. "Anything else about the Rising Moon Lands and crossing that could be useful to us?"

"Oh. Right." Rhian scratches at his temple. "He did say that Fae blood is more common across the border. He didn't..." Rhian hesitates. "He didn't mention magic, not as such, but he did mention that the vegetation in those towns is rampant and that the riders don't use harnesses for their horses, so I suppose... it's a Fae blood thing? What you did back there, at the manor?"

Taj chokes on a bark of laughter. "That's something. And I feel so special now."

"You always were an arrogant bastard," Finnen mutters with a small grin. His scent of leather and bitter almonds wafts over to me and I draw it in deeply, shivering.

"Can't deny that," Taj mutters. "But did he happen to mention where he crossed and if it was easy? If it was safe? I mean, if the border is open and the Rising Moon Lands are harboring all the Fae-bloods, aren't there clashes with the Empire who is hunting us down? How the hell is that possible?"

Their voices turn into a buzzing inside my head. I know all this is important. Essential. That's our way out of here, our salvation, our goal. Unless we leave the Empire and find shelter in the Rising Moon Lands, we're screwed and not in a nice way.

But my body is burning. It was burning in the dream of the dragon god, it burned yesterday, and today I think I might die

in a conflagration. The back of my neck aches fiercely, as do my wrists, and the throb between my legs is searing agony. My skin feels stretched too tight over my bones. When I turn my head, I find the world tilting. So dizzy.

“Where is Kiaran?” I interrupt them to ask. “Can’t see him.”

“Said he wanted to check nobody has followed us.”

“And Aless?”

Taj frowns. “That’s the new guy, right? The horse thief?”

“Rhian, what did you tell Taj?”

“The truth.” Rhian shrugs. “He had been stealing our horses when we met him.”

“So where is he?” I demand.

“Said he had to take a piss.”

“What if he runs away?” I ask.

“Ari...” It’s Finnen this time. “If he runs, don’t you think that’s his choice?”

“Artume, you’re right.” I sigh, push my long hair out of my face. “It’s just... his scent. He’s our mate. The final link.”

Suddenly everyone’s attention is on me.

“The *final* one?” Finnen asks. “Are you sure?”

“I... I’m going to talk to him.” I scramble to my feet, suddenly unsure I want to talk about this now, examine the implications of my statement, of my feeling. “You find out all you can about the border and crossing to the south.”



Taj stops trying to wipe the blood off his face. “But Ari—”

“I’ll be back,” I tell Taj and hope I don’t look as trapped and panicky as I feel. “Got to pee, and wash my face, and make sure Aless hasn’t run away, and that Kiaran hasn’t been eaten by wolves.”

“But—”

Stumbling dizzily, I hurry out from under the branches of the pine tree where we spent the night, my heart banging inside my chest. I should be checking them over for injuries, my stubborn alphas, I should be touching them and kissing them and maybe having sex with them as my body demands.

So why am I running away?

**KIARAN**

**T**he first time around, I was sent away. Left to die. Denied any clemency.

This second time I am the one who walked away from my family.

But what was I supposed to do? Stay and be slain, me and my mates? Stay and fight my parents? Kill my father, perhaps, and take his place?

Take his role?

Become him?

I couldn't do that. And we're hunted, all of us. What was I going to do, send my mates away and stay at the manor? Pretend to be a human? Pretend everything's all right? That I forgive my parents for deciding to get rid of me, so that I can spend time with my sisters who seem like nice people?

I wish I had time to get to know them better.

But I can't deny my mates any more than I can stop breathing air, and not only because they brought me back to life. Not only because they took care of me, trusted me, pleased me and saved my life again and again.

Though... yes, also because of all these things. I don't just want them and desire them. I care for them and need time with them, and the idea of making babies, making a family, a home for us... It's the dream to top every fucking dream I've ever had in my life.

I hope my sisters are well and happy. I even hope... yeah, I hope my parents are okay and look after them. My life has taken a different path and I don't regret it.

Not one fucking bit.

Which may be why I'm standing on the plain as the sky lightens in the east, keeping watch over my mates who have just started to stir under the pine tree we chose as our shelter for the night, while at the same time keeping an eye on Aless.

Aless is a new factor and I both don't exactly trust him and want to keep him safe. There are wild animals out here, especially at dusk and dawn, and he seems a little... out of sorts.

He kicked at rocks and branches for a while, muttering under his breath. He's a strong man, tall and muscular. Not as strong as me. Then again, few men are.

He feels dangerous, though. A man who has seen a lot, done a lot to survive, not restrained by ethics.

Look at me, talking about ethics. But even though I follow my body's desires freely, even though I've been a Wildman, I don't condone crime.

And he's a thief. A criminal. The scar on his cheek gives him a slightly menacing look, though he's handsome.

In a dark and brutal way.

Now he's sitting on a fallen trunk, silent and still, black hair falling in his eyes. He should be sleeping and resting, preparing for our trip south.

If he's decided to come with us.

Our omega will be crestfallen if he doesn't—and what do I feel? Not sure. His scent is drawing me to him regardless, that ambered liquor aroma, that earthy spice of him. His scent and that inky hair, the broad shoulders and the long legs, the strong jaw and slightly hawkish nose, the thick lines of his brows over his hooded, sloe-eyed gaze.

A shadow. That's what he is. Mysterious and intriguing, alluring and tempting, just like the Fae were always described.

A trickster and a scoundrel and a rake.

And why am I getting such a fucking hard-on over a guy I've only just met? It annoys me. I should be more clever than my instincts.

Then again, instincts are like magic, touching on information my mind can't normally access, so why—?

*Shit.* Someone is coming.

A woman—and instantly I recognize her shape, her scent, before my eyes even register what I am seeing.

*Ariadne.*

She's coming toward me though she hasn't seen me. Where are the others? What is she doing and where is she going? Her scent blows over me in waves, stoking the fire in

my veins, getting my dick rock-hard, but something about it is... off, like maybe she's upset or agitated.

She's heading toward a golden willow growing down a slight slope and I narrow my eyes. A stream has to be nearby.

Where the fuck is she going? Against the brightening sky, she's a flitting shade, a figure of mist about to dissolve into thin air. She's the most important person in my life right now. The center of my universe.

Mine to protect.

Casting Aless one last look, I rush after her.

It's the only thing I can do.

---

At first, I don't see her as I run down the small slope after her, and my goddamn stomach twists. Where did she go? How did the other idiots let her run off on her own? Where the hell are they?

Her scent is thick on the cool breeze, though, so she can't be far and my heart settles in my chest.

I'll find her.

See what's troubling her.

Keep her safe.

Then I'll find the others and beat the shit out of them for failing to follow her, as I'm doing.

"Ariadne! Ari! Show yourself. Are you okay?"

No sound, except for the light soughing of the willow and the grass on the plain. A bird tweets.

I search for something, a thread, search for the little bird minds in the tree—and then I find her.

I suck in a breath.

Hadn't thought I could do this. I've never found a human mind before.

Hers burns bright and it's so close.

“Ari?” I step closer to the willow and now I can hear her panicked breathing. “It's just me, Kiaran.”

She says nothing, so I part the willow branches and step inside the cave-like space. Light seeps through the golden-green walls formed by the branches drooping toward the ground, and there she is, curled against the tree trunk, under a low-hanging branch.

She's wrapped up in her long hair, her face veiled by the long strands, her arms wrapped around her legs. She looks so tiny like this, so fragile and young that my fucking heart nearly breaks.

“Ari...” I drop to my knees in front of her, take one of her hands in mine. “What's wrong?”

She blinks at me as if she doesn't really see me. Her breaths shudder.

She's always seemed so strong for someone so slight.

She's always seemed to know what she wants, what has to be done, how to help and save us all.

“Ari,” I try again. “Are you hurt? Are you in trouble?”

She huffs a light breath of a laugh then. “In trouble? Oh, yes. With you guys, so much. How did you find me?”

“I touched your mind.”

“That was you. You can talk to animals, so maybe that’s why.”

“Talk to them?” I squeeze her hand in mine. “Not sure. But I can sense their minds sometimes, like you do, an ability that came to me as I started growing taller, growing into a man. I never really befriended any. I mean, what is a friend? There were crows following me when I hunted. Some big cats came and sat near me when I skinned my catch, hoping to get the carcass. A wolf stuck around for a while but then it left, too.” I chuckle. “Even took my favorite fur with him. Still can’t imagine what he wanted with it.”

“Aw gods, Kia...” Tears spill from her eyes and run down her flushed cheeks. “I’m so sorry. So sorry you went through all that, that you were left alone. The loneliness! I can hardly imagine it. Oh, no...”

“What is it?” I put my arms around her, gently pull her out of her little shelter and against my body. “Didn’t mean to make you cry, dammit.”

“I know.”

“Sometimes I don’t realize how strange my life so far has been until I laugh about it and you shed tears for me.”

“Because I care about you and take it personally that your family made you suffer.” She pulls back a little and smacks a

small fist against my chest.

“Woman.” I grip her chin, tilt her face up. “I’m not alone anymore, thanks to you. Stop crying.”

“I want to cry! You can’t stop me.” There goes her little fist again.

I stare down at her, mystified. “Okay...”

“Because so much sucks and you all suffered so much and the world is so bad!”

“Okay.” I stroke her wet cheek. “You’re right. And you can cry if you want to. But not for me, woman. I’m the happiest I’ve ever been, okay?”

And the result of that is that she cries harder.

This is so weird. I mean I don’t know women. Don’t know people, really, not after a lifetime in the wild. Maybe someone can explain this to me?

“And what about your scars?” She now pokes me in the chest with her finger, sniffing. “Will you tell me how you got them?”

“Ah, sure.” I frown, still unsure how to fix this, how to dry her tears and make her smile again. My record so far today hasn’t been so good. “So, the one on my leg, I got it a few years ago. I was hunting a jaguar, had been after her all day, but I hadn’t realized...”

“Hadn’t realized what?”

“That she had just had cubs. She was so ferocious. Attacked me the moment I approached her den, no warnings,



no grace. Her claws cut me open, but that was the worst of the wounds. Had to keep my thigh wrapped tightly for weeks before the flesh finally knit. As for the one on my arm... I barely remember. I think I fell down a slope and cut myself on a rock. I lay there for days.”

“Oh, Kia...” She’s sobbing now and I’m so mad at myself for all this. “No...”

“Fuck, I’m so sorry,” I grind out, “so fucking sorry, Ari. Didn’t mean to—”

“Shut up and let me hold you, you big stubborn animal, do you hear?” Her slender arms tighten around me, her tears soaking my shirt.

“...okay?” I pull her back into my arms, into my lap. And it feels so damn nice to have her against me. If my dick is hard enough to burst through the seams of my pants, I don’t give a shit. I like holding her. Feeling her pressed to me. Knowing she’s safe even if I made her cry.

“I won’t let anyone hurt you ever again,” she seethes, clutching me so hard I feel the hard points of her nipples through my shirt, “I’ll kill them before they hurt you.”

I laugh softly, because yeah, it’s funny. I’m talking about jaguars and wolves, and she wants to fight the world for me. This little, fierce thing I can hold up in one arm.

And I laugh because I’m so damn happy I want to fucking cry, too.

Thank the gods I don’t because just then I hear a crunching noise and turn to see the others finally arrive.

I shrug off the relief—it's our mates, not some hungry animal, not imperial soldiers come to kill us, not the Temple footmen preparing to capture us and take us to the gallows—as I'm damn pissed at them.

“*Now* you remember to follow her?” I snarl. “Now you show up?”

“Whoa. She said she needed to piss,” Taj mutters. “She seemed to need some space.”

“Really now?”

“What's the matter with you? Move aside.” He sighs when I snarl again and won't budge. “Is she okay? Why is she crying?”

“I'm fine!” she sobs.

“Not a very convincing act, woman,” I mutter, half-amused and half-exasperated. “She smelled... different, so I followed her.”

“Ari, why did you come here?” Finnen asks.

She says nothing.

“Ariadne,” Rhian whispers, reaching out and stroking her arm. “You can tell us when something is wrong.”

She shudders.

“She was hiding... sheltering,” I say, picturing her when I found her. “Under a branch. She seemed upset.”

“I'm not upset,” she sobs.

“Okay. Why did you hide?”

“I needed... a place.” She sniffs. “To sort out my head. My heart knows that everything is good, but my head gets scared sometimes, and my body...”

“What about your body?” Rhian asks.

“It wanted... some dark and safe place. A soft and warm place. I can’t explain it. I...” She strokes the satin of her now filthy gown. “I felt like I was drowning, like I couldn’t breathe, and I was burning...” She chokes a little, her cheeks bright red. “Burning inside, needing you.”

“Oh, girl,” Taj breathes. “It’s clear what you need.”

“You need a nest,” Finnen says. “We are the most miserable band of alphas—and beta—to ever see the light. You’ve been needing a nest for a while now but we’re still on the run.”

“Not your fault,” she whispers but she does look miserable, her lower lip trembling, her lashes wet. “It’s just that... I don’t know how to deal with this. How to get out of this hole in my head. My body and mind clash over priorities, like escaping with our lives. They clash with how much I love you, or maybe not really, because wanting you and loving you can go hand in hand, right?” She casts me a doubtful look. “Goddess, I’ll never get rid of the teachings of the Temple, will I? Carnal love and chaste love... I love you in all the ways. I want the whole of you. But my body wants the carnal part here and now.”

“We’ll help you build a nest the moment we cross the border to the Rising Moon Lands, where it’s safe,” I say. “It will be the first thing we do.”

“You don’t understand,” she whispers. “There’s no time.”

“No time?” Finnen repeats the words, his voice rising a little. “Ari...”

“Are you in heat?” Taj asks abruptly.

She hesitates, gives a slight nod. “It’s starting, I think.”

“Because of Aless?”

“Because I have the mates I need.”

I exchange a glance with Taj. He looks a little stunned. Finnen doesn’t look any better, and Rhian looks confused.

Truth is, I’m stunned, too. Things are moving faster than I thought possible. And yet I’m so very fucking damn pleased.

“Oh, woman.” I pull her into my arms again and she comes willingly, melting against me. “We’ll take care of you.”

“How?”

“We’ll find a way. I promise you that.”

“You can’t promise that, Kia,” she whispers, “not when we’re on the run.”

“Yes, I can, because you mean everything to me and I’ll find a way. We will find a way.”

The others nod, though I bet they’re coming up empty, like I am, as to how.

“We don’t have a choice,” Finnen says. “Once an omega goes into heat, she has to mate with her clan or she may die. Her alphas may die, too.”

“Nobody is dying,” Taj snaps, glaring at Finnen. “Don’t worry, priest, I’ll teach you some techniques to build up your sex stamina before her heat begins.”

Finnen chokes.

“After all,” I say, kissing the top of Ariadne’s head, “she’s worth dying for.”

All of them stupid bastards are, but no way in hell am I telling them that. They’re too big for their own boots already. And what about this Aless guy?

Still need to figure him out...

## ARIADNE

**R**ight, I tell myself. *Snap out of it, Ari. You need to move.*

*Nesting under a tree while the Empire hunts you and your mates is the mother of all bad ideas. You're a sitting duck.*

*Run ahead while you can. Especially now that the border is so close.*

Pulling back from Kiaran's warm, strong body is like wading through mud. I don't want to let go, don't want to face the fact that I can't settle down with my mates yet, can't ignore the real danger lurking behind every tree and boulder and just... ride their cocks until the ache in me stops.

*If you don't move now, I think, you might as well give up and get everyone killed.*

Not an option.

No way.

Ignoring the pain twisting my belly, the maddening throbbing between my legs, the pounding in my head and the dizziness, I slowly, carefully climb off his lap. He resists for a

moment, his arms tightening around me, his breath catching as if he wants to say something, but he lets go.

And I love him for it, because the hard ridge of his cock underneath me was impossible to ignore. They're all hard, so hard their pants seem about to tear at the crotch, but they're doing their best to think rationally, to formulate a strategy that will keep us alive.

I love them all.

Following their example, I tug on my rumpled gown and sit my ass on the mossy ground. "So tell me the plan. What have you found out?"

"Ari... Are you all right?" Rhian asks.

"As all right as I can be at the moment," I tell him truthfully. "We don't have time, like I said. Did you find out anything useful about crossing the border?"

Rhian shrugs. Shifts uncomfortably where he's kneeling on the ground. The tent in his pants looks painful. "The border is heavily patrolled. That man, the storyteller, he was known as harmless and crossed the border at will. Nobody minded him."

"Damn. That's not helping us. We're probably the most wanted people in the area right now."

"The only other way I've ever heard mentioned," Taj says with a frown, is a passage through steep hills near the river, but it's said to be haunted by bandits, waiting to ambush every desperate soul trying to cross."

"Dammit," Finnen breathes.

“I thought you had a plan, priest?” Taj doesn’t sound angry, only tired, and my chest clenches. He looks tired, too. They all do. Though he’s mostly cleaned the blood off his face, his torn clothes are covered in it and I think I see fresh crimson staining his right sleeve.

“I’m not an army commander,” Finnen mutters. “Never been this far south. I only knew that the south is more welcoming for the likes of us but never considered how to cross over, I admit.”

“Hey.” Taj slaps him awkwardly on the back. “It’s fine.”

“No,” Finnen says, “it’s not.”

“Don’t start with the self-flagellation now,” Kiaran says.

“Look at you, using big words.” Finnen bares his teeth. “Meeting the family unlocked your mind and shook off the last cobwebs, huh?”

“Mostly.” Kiaran shrugs those big shoulders of his.

“Enough cobwebs to make you wish you hadn’t remembered?” Taj asks.

“Never that.” Kiaran frowns. “It’s always best to know the truth. Living a lie can destroy you.”

“Speaking of living a lie...” I glance at Rhian. “What if we pretended, like your storyteller? Pretended to be harmless and unimportant?”

“Pretended to be tinkers?”

“Or vendors of trinkets,” Taj says. “Use your imagination. Oh man, Ariadne is onto something. This might actually



fucking work!”

“As if you could ever seem harmless,” Finnen chuckles grimly. “Or any of us.”

“Yeah, you see four hulking alphas and a damn strong beta with a slight omega dressed up as beggars trying to cross the border,” Kiaran says. “Do the math.”

“Got a point there. Still...”

“Speaking of four alphas,” I say. “Where is Aless?”

“Last I saw him,” Kiaran says, “he sat on a rock and seemed to be contemplating life.”

My mates exchange slightly worried looks.

“We don’t know him, Ari,” Taj says, reaching for me.

“And I didn’t know any of you not so long ago.” I get up, shake out my long skirt. “I took a chance. A leap of faith.”

“But Ari—”

“How can we argue with that?” Finnen mutters. “It’s what saved us. What brought us together.”

“Fuck,” Taj says. “I was going to say he’s a thief but...”

“... but who’s to say we’re any better?” Finnen finishes. “We haven’t heard him out yet. Don’t know his side of the story. Don’t know who he really is.”

“In his place, I’d stay here and keep stealing horses,” Kiaran says, “rather than get tangled up with us.”

“But he hasn’t run away yet... Who is to say he doesn’t have the same need we do? I’m going to talk to him, and...” I

lift my hands when my mates make as if to follow me. “Alone. Okay?”

“See?” Taj bares his teeth at Kiaran. “That’s what she did earlier. Would you have disobeyed your queen?”

“Unlike you,” Kiaran says, “I don’t get my rocks off on being ordered around.” He stalks after me. “Suit yourselves.”

“Dammit,” Finnen says. “No boundaries, that man. I really need to talk to him about that.”

Taj’s laughter chases after me as I make my way to our last mate.

---

Aless is where Kiaran said he would be, sitting on a rock, his dark head bowed. He’s not as pretty as my other mates but something about the sharp cut of his jaw and cheekbones, the narrow, slightly aquiline nose and sloe eyes, the big shoulders and hard body that makes me go weak in the knees.

He’s not pretty but he’s smoking hot.

His hair is almost as long as Finnen’s, though charcoal black, hanging over his shoulders. I can’t even guess his age, though despite the hawkishness of his features, he doesn’t seem to be much older than us. That scar on his cheek... I wonder how he got it.

Scars are fascinating, more so the ones I can’t see but only guess at, and I’m pretty sure Aless has more invisible scars than the one staring me in the face.

“Aless,” I whisper, and his head snaps up, dark eyes narrowing.

“You,” he says, the word harsh. But then he says nothing else. Maybe he doesn’t even know what he wants to say, whether to curse me or ask me who I am.

So I approach him, aware that Kiaran is somewhere behind me, keeping an eye on me. Probably the others, too.

“May I join you?” I ask.

“Be my guest,” he says, and his rough voice does something to me, getting that throb between my legs to rise into a frenzied pulse, beating as fast as my heart. “Sorry the chairs are so hard.”

“You mean, rock-hard?” I say.

After a moment, unbelievably, his mouth twitches. “Yeah. Rock-hard.”

In spite of myself, I glance at his crotch and find him just as hard as my other mates. I swallow, the heat rising in me, licking at my neck, my ears.

“See this?” he says and stretches out his hands in front of him for me to look at. “What is this?”

*Oh.* This is new.

On the backs of his hands, patches of scales have formed. Lines and patterns flash on his skin. I’m pretty sure they weren’t there when we found him last night stealing our horses.

I take one of his hands in mine, examine the pattern. It's... pretty. But I don't say that, not when I read panic in his gaze. "This is a Fae blood trait," I say softly, carefully. "But you know that."

"Fuck." He pulls his hand away. "I never... I mean, I thought I might be, because of the ears and my strength and how stealthy I can be, but..."

"But you'd hoped it wasn't true." Realization dawns. "You were never abandoned by your family, were you? They never knew you are Fae blood."

"It's not like that, I... There must be some mistake," he whispers, his gaze haunted. "This can't be happening."

"You can't go back to them. I'm sorry. You'll be hunted and so will your family."

"Stop, just... I said it's not like that." Wrenching his hands out of mine, he gets up and paces a few steps. "I can't change my life in the blink of an eye. You can't just snap your fingers and change my life."

"You're Fae blood, Aless." I see the flinch. "Accept it."

"Like I have to accept that I'm your fated mate?"

My turn to flinch. I clasp my hands in my lap. They are filthy, my nails marked with black crescents of dirt, the backs scratched, a stark contrast to the pretty satin of the gown.

"I can't ask you in good conscience to come with us," I whisper, my throat all clogged up. "You have a family. None of us have a real family to leave behind."

It hurts so badly to speak those words. To let him go.

*You don't know him, I remind myself. Just the scent isn't enough. You will find another mate to close the circle.*

*But I'm going into heat. When will I find another?*

*Nonetheless. You can't snatch a man's life away from him.*

He's staring at me. "I do have a family. And I'm not who you think I am."

"A thief?" I manage a smile for him.

"A thief. A criminal. You don't want the likes of me traveling with you. And besides, where will you go? You're Fae blood. The Empire's hounds are after you."

I glance at the scales on his hands. "And you? How will you hide what you are now?"

He shakes his hands as if the scales will fall off. "It can't be a coincidence they appeared right when I met you."

"No, I don't think it is." I draw a deep breath. "It may be because you are my last mate. The last one I need for my clan. You closed the circle. So now all of us are changing faster, turning into Fae, and—"

"No." He shakes his head, dark hair flying. "No. I can't change."

"You can wear gloves. Maybe after you move away from us, the scales will fade. I don't know how all this works, to be honest. But if you leave and I find another mate to take your place, you may be able to go back to your old life."

He's still shaking his head. The knot in his throat bobs when he swallows hard.

“Aless...”

“This is all fucking shit,” he breathes and turns away. His broad shoulders are tense, hunched up to his ears. “I fucking can't...”

“I know. I get it. You can't stay with us.”

He draws a shuddering breath. “No, I can't stay.”

“I see. You're afraid you'll put your family in danger.”

He shakes his head. “But I can't just leave, either, and dammit, I can't walk away from this, from you... Not yet. I'll...” He scrubs a hand over his face. “I'll go with you to the border.”

I blink. “You will? You'll join us?”

Hope leaves me breathless, confused. I don't know if to remain seated here and process this, or stand up and go hug him.

“I'll join you,” he confirms and turns back to face me. He folds his arms over his broad chest and glares in a way that reminds me of Finnen.

“What made you change your mind?”

“You're an omega going into heat.”

“Oh.” I wince. “You heard that.”

“I have good hearing.”

Another sign of Fae blood but I don't say it. "So that's why you'll come? To save my life?"

"I'll take care of you through your heat. Make sure you and your other mates make it."

Flames lick at my cheeks. "You will?"

"Yeah. Said so, didn't I? And after that, I'll leave you."

"Of course." I feel torn between exultation and sorrow, gratefulness and humiliation.

He'll fuck me through my heat, and then go.

It will probably save my life and the lives of my mates. I may even carry his baby afterward.

Then he'll be gone as if none of it has ever mattered to him.

And since he doesn't really know us... it probably hasn't.

## ARIADNE

“He’s staying with us?” Taj glances back at Aless who is standing a ways off, arms folded over his chest, gazing into the distance. “He said that?”

“Yes. He said...” I pause in finger-combing of my tangled hair, then resume. “He said he’ll see us through my heat.”

“And then?”

“Then... he’ll go.”

“What an asshole!”

“He has family, Taj. He’s not untethered, like us. I mean, I know you left your army family for us and how much it cost you—”

“Shush.” He comes and places a finger over my lips. “I was an idiot to ever hesitate. I thought that was my family because I didn’t know any better. I mistook friendliness, even condescension, for love. Now I know the truth.”

I swallow. My eyes burn. I put my hand over his. “Well, his case is different, and I can’t ask him to just leave. Nobody should be asking him this.”



“He’s Fae blood. He’ll be hunted.”

“Maybe he wants to take the risk. Wouldn’t you, for those you love? He’s doing us a favor, Taj. Be nice to him.”

“A favor.” Taj tsks, turns away to finish saddling his horse. “As if fucking you isn’t a privilege. As if his dick hasn’t been hard since he laid eyes on you.”

“Since he smelled me, you mean. It’s a physical reaction. Without feelings attached, it means nothing.”

Taj is still muttering to himself, so I leave him to go help gather our few belongings. As I walk away, I twist my long hair up into a bun and stuck in it the few hairpins that managed not to fall out of my hair during our flight.

Finnen has already saddled our horse and Kiaran is talking softly to his.

The horse Aless rode here is chewing on his bit. The first thing that Aless did after our talk was saddle his horse.

He’s serious about this. Riding to the border with us. Getting hot and sweaty with us to save the bond, save us. It’s as if he’s trying to hurry things up, leave as soon as possible so he can be back as fast as he can.

It still hurts.

And it shouldn’t.

*Remember what you told Taj*, I tell myself as we get on the saddle and head south. The day is overcast, but Finnen leads the way south unerringly, and truth be told, I feel it, too.

I feel it in my bones, feel where south is, feel the draw of dry earth and ancient trees, of sturdy vegetation and dry gullies, of arid beaches and the heaving sea.

And the others say nothing, which makes me think they do, too.

South. The homeland of the Fae. They came from lands full of light and fire and salty water where dragons used to roam the skies and speak with us.

Where the dragons used to be us.

In the distance, we see the gleam of the river, flowing through the plain like a giant snake, rippling and glinting. We ride parallel to it, avoiding the city ports built on its shores, buzzing with life, keeping far from the trade road that runs parallel to it, following its route.

We advance over meadows and rocky platforms, through sparse woods and bush-covered expanses, thorns scratching our mounts' legs, making them stomp and whinny.

And always, always we look over our shoulder, expecting the Imperial army or the Temple soldiers to descend on us.

As one day passes, and another, I find myself growing quiet, trying to control the fire inside me. Finnen's scent has seeped into my gown, into my skin, and it's increasingly hard to stop myself from begging him to take me then and there—so I switch it up, asking to ride with the others, too. All, except for Aless.

Not sure I want to grow close to him if he's leaving us soon. He's keeping apart, too, as he's done from the start,

distancing himself.

That's fine.

No, it's not, but what can you do? No choice in the matter. We need to cross somehow and build a nest before my heat starts and takes us all down.

Everyone is antsy. Everyone is rock-hard and I can tell that their control is slipping, too.

We decide to press on and we ride until late, especially with the moon shining bright, leaving again at the first break of dawn. No time for anything but eat something—Aless, as it turns out, has a satchel with some rusk and jerky in it—and snatch a few hours of sleep.

And yet the nights are the worst. It doesn't matter if I sleep or not, or how exhausted I am. Lying among my men under the stars, huddling close for warmth, bathed in their scents, I feel like I'm going to die if I don't kiss them and pleasure them, if I don't feel them inside of me.

But if I get naked with them, I'm afraid my heat will erupt and engulf me.

The need is turning excruciating. It's all I can think about. It consumes me like a disease. Whenever they touch me it's torture, so I roll away from them.

It's torture for all of us. Sooner or later, something's got to give.

Two nights. Three nights.

I don't know if I can make it to the border.

I don't know if my mates can make it.

We pass ruins as we press our tired horses onward. I gaze at them through blurry eyes. More and more ruins of villages and temples, spires and delicate stonework, arched windows and domes.

Something about their style nags at me, reminds me of the temple back in the Fort and through the mind fog, it takes me a while to figure out what it is.

They are Fae ruins, probably abandoned since the war. Trees grow through their walls, roots breaking up the colorful mosaic floors. Rose climbers use the piles of stones as trellises, winding and rising, blooming even in the cold of winter—though, as I come to realize, it's getting warmer the further south we travel.

The ground isn't frozen here, the clouds don't carry snow or hail in them. The trees are green with leaves, even those that drop their leaves in winter.

We've entered a different season.

A different world.

And we haven't even crossed the border yet.

All I can think of is—no wonder the Fae preferred the south and why did they expand north, then? What pushed them to leave their cozy lands behind for the sharp cold and the mountains?

Maybe Finnen or Taj will know.

The distraction brought on by the ruins is short-lived, though. My head keeps spinning. From time to time, I hear the dragon god's voice and I don't know if it's real or if I'm dreaming—or maybe the gods only speak to us through dreams? What are dreams? Maybe they are portals into a different dimension of the world.

Maybe I'm feverish.

One day—I've lost count—I raise my hand and stare blankly at the dark marks surrounding my wrists. Made up of small, dark red scales, they look like bracelets.

This is torture. My nipples hurt. The back of my neck itches fiercely. My lower lip burns and when I touch it, I find blood.

My canines have grown longer and sharper.

*All the better to bite with*, I think and shiver.

The light is too bright. It stabs at my eyes. I close them, leaning back against Kiaran's chest. What I wouldn't give for a dark, soft, warm space to crawl into.

What I wouldn't give to get off this damn saddle that tortures my sensitive, aching lady bits all day long.

And let's not even mention the pain in my belly. It radiates down to my hips and between my thighs and grips my whole lower body in a vise. Kiaran's hard cock pressed to the small of my back is a constant reminder of what I need and crave, and his hands, holding the reins in front of me, bear the same crimson bracelets as mine.

Scent glands. Like the mating ones on our necks. On the inside of my thighs. On my breasts. Probably other parts, too, the itching lost in the general ache encompassing my body.

Marking where to bite during the mating rite.

Shivers go through me at the image, the thought of how it would feel to finally have my mates pressed to me, knotting me and biting me, marking me in every way.

My undergarments are so wet. I'm so slick and ready.

So hot. Burning up.

So thirsty.

So aroused and overheated.

That's why when Finnen calls out "Water!" I gasp.

"What is it?" Kiaran calls out, his arms tight around me. Finnen is ahead of us, riding with Taj. Aless is behind us, as he has been from the start.

"A stream." Finnen slows his horse down, waiting for us to catch up. "I can hear water running."

"Then let's get down there," Kiaran says. "We need water and so do our horses."

"Water," I whisper.

Kiaran kisses my hair. "And Ari needs to cool down."

"Hell, we all do," Finnen says. "Come on."

---

“This can’t go on,” Kiaran says as we canter down, toward the gurgling water. His voice comes to me in echoes. “We have to stop and take care of her.”

“And then what?” Finnen says. “Stay here for days and nights, waiting for the army to scoop us up?”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah. But fucking is exactly what we can’t do.” Finnen clicks his tongue. “Cooling down is the way to go until we reach the border.”

“I tried jacking off,” Kiaran says. “But it doesn’t help, does it?”

“How should I know?” Finnen mutters. “When did you have time for that, anyway? On the saddle?”

Kiaran snorts. “I don’t expect you to even know how to jack off.”

“Oh, fuck you. Of course I jack off.” Finnen’s voice is blistering. “Especially these days, when I can’t... Dammit. I have to or I won’t be able to sit in the saddle.”

The image of it brings a moan to my lips. So like Finnen, to be jacking off like he’s punishing himself for wanting it, for giving in to his body’s desires.

So... wrong somehow.

So hot.

We all file down toward the scent and sound of water, the splashing and the glimmer of it as it flows over dark rocks, smoothing pebbles and rolling them like dice.

But something is wrong.

I turn my head to look for Taj but Kiaran's body is blocking my view. "Taj..." I whisper. "Where is he?"

"He's following us."

"Is he?"

"Must have fallen back to talk with Aless."

"Really?"

Kiaran grunts. "I don't know. Should we—?"

"Stop!" Aless shouts from behind us. "Stop! He's not okay."

"Who? What are you talking about?" Kiaran turns our horse around and for a moment I don't know what I am seeing.

"Taj," Rhian says, alarm in his voice. "Fuck!"

"What's going on?" Finnen is turning his horse around, too, I see it in the periphery of my vision. "What the hell happened?"

Aless has brought his horse right next to Taj's and is wrestling Taj out of the saddle. The two horses snort and prance, trying to move apart, but Aless is still pulling on Taj, finally hauling him off and slinging him onto his own horse.

Taj's riderless horse canters away and then turns in a circle, slowly returning to us.

I barely notice.

"What's the matter with him?" I call out.



“Not sure but...” Aless looks up from Taj’s body, draped now in front of him on the saddle. “There’s a lot of blood.”

My own blood freezes. *Goddess help me.*

“He must have been wounded during the fight at my sister’s wedding,” Kiaran mutters. “We all got cuts and bruises, and he said nothing, so I assumed he was okay.”

“Let’s find a place to stop. By the stream would be good,” Aless says. “There we can check him over.”

“That fucking pigheaded idiot!” Finnen explodes, which means he’s worried out of his mind. “He should have said something!”

I think of all the blood on Taj’s clothes. I noticed it time and again but I was too far gone in my pre-heat daze to pay enough attention.

“He’s been bleeding out for days,” I whisper. “Oh gods, he could die.”

“He’ll be fine,” Aless says. “He’s an alpha. Strong as an ox. We just need to stop the bleeding and he’ll recover.”

“Now you’re a healer and an expert on alphas, too?” Finnen snaps.

“I’ve picked up a few things here and there,” Aless says quietly and clicks his tongue, nudging his horse forward. “Are you coming?”

---

“He’s asking if I’m coming,” Finnen mutters irritably as we follow Aless down to the stream. “Is he for real?”

“That’s funny,” Kiaran says with a snicker, lifting one hand off the reins to pat down my hair. Though I’ve tied it back, strands keep flying in his face. “You know. Asking if you’re coming when you haven’t come in ages and—”

“Kia.”

“Sorry.” Kiaran’s voice twists and I can almost see his crooked grin.

“No, you’re not.”

“No, I’m not.”

Kiaran is quiet after that, as we walk our horses down to the stream bed, hooves sinking softly into the wet ground or clicking on pebbles. We stop and Finnen slides off his horse to join Aless and help him pull Taj down. Rhian is there, too, helping him.

Kiaran leads our horse down to the water, then dismounts and gives me a hand down before turning to Taj, too.

Finnen and Rhian are lowering him down to the ground, and my heart lodges in my throat. He’s so still and the boneless way he sprawls have me gasping for breath.

*Taj...*

The quickest with a grin and a joke, a pat on the shoulder and a wink, he’s now too quiet. It doesn’t feel right.

“Come on,” Kiaran says, catching my hand and pulling me along. “Let’s see how bad it is.”

I don't want to see and yet I have to. Fear is a tangible thing, a cold touch between my shoulder blades, a dark presence inside my mind.

Finnen and Rhian are already unbuttoning Taj's shirt and peeling it away from his chest, while Aless dismounts and joins them in a crouch. He has scars on his chest, I've seen them before, old and silvered, but now they're covered in blood.

"His shirt wasn't red originally, I assume?" he hazards.

"Fuck." Finnen's hands start to shake. He sits back on his heels. "I see his outline and what might be the wound but can't see it. How bad is it?"

"Let me see," Aless says, leaning forward. "Damn. He has lost a lot of blood."

I sink down to my knees beside him, reach for Taj. His face is white, and the slash in his chest is long. His entire chest is painted with his blood. It has seeped into his pants, his coat...

"Doesn't seem too deep," Aless mutters, pressing all around the wound. "Doesn't seem to have affected any organs, though he has older wounds that are reopened. If he rests and eats, he should be okay."

Aless is right. Taj is strong. He'll be fine.

"But he's not even conscious." That's the most alarming thing of all. "Shouldn't he be awake by now?"

"He's breathing. His heart is beating. As long as his heart is beating, we're good. His body probably needs rest—"

“Taj!” Finnen grabs his shoulders, shakes him. “Taj, wake up! Come on, now, don’t you fucking dare die on us, do you hear me? I’ll fucking kill you if you do, you asshole.”

A sob catches in my throat. “Finn—”

“I’ll offer myself back to the Temple if you’ll help him,” Finnen breathes, bowing his head. “Nyx and Briareus be my guides. Whatever you want from me, I’ll give you, I—”

“Stop.” Kiaran snags Finnen’s arm, hauling him back. “He’s not dead and you won’t give yourself back to that awful place with those bastard priests.”

I draw a jagged breath. It hurts my chest.

“Touch him,” Rhian says suddenly. “That storyteller, he said that the bond between an omega and her alpha is magical. That you can lend him strength just like he can lend you his.”

“Like we did with Rhian. Remember, guys?” I grab Taj’s hands in mine. “Please, Taj. Come back to me.”

Nothing happens for the longest moment. No movement, no flutter of lashes, no stirring.

And then his lips move, and one gray eye opens to a slit. “Ari?”

**ALESS**

**T**hese people...

They share such a power. The way her touch jolted Taj out of that stillness and back to the land of the living is insane.

But it's so much more than this.

The fear on all their faces the moment they realized one of them was injured, the determination to get him back, to make him well.

The profound relief the moment he stirred.

The way they're kneeling around him now, on the wet shore of the stream, fighting not to tear up, touching their mate on his arms, his hair, his legs, anyplace they can reach, to let him know they are there, to make sure he's alive.

It's a punch to my chest.

I didn't want to like them.

Still don't.

I wanted to resent them for dragging me along on their crazy quest.

Still do.

I'm fucking crazy, following them.

It was supposed to be a simple job. Get in while everyone is distracted by the arrival of the couple and the priest, by food and drink and music, steal a few horses and make my quiet way to the town. Sell the horses fast and disappear.

But I had to come across this feisty little omega and her mates, her scent and theirs putting shackles on me, on my will, on my mind.

I've never had my body react to anyone like that. My dark thoughts ceased for a while as I followed them through the feast, through the fight, and then out of the manor and into the fields.

All I wanted was to be near them, to keep smelling that delicious smell, feel my body come alive for the first time in ages. I'd have fucked her right there in the manor's garden, fucked all of them if the breeze out in the open hadn't loosened the spell and let me have my proper thoughts back.

And even then...

I saw them together, dammit. Saw how much they care for each other in every movement, every expression, every word, every action. It made me nostalgic. Jealous. Greedy for something like that.

That kind of connection.

That kind of affection.

The hook is only sinking deeper with every day I spend with them—and the pull of their scent hasn't lessened. Despite

being out in the open all the time, it's as if the urge to touch them, take them has only grown stronger.

It's making me do things I never expected of myself.

Like stick with them.

Take care of them.

What's wrong with me? Why am I even here, examining Taj, promising to sleep with Ariadne through her heat, riding away from my home base, the life I have here. Not a good life, I'll admit, but a relatively safe one nonetheless.

Getting to my feet, cursing, I stagger away, leaving them talking to Taj. One of them, Finnen I think, is accusing him of being a bastard.

And somehow I think he means it as a compliment.

What place do I have here? I'm deluding myself if I think I could ever be part of their clan. They've obviously known each other for a while. I'm just the thief intruding upon their bond.

As it should be. I need to leave.

But I fucking can't. Don't want to. I'm fucking intrigued, and fucking consumed by them, and she is the center of it all.

Her, and that wild-haired barbarian. Kiaran. Why am I so pulled to them?

*Just fucking scents, I tell myself. Instinct. Because you are Fae-blood after all, and that's how the Fae were. Animals. Beasts.*

*With a penchant for the fine arts.*

I snort to myself.

A contradiction, that's what they were. And now they're gone, and we're their second coming, as contradictory as they were, just as lost and hunted.

*Damn. You're in a black mood today, Alessi, I think I hear my mother's voice in my head.*

I rub my hand over my face a few times, as if that will chase away the headache that's been plaguing me for days now.

I glance back at the others. They've bandaged Taj's chest and are helping him to sit up. He's looking better already. Did touching his omega really make such a difference?

I'm so out of my depth.

So out of place.

*Of course, pretty omega, I'll stay with you and fuck you through your heat, maybe with a side dish of your handsome alphas and that pretty beta. Sure, I'll follow you to the ends of the Empire, ducking spears and arrows and hunted down by everyone.*

*Meanwhile getting scales on my hands and who knows what else I...? Oh, what the fuck?*

I stop, fingering one of my ears. They always were slightly pointed, though my long hair hid them just fine, but now...

Now it feels like they're poking out of my hair, and...

"Aless!" someone shouts. Turns out to be Kiaran. "Where are you going?"



“I just need to clear my head!” I shout back.

The wind blows my words as I walk by the stream, needing some quiet. Some time away from their dizzying scents and handsome faces, away from the sexy omega with the alluring curves and big, long-lashed eyes.

Because, yeah, where am I going? What am I doing? I was supposed to steal those horses, sell them, make it back into the Black Fist’s good graces, but now...

Now I’m heading away on this crazy mission to save an omega and her clan from possibly dying of unfulfilled desire.

I should turn around, go back. I don’t owe these people anything. This is a subtle magic, pulling me along, making me dance like a puppet on a string. I have nothing to do with this, with them.

*You’re Fae blood, a voice whispers in my head. You can’t hide it forever.*

*And deep inside you knew it.*

*You’re their mate. You feel it. You know it.*

*Fuck off, voice.*

“Aless!” Kiaran calls out.

Without turning, I give the handsome alpha the finger. “Shut the fuck up,” I whisper and it’s not even to him I’m saying this, it’s to my circling thoughts. “Shut up, shut up!”

And then, as I try to take another step, I find that I can’t—and no, it’s not doubt that stops me.

My foot is stuck in the mud.

Cursing, I pull and heave, but nothing happens.

And then my other foot is stuck too.

“What the fuck is this?” I breathe, trying in vain to free myself from the mud. “I can’t... *Hell.*”

I’m sinking.

What the fuck, I’m sinking into the ground. Is this some spell I’ve never encountered? I’m stuck fast, my boots sinking and sinking until I’m up to my knees in slithering mud.

*I’m going to die here*, I think, and it’s as if I’m seeing someone else by the stream, reaching the end of their life thread.

“Aless? Aless!” Kiaran is still shouting my name.

That breaks me out of my daze.

I’m not alone this time. Force of habit. There are others with me. I’d almost forgotten. Others who seem interested in helping.

“Kiaran! Over here! Damn...” I shift, and I sink faster. “I’m stuck!”

I can’t see him. Can’t turn. He probably can’t hear me. Probably thinks I’m still telling him off.

I may die here anyway, people or no people, and it startles a laugh out of me. My body is shaking. My laughter is like a howl.

*Gods. Fuck.* I’m going down.

“Aless.” The voice is much closer now, I realize. “What’s going on?”

“He’s stuck,” Rhian says. “And sinking.”

“It’s quicksand,” Finnen mutters. “Which isn’t really sand. Just watery mud. Stop moving, Aless, or you’ll sink faster.”

My breaths are coming in quick gasps. They’re all here. My vision is a little gray, darkening at the edges.

“And breathe,” Finnen goes on. “We’ll figure this out.”

They come into view, and I realize they left Ariadne with Taj.

“How would you know it’s quicksand?” Kiaran says, eyes narrowed on the mud swallowing me bit by bit. “I’ve never even heard that word before.”

“Despite general consensus, books aren’t evil and do help,” Finnen says.

Kiaran still looks unconvinced. “How could you read if you’re blind?”

“Mostly I asked others to read the books out loud for me.”

“Inconvenient.”

“Being blind generally is.”

“What are you...?” I bite back a curse. “Will you stop bickering and help me out of here?”

“That’s what we came for,” Rhian says with a troubled frown. “Couldn’t you guess?”

My god, I’m going to murder them.

But as I open my mouth to curse them and their ancestors, Finnen crouches down.

“Lean back,” he instructs me.

“Beg your pardon?”

“Lean back. like floating on water.”

“I’m stuck in the mud!”

“Liquid mud. Try it and give us your hands.”

“I’m not—”

“Here.” Kieran grabs one of my arms, Rhian the other. “Do it. That man knows things, I tell you.”

I choke on near-hysterical laughter.

“Stop laughing and breathe deep,” Finnen says, crouched there like a pale vulture, not seeing and yet apparently knowing everything. “Breathe in and out. And stop moving your legs, just... try to float back. Let Rhian and Kieran pull you out.”

Easier said than done, to damp down the panic, to trust these unknown men to save my life. Gone from walking to clear my head to struggling to keep my head above water. Or mud. Probably symbolic.

“Heave,” Kieran says, and the beta, Rhian, though more slender than him, seems to possess similar strength as they both haul me slowly out.

“Careful not to step into the quicksand, too,” Finnen says.

“A bit late for that,” Rhian grunts, then releases my arm before I’m fully out and clutches at his shoulder. “Fuck...”

“Okay, Rhian?” Finnen straightens and reaches for him. “You should have let me do this.”

“I’m fine,” Rhian says and I realize he must have been wounded recently. “He’s out now.”

“I am?” I breathe.

Kiaran is still gripping my arm, crouched down beside me. I’m still half-submerged in the mud but slowly I manage to lift my legs, one and then the other, until they’re out of the miserable, filthy soup I’ve found myself in.

“Come.” Kiaran pulls again until I’m sitting on my ass on a firmer patch of ground, panting harshly and fighting the return of aforementioned panic. “All good now.”

*Is it?*

By the time I catch my breath, Kiaran has gone over to Rhian and lifted his shirt to examine a bandage wrapped around his chest, and fuss over him while I sit there, drenched in icy muddy water and feeling like I’ve returned from the underworld, barely alive.

They saved me.

Put their own lives at risk. One of them was even injured but never hesitated to help me.

What do I do with this?

I bring a hand to my chest, press. I feel as if my fucking heart is going to explode out of my ribcage. I taste metal in my

mouth. I feel like I'm going to come apart at the joints, like I might as well slip back into the mud and fade away, I—

“Hey.” It's Finnen and he's suddenly right there, beside me, a hand on my shoulder, its weight strangely reassuring. “You're okay. Listen to me.”

“But—”

“We would never let you die. The reason it took us so long to notice something was up is because you keep straying apart from us. We take care of our own.”

“I'm not...” The words stick in my throat. My lungs feel too small. “Not yours.”

“But you are, whether you like it or not.” He nods at Rhian and Kieran who are watching us, their gazes unreadable. “Whether you choose to walk away later or not, you are part of our clan right now and we appreciate...” He clears his throat, looks away.

I frown.

“What he's trying to say,” Kieran explains, “is that we'll never forget how you aided us in escaping from my father's manor and how you helped Taj. How you didn't hesitate each time to save us, so even if you don't realize it yourself, you're one of us and you've proven it.”

I stare at him as his words sink in slowly. Turns out my mind is like quicksand, too.

“Welcome to the family.” Finnen claps my back and grins, then stands and gives me a hand up. “Coming?”

“You still don’t know me,” I mutter, accepting the help because my knees feel weak and my legs are trembling. I let him pull me to my feet. “For all you know, I’m just a thief.”

“Nobody is just a thief,” he says.

“I don’t understand you people,” I whisper.

“That’s because you don’t know us either. Getting to know someone takes some time. I’m still getting to know the whole clan.”

Time I don’t have, not if I’m leaving them soon, and why the fuck does that bother me? What’s this regret hounding me? Why do I wish I could take the offer and stay with them?

I fucking can’t.

Can I?

“How is Rhian?”

“He’ll be fine,” Finnen says, releasing my arm and moving away when I find my feet and I feel the loss of his warmth keenly. “Like Taj, he’s a stubborn ass with too much pride and would rather die than tell us when he’s in pain or bleeding to death.”

“As if you would,” I mutter.

That startles the bark of laughter out of him. “You may not need that much time to get to know us, after all.”

It makes me smile.

And then more of Kiaran’s little speech falls into place and I lift my gaze to find him grinning at me. “Wait... your father’s manor? You’re the duke’s son?”

“Long story,” Kieran says, shaking his head.

Curiosity has always been my vice, and if it killed the cat, imagine what it will eventually do to me...

“I have time,” I tell him.

I’ll make time, until it runs out.



## ARIADNE

“Aless! Is he okay?” I’ve helped Taj to sit up and used a strip from the hem of my gown to wrap around his chest, hoping it will stop the bleeding. He looks pale as death and it worries me, but then everyone ran toward Aless and I don’t know what happened.

“He’s fine!” Kiaran calls out and I sag with relief. “How is Taj?”

Taj lifts a hand and gives him the finger.

*Men.*

Honestly.

“I see he’s feeling better.” Kiaran snickers. He’s hauling Rhian along, which isn’t that good a sign.

“Rhian?” I leave Taj sitting on the ground and make my way toward them. “What happened to Rhian?”

“He over-exerted himself a little, pulling Aless out of the quicksand.”

“I’m good,” Rhian says, his cheeks flushing.

“Quicksand?” I glance past them to where Finnen and Aless are walking. He seems okay, if covered in what has to be mud. He looks like he’s been dipped in brown dye.

“Be careful when walking by that stream,” Kiaran says. “It’s sneaky.”

“Stop grinning.” I laugh, slap lightly at him when he comes to give me a kiss, dragging Rhian with him. Then of course I want to kiss Rhian, too, and he smiles against my mouth.

“Hey, what about me?” Taj complains. “What am I, chopped liver? I demand a kiss, too.”

“The big baby is back,” Finnen mutters as I turn and kneel down to kiss Taj.

He grabs my hand and keeps me there for a good, deep kiss that brings back the fire in my blood. “This baby can kiss better than you, priest,” he says once he’s released me. “Help a mate up, will you?”

“Bad baby.” Finnen comes and helps Taj up, then leans in to kiss me, too. I caress his cheek and he sighs against my lips. “It’s been a day.”

“And Aless?”

“He’ll be fine. He’s a little shaken. And seems to have some doubts.”

“About us?”

“About himself, I’d say.”

Trust Finnen to speak in riddles. I glance past him at Aless and find him looking as pale as Taj.

Fine, my ass.

I go to Aless, reach for him, prepared for him to step back, push me away.

He doesn't.

I put my arms around his narrow hips, slide my hands over the small of his back, feeling the strength in his coiled muscles, not caring that I'm getting drenched in watery mud from his body. He's icy cold and shivers run through him.

"Glad you're okay," I whisper, resting my cheek on the wet fabric of his rough shirt, feeling his heartbeat thud madly through it. "I couldn't bear it if we lost you."

He says nothing, his breathing ragged, but then his arms come around me, crushing me to him so tightly I can hardly breathe, and that... It tells me everything I need to know.

---

Like a dash of icy water down my back, the shock of almost losing not one but two of my mates has pushed the fire in my blood back for the night.

And this time Aless lies down beside us, losing the distance he'd put between us until now. The day's events have brought us all closer together.

A bond has formed between us and our last mate. Or rather, our bond has extended to include him.

He doesn't say much and I don't know if it has changed anything for him, if it means he'll stay with us—but then I remember he has a family.

And realize it's not possible. He won't stay.

My heart aches.

The next day for the first time, I ride with him, and it's so new and yet familiar, this feeling of a hard male chest at my back—and a hard cock, because no matter the shock, my scent won't abate—and muscular arms caging me, his strong hands holding the reins in front of me, the crimson bracelets of his scent glands a match for mine.

His scent winds around me, despite the wind buffeting us as we ride. It clings to me, musk and spiced mulled wine, making me throb and clench deep inside my belly.

“How far are we from the border?”

“See those hills over there?” He lifts a hand to point and I'm mesmerized by the tendons shifting in his corded forearm, the scales on his hand, a light copper, the long, bronze fingers so unlike mine. So sexy. “That's the border. We're almost there.”

“How long?” I whisper.

“A couple of days.”

I groan softly, grit my teeth to keep it quiet. *Couple of days.* How am I going to do this?

“Tell me about your family,” I say.

Distraction might work. Has to work.

He's very quiet behind me and it belatedly occurs to me that he might not want to talk about his personal life with me. I thought after my men saved him from the quicksand he might open up.

"Sorry," I whisper. "It's okay. Never mind. Tell me whatever you want, just... anything to keep my mind off my heat."

It comes out a little broken, and I wish I could take it back, but his hold on me tightens and I swear I feel his mouth on my hair.

"It's complicated," he says.

"And what isn't?" But I need to respect his boundaries, as Finnen would say.

"Have we decided how we're going to cross the border?" he asks, and I focus on that, instead of all the questions crowding my mind.

"We didn't discuss it again since yesterday, but I had this idea of disguising ourselves as vendors, ordinary merchants who'd cross the border all the time as a matter of routine to sell their merchandise. What do you think?"

"That might work," he says but sounds dubious. "Selling what?"

"Good question."

"We'd have to buy such things and with what money?"

"Unless we steal them," I say. "A thief's experience might come in handy."

He stiffens and I curse my big mouth, but then he says, if a little reluctantly, “I suppose it might.”

“Damn, I’m sorry—”

“What for? I am a thief.”

“But I’m sure you have your reasons—”

“Don’t think me a good person,” he says. “I’m not.”

“Aless—”

“I’ll steal whatever you need me to steal. I’d do...” He pauses. “I’d do anything for you, Ariadne, you and your mates, you see? You can’t let me stay.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have enough people coming after you. You don’t need more.”

And he refuses to explain or talk more the rest of the day, leaving me confused, achy and sad. I want to grab and shake him, demand he tells me who would come after us.

Who is after him and why. I thought he refused to stay with us because he has a loving family back home, so what else isn’t he telling me?

Hard to shake answers out of him when we’re racing toward the border as fast as we can.

*Figures.*

Just another day in a fugitive omega’s life.

---

The weather is definitely getting warmer as we ride south. That's a relief because none of us dressed for riding through the plain in the winter when we escaped the wedding party and its unfriendly hosts.

Bad for me, though, as the feeling of burning from the inside gets worse and worse. I'm sweating and feeling faint, and if not for Finnen's arms around me, I might have toppled many times off the horse today.

He knows. They all know. Time is running out. And I'm not the only one in pain. I don't need to read the old scriptures to know how my mates are affected, and I doubt it's only my scent anymore. The bond between us seems to go deeper than that.

I feel them.

They are bright presences in my mind. My body knows where they are at all times. Their scents match their spirits, and it's like a weave, a web, a map with me at their center.

As I am entering my heat, they are going into a rut, a different kind of heat, a crescendo of arousal that torments them as much as it torments me.

The hills are closer now and that's not all that's closer.

Watchtowers.

The border with the south is narrow, hemmed on either side with hills that then rise into steep mountains. A natural wall on either side of the river flowing down to the sea.

Some say that was why the Fae managed to keep to themselves for so long, Finnen whispers in my ear, why their

country had become a myth. They'd put an illusion on the passage and over the river, some say, so that nobody suspected there was a way through.

What pushed them to break the illusion and move north?

And is whatever chased them away still there?

If it chased away a magical race, what chance do we stand?

But it was so long ago and so many people still live there, so maybe there's no reason to worry.

*You're overthinking this, I tell myself. You always do.*

*Except when you fail to think at all. When your body takes over.*

*And it's about to take over, soon.*

---

We pass more ruins as we detour around a village and then a town sprawling on the riverside, to avoid any patrols.

The ruins turn out to be an old farm, from the looks of it. The nearby villagers must have taken most of the stones to build their barns and houses, appropriating the remains, a story repeating itself all over the empire. Fae ruins are either built upon or dismantled to build crude new houses and forts and temples.

By all accounts, the Fae used to lead a life similar to ours, with similar needs and activities. They cultivated the land and raised animals, had crafts and arts and religion. A different



race but still so very human in so many ways. An older race, it seems, with closer ties to the earth and magic, with different traits and gods, and yet as vulnerable as anyone to the sword and death.

How did we end up in a war against each other? How did we end up killing off an entire race?

The hills, the border, are close but not close enough.

“Stop,” I say sometime after midday. “Stop! Please, stop.”

“Ari?” Finnen pulls on the reins, bringing our horse to a halt. “What’s wrong?”

“I need to get off this horse. I need...” Sudden tears choke me. The ache in my belly, the need, the burn is too much. “I need off!”

He’s silent for a long moment and I want to twist around in the saddle and hit him, scream at him, weep and wail—and when did my emotions get so out of control? Going from calm to panicky, from panicky to angry, from angry to desperate.

Then he shouts, “Kia, shelter! Find us a shelter, now!”

Kiaran wheels his horse around, glancing at us, but he doesn’t protest or ask questions. Either he sees something on my face that tells him I’m about to snap, or he feels me like I feel him.

Nobody speaks as we follow Kiaran, cantering through green fields, and I manage to keep my tears at bay, the wind drying them before they fall.

*Goddess.* It hurts. I *need*. It's a need impossible to contain, a pain too great to keep silent anymore.

*Please.*

Can't stand it.

Can't take it.

Kiaran leads us to the ruined farm we glimpsed earlier. A raven flaps black wings and lifts off one of the crumbling walls as we canter into the abandoned yard with its two trees and a broken stable.

I struggle against him until he curses and slides off the horse. I follow suit, and he helps me to the ground.

I shove his hands off me, walk a few steps off, my hands on my hips.

“Ari...”

“Can't.” I shake my head.

“Ari, we're almost at the border. One more day—”

“I can't,” I whisper faintly, staggering, falling to my knees. My blood is boiling. My insides are on fire. “Can't. Can't wait any longer. Please. Gods.”

Rhian falls to his knees beside me, takes my hand. “Her skin is burning. Finn, what the fuck should we do?”

“Why are you asking me? You know damn well what has to be done.”

“Is she in heat?”

“What do you think?”

“Dammit, stop answering my questions with more questions!”

“Then stop asking stupid questions!” Finnen grips his hair, pulls. “We should put her back on the horse and keep riding.”

“Are you insane? Look at her! She can’t even stand. Sitting in the saddle is killing her. Not being taken care of is killing her. Hell, it’s killing all of us.”

“Don’t be stupid!” Finnen snaps. “We’ll be locked with her for days! It’s not safe.”

“We’ll put traps all around,” Kiaran says. “I’ll do that. I’m fast.”

“You think your traps will stop an army?”

“And then we have to build a nest, and quickly,” Taj says.

“With what? Branches and thorny bushes?”

“It doesn’t matter, Finn! We’ll make do.”

“Please, Finn...” My tears finally fall as I hunch over, curling over myself. “Help me...”

“Dammit,” he breathes, his voice losing its annoyed edge. “Ari... It’s a bad idea. We can’t protect you if we fuck.”

My slick is running down my legs. I keen, trying to lift my dress, unable to take it any longer. I smell myself, the honeyed scent layered with musk. I have to touch myself at least, relieve the insane pressure.

“Oh, fuck me,” Taj groans, reaching for his cock inside his pants.

“We should... go,” Finnen says, his voice strangled, as my perfume rises, thick enough to bring tears to anyone’s eyes. “Holy shit...”

Rhian makes a choking sound, staring down at my soaked undergarments, at my hand slowing inching between my thighs.

“We should set those traps,” Aless says, sounding breathless. “Before it’s too late. Kiaran—”

“Fuck caution,” Kiaran says, lowering himself to the ground and grabbing me. His mouth crashes on mine, his teeth sinking into my lower lip, and I welcome the pain.

The sound of our control shattering is deafening.

My heat breaks over us in a wave, bringing everyone still standing to their knees. They crawl toward me as I kiss Kiaran, winding my arms around his neck, straddling him.

Then he shoves me back, breaking the kiss, and looks down at his lap. His eyes widen. His cheeks lose their color.

I look down, too, taken aback by the shock written all over his face. The bulge between his legs is obscene, and looks... kind of too big?

“What’s happening?” I whisper. “What’s that?”

He looks up, the shock fading from his features, replaced with dark hunger. “My knot. It’s starting, girl. I hope you can take it.”

A haze descends over my eyes, my thoughts. I barely recognize my own voice when I whisper, “Give it to me,

alpha.”

Things are about to get wild.

**ARIADNE**

I t's like a dream at first. Hazy. Dim.

Kiaran scoops me up in his arms, rising to his feet, and they all jump up and follow us inside the ruins. I have a vague impression of white stone walls and filigree stonework in the remnants of tall windows. The roof is mostly gone and the sky above is a light blue. Dark dots of birds circle overhead.

“You’ll be okay,” Kiaran is saying and I turn my face against the solid wall of his chest. Then he lifts his head and barks, “A nest! We need to build her a nest right now.”

I almost laugh, feeling drunk and slightly sick with it. “How are they planning on making a nest now? Here?”

But they know I won’t relax enough to let their knots inside me unless I have a nesting space. I think I’ve heard them discuss this while I slept on some of the nights.

And the thought of their knots twists my insides even worse with desire.

“Please...” I cling to Kiaran’s shirt, pressing my nose to it, drawing in his scent through the soft fabric. “Hurts...”

Kiaran roars, the sound emanating from deep inside his chest and I whimper. “Get to it!”

“I’ll tie the horses,” Rhian says, “and bring in the saddles and saddlebags,” and he’s off like a shot.

*“The only one with a clear head,”* Finnen’s voice from days ago echoes inside my mind.

“Going with him,” Aless announces, taking off after him.

“We’ll make the nest,” Taj says, though he hesitates, almost reaches for me. “Finn, with me.”

And they run, they actually run and I follow them with my eyes, uncomprehending, as they clear out branches and nests from a corner.

“Faster!” Kiaran roars, and they roar back, a sound that goes right through me, that wrenches a cry out of me, making me wetter and hotter, making me writhe in Kiaran’s hold.

“Easy,” he whispers, “easy,” his voice raspy from the roar and I groan and slide my hands over the back of his neck, needing to feel him skin to skin. “Easy now.”

“I just... need...”

“I know.”

Rhian passes us by, carrying a saddle, followed by Aless with another. They place them on the floor, then head back out to bring in the rest.

“Look,” Kiaran says, stopping and sinking down to his knees again, still holding me in his arms. “We got you.”

What I see stops my breath.

They're piling the saddles in the far corner of the ruined farm. It's a spot where the roof is still in place as well as two of the walls, forming a shelter. Taj and Finnen have undressed and are piling up their coats and pants on the ground. Rhian and Aless return with more saddles, placing them around the corner, creating a low wall. When they bring in the last of the saddles, they also unfold a blanket they found, then they undress, too, and cover the rest of the floor with their clothes.

"Good, yeah?" Kiaran nuzzles my hair, his breathing harsh. He's exuding musk and spices strong enough to burn my sinuses. I want to lick every inch of him. I want him inside of me, filling me with that knot swelling his cock. "Nice nest?"

I force myself to look at it again. As nests go this has to be the saddest one, but it makes me so happy I cry again, because my mates made it for me. Because they understand me, and they know I need this now and can't wait any longer.

I can't seem to stop crying, my eyes leaking even when I'm laughing.

And I keep laughing as I cry.

"I feel like I'm going crazy," I whisper as Finnen makes his way toward us. He's only dressed in his drawers and his cock forms a huge tent in them, and... is that a knot, too? I stare at the bulge and moan softly.

"You're not crazy," Finnen says. "It's your heat. It intensifies emotions. Sensitizes your skin. Makes everything more extreme."



“Is it the same for you?” I reach for his hand and he clasps it. He must be seeing outlines again because there is no hesitation.

“I think I can safely say it’s the same for all of us, but even more so for you. You’re an omega. Omegas are the most perfect creations to ever exist.” With something like reverence, he lifts my hand to his lips. “My queen.”

The feel of his lips on my skin makes me arch up in Kiaran’s arms. “Oh, goddess...”

“Ari?”

“She’s burning up, we have to hurry.” Taj is pulling off his undergarments and when his knot is revealed at the root of his thick cock, I clench so hard inside I see stars. “Rhian, clothes off. Everyone, come over here. Everyone get fucking naked, right the fuck now. It’s starting.”

Kiaran lowers me to the ground, on top of the garments and the blanket, inside my very first nest, and the dark mist over my vision turns to sparkles.

Time slows down.

The world cracks open.

And my men come to me.

---

The sound of fine fabric ripping.

A line of fire against my side.

Falling back, on top of softness.

Growling. Snarling. Musk and pepper and leather, scents mingling and mixing, invading my senses.

Lips on my wrists, licking and lightly biting. Their strong wrists rubbing over my skin, leaving trails of musky perfume.

I'm dizzy.

I gaze up at the piece of roof and it seems to breathe.

My own breathing echoes in my ears.

“Omega,” a voice whispers, and I think I see the dragon god's impassive face floating over me. “Dragon queen. Are you ready?”

“I'm ready,” I whisper.

And then it's Kiaran's face over me, blue eyes burning, teeth bared, long canines flashing. Silver scales flash over his cheeks, like metallic tattoos, and the hand he lifts to my face is clawed.

“Woman,” he breathes. “Mine.”

“Yours,” I tell him, reaching for him, “take me, fuck me, need you...”

The hand that touches my face is a human hand, though. Am I seeing right?

Does it matter?

His long canines are still there when he grins down at me, though, and red flashes on his neck, where his primary mating scent glands are. Silver scales ripple over his bare arms. His

ash-blond hair is wild and tangled, and I sink my fingers in it, gripping it, pulling him down on top of me.

His weight is so pleasurable I let out a kittenish whine. I want him, want them to take over, to push me down, to take me without asking for permission.

He seems to sense that, or else he's too far gone to care, sinking into the alpha rut.

"Omega," he breathes, then his mouth claims mine in a deep, tongue-clashing kiss. His teeth scrape my lips. A sharp sting tells me the skin is cut, but I'm not sure if it's because of his fangs...

... or mine.

The shock of discovering them is lost in the pressure between my legs. He's rucked up my skirt, his knot pushing right where I'm soaked and burning.

I'm overdressed where they are gloriously naked.

Growling, he breaks the kiss and looks down, as if discovering that very fact himself.

"Fuck." The growl doesn't leave his voice, turning it to gravel, and it does things to me, bringing an extra pulse inside my core, making me twitch. "You're so wet..."

No shit.

But he doesn't seem to notice me propping myself on my elbows, all his focus between my legs. He grabs my undergarments and drags them down my legs until I'm bare down below.

Then he buries his face there and all the pain and pressure and fire that's been tormenting me for days and nights breaks loose.

"Oh gods!" I cry out as his tongue teases my folds apart, then drags over my exposed pussy. It doesn't take anything more than that, just the drag of his tongue over my opening and my clit, and I'm breaking apart, shattering to the ground.

"Fucking hell," Taj breathes from somewhere behind me.

"Move aside," Finnen barks and my pussy gives a deep throb at the sound.

"Finn..."

"Not done yet," Kiaran growls.

"Of course not. I want to taste her." Somehow, he shoves Kiaran to the side, a smirk on his face, and lifts my legs over his muscular shoulders.

Then he takes over where Kiaran left off. Licking. Playing with my clit. His tongue is pushing into me, fucking me.

"Oh goddess, yes..." I lift my hips a little and he groans against my pussy. Buries his tongue deeper.

And I come again.

Pulses of pleasure.

Throbs of scorching heat.

A relief.

Yet not enough. Each orgasm only makes the emptiness inside me yawn wider.

“I need... I need you inside me...” I try to reach for him, but with my legs folded over his shoulders, it’s hard. “Please...”

“She needs our knots,” Taj says. “And I think it’s my turn.”

“Why yours?” Aless barks and I gasp with an aftershock of pleasure at the alpha sound.

“Want to fight me?” Taj barks right back.

Finnen lifts his head and lowers my legs. His lips and chin glisten with my slick. He reaches down for his cock. “I was with her first.”

They all sort of freeze at that, and he’s right. He helped me first, wanted me first, even if he didn’t fuck me first. Not that it matters, really, but somehow that makes sense in my mind and this time when I reach for him, he roars, throwing his head back and baring those sharp teeth.

An alpha roar, like Kieran’s earlier, marking dominance, and it shakes me to my bones.

He grabs at my gown and shreds it with an ease that’s frightening, leaving lines of fire down my body with the violence of it, and this time I’m sure I see claws. They seem to appear and disappear at will.

I shiver when the cool air hits my naked body and the wetness between my thighs. My nipples, already hard, now turn into sharp, pulsing points. My belly cramps so badly I whine deep in my throat.

Finnen groans at the sound. Looks like my whine is a match for the alpha roar, an omega's catnip for the alphas. Though Rhian seems affected, too, and if he can't form a knot like my alphas, his cock jutting out to point right at me is large and thick.

Delicious.

"Mine," Finnen barks and I arch up, soft and pliant and ready for him, losing sight of Rhian and his cock, my attention fully back on my first alpha. My first love. The head of his cock brushes my entrance and I have to bite the inside of my cheek. "I'll mark you, take you, bite you."

"Gods, yes, please..."

And all my mates are closing in now, their growling meshing into a song of mating desire, cacophonous and discordant and perfect.

Nobody has to tell them what to do. Their instinct guides them as they touch me everywhere, crowding in around me. Who needs a nest when I have a bower made of hulking, handsome men?

Their touch is electrifying, making me arch again, and when Finnen pins one of my bent legs against his shoulder and guides his swollen cock into my spread pussy, I cry out. He pushes deeper and deeper until something very large stops his plunge.

"You'll have to take my knot," he says, voice strained, pale brows drawn, his strong body trembling. "I'll go easy on you."

"Don't," I whisper. "Don't go easy on me."

“Gods dammit,” he breathes, his knot bumping against my opening. “Ari—”

“Just put it in me. I need it.”

Yeah, it makes sense that my first knot would be Finnen’s. From the beginning, our first encounter, our talk of the unnamed god, his reluctant protection and attraction, it’s all led to this moment here.

“Ari?” His blind gaze seems to find my face. We’re all so worked up maybe he can see it with his Fae vision.

I have my hands planted on his chest, I realize, sort of pushing him back while wiggling to get him to knot me.

“Do it,” I whisper, and make myself go still and let the tension in my body flow out. “Do it now.”

“Do it, priest,” Taj says hoarsely, “or I’ll take your place.”

“Sit, Taj,” Finnen roars and Taj groans. “You’ll do her when I say so.”

Who knew Finnen was the actual clan leader? All the others seem to fall in line when he takes charge. My vision is hazy, all my nerve endings burning, but I think I see them bow their heads all around me.

And then Finnen starts working his knot into me, lips peeled back, and then I can’t even look anymore, my eyes closing as sensation takes over.

“Goddess, it’s so big.” I squirm, gasp, start pushing on his chest again.

“Relax,” Finnen growls, his voice almost an animal’s rumble. “Let me inside.”

“Can’t.”

“Take a deep breath. Now. Now, Ari!”

His bark shocks me into obeying and I draw a long, shaky breath.

And with the air entering my lungs, his knot slips into me.

“Gods, gods...” I writhe, moaning, losing it, clenching around his hard length and hard knot like a possessed woman. “Oh...”

“Fuck me,” Rhian breathes, awe in his voice, “look how she’s taking that fucking thing in, opening up like that, I just —”

“Rhian, you’re in charge of her safety,” Taj says. “Keep watch.”

“But—”

“Take a walk and come back.”

“I’m not leaving her!”

“I said, then come back,” Taj says, his voice softer.

“Rhian go!” Finnen barks, and Rhian is up and running, as floored by the sound as I am.

“What are you doing?” I breathe when I get some air back in my lungs. “Why send him away?”

“Protective beta instincts,” Finnen growls, the gravel of it hitting me right in my core. “He may try... to stop me...”



“From fucking me?”

“From knotting you, putting babies in you.” He groans, pushing his knot deeper, his thick thigh muscles bunching. “I can’t wait to see the pregnancy marks appear on your belly. Fuck...”

“Oh gods...” I don’t recognize my voice. It comes out as a moan when I say, “Yes...”

I don’t recognize myself. I’ve changed in fundamental ways, ways I never expected to follow, but now that I’m here, I can’t imagine ending up in any other place, with any other people than my mates.

And the burning need driving me, gripping me, making me clasp Finnen’s big shoulders and pull, urging him on, urging him to take me, fit that huge knot inside of me and lock me in place with his body.

“Finn,” I whisper, “Finn, do it, do it...”

His face spasms when he finally slips inside, and he falls forward, catching himself with a hand by my head.

Goddess, he’s inside. It’s... *ow*. It’s too big, it hurts, I need it out...

I make a noise, because he lets out a strangled, “Ari...”

We’re almost nose to nose, his eyes closed, his mouth tight. His long, muscled body is tense, strung like a bow over me, his breathing harsh. His long white hair tickles my neck.

“I’m hurting you,” Finnen says, his voice somehow distant. My ears are buzzing. “Fuck...”

“You need to move,” Kiaran says.

“Too fucking tight,” Finnen gasps.

*Ah. Goddess. No. Hurts.* Shouldn't be like this. *Why.*

My nails are scratching grooves down Finnen's arms. I'm scared to move, make it worse. I can't get enough air.

“Move, Finn, dammit!” It's Taj this time. “Thrust! It won't get better if you don't thrust.”

How does that make any sense? I feel that if Finnen moves, I'll die, I'll break into pieces.

He seems caught up in the same thought, the same indecision. His knot, his cock pulse inside me and it should feel good, all my instincts tell me so. It's what I've wanted since I awakened as an omega.

And then he moves.

Oh goddess, he moves, and it changes everything. He moves and the world moves with him.

I moan his name, arching my back. He grabs one of my legs, wrapping it around his, and it opens me up more, so that his knot slips a tiny bit deeper.

I howl.

Can't describe the sound any other way.

My mind is blown to smithereens. It feels as if I'm turned inside out with pleasure. A wave is rising inside me, about to drown me in dark relief. Finnen chokes out something that resembles my name as he thrusts again, and again, shoving me against the fabric-covered ground. His knot shifts inside me,

massaging my core, his thick cock stabbing against something deep in me that sparks and feeds the loop of arousal, fanning the flames.

“Finn,” I murmur, no air in my lungs, “oh my Finn...”

Every snap of his hips brings my clit into contact with his flesh, rubbing it, makes my breasts bounce, my nipples scraping against his chest. I’m moaning shamelessly, loudly, uncontrollably as he uses his knot to burn down my body and implode my mind.

He shudders, red staining his cheekbones, teeth gritting, grunting and thrusting, grunting and thrusting. The alphas around us seem to grunt in synchrony, working their cocks, stroking my hair, my arms, any part of me they can reach.

It’s a rite, all right. A ritual. And we’re all initiates, acolytes.

That’s when Finnen’s head dips and his teeth meet my skin at the juncture of neck and shoulder, hitting my mating scent gland. I flail as his canines sink into my flesh, and the sting steals my breath. The small pain flows right into my core, making me wail and clench hard around his knot. He growls against my skin, biting harder, and this time it jolts my mind, sending images rolling through my thoughts—of solemn temples and bustling cities and great winged beasts circling overhead.

My pulse roars in my ears.

His hips rock, his cock swells bigger inside of me, his knot, too, and I know I’m about to come now, right now.

I wrap my arms around his neck, rocking up to meet his thrusts, and try to muffle my scream against his salty skin. But my teeth need to sink into his flesh and I bite down hard, instinct overriding rational thought. Unconsciously, I've hit his mating scent gland, on the side of his neck, where red swirls mark it now. The moment his blood hits my senses, the moment his taste of bitter almonds and black tea, dark spice and sugar hits my tongue, the bond between us jerks and pulses, snapping together.

A hook.

A clasp.

A lock.

*Oh.*

*Shit! Oh... Goddess...*

My vision goes black. My body jerks as if hit by lightning. The pleasure is rushing over me, through me, a river, a flood—and I only have time to see his face twist as he comes, too, hear his shout of surprise, agony, and exultation as he pulls his mouth off my neck.

*Holy shit.*

*Whoa.*

I'm sinking under, lost in warm blackness, floating in pleasure, my heartbeat echoing in my ears. My body is crushed under my alpha's, I'm still stuffed with his knot, and I don't think I can ever move again.

Don't want to, either.

Finnen's scent is all over me, inside of me. I can taste him on my tongue, feel him under my skin. I'm drowning in almonds and leather. The sting of his bite on my neck sizzles, burns bright in my mind.

As I slowly surface through the dark, I find him trying to lift himself off me, stop crushing me, his heavy alpha body covering mine, but I clutch him to me with a whine.

He braces his elbows by my head and a slow grin breaks over his face. One of his hands smooths my hair out of my eyes. I lift my head, seeking his lips, and he bends down to kiss me. His taste floods my mouth as our tongues clash, and I groan softly as his knot strokes me deep inside in ways I never thought possible.

And then a shout penetrates the pleasant haze.

"What the hell?" Taj mutters, and I become aware of him lifting a hand off my arm, leaving cold behind. "Rhian?"

Yeah, it's Rhian, standing in front of us, gloriously naked—my gaze instantly catches on his cock but he's only half-hard and I frown at that—only I realize he's panting, eyes wild, fists held at his sides.

"You assholes, can't you hear me yelling?" He shakes his head, brown curls flying. "You're all gone, in heat, but the outside world still exists."

"What the fuck is the matter?" Finnen snaps.

"Animals," Rhian says and I notice his face is white, spots of color high on his cheekbones. "Big ones. Lions? Not sure."

"Why the fuck are there lions gathering?"

“Maybe it’s your howling,” Rhian says darkly, though his mouth twitches.

“The scents. They must have smelled us,” Taj says. “There is a reason omegas have always sought safe, dark holes for their heat. In a nest, we wouldn’t have to worry about the wildlife joining us.”

“We need to move.”

“How?” Finnen growls, shifts slightly, and I gasp as his knot shifts inside of me. “We’re kind of locked together here. Fight the lions off until we can move.”

“And go where?”

“I don’t know. Dammit.” Finnen hisses and his knot shifts again, making me moan and shudder. “A village? A house? Something with fucking walls and doors?”

“Maybe Kiaran can hunt down a cave for us,” Rhian says.

“Fuck...” Kiaran turns out to be sitting on my left, a hand on my side, over my ribcage. “I’m supposed to use my brain? *Now?*”

I start to laugh, and that jostles Finnen’s knot inside of me, so that I gasp instead, and he groans, cursing.

“Gods, you’re all useless when you’re in heat,” Rhian grumbles, though it’s obvious he’s very much affected, judging by the state of his now fully stiff cock. “Nobody told me I was signing up as your babysitter on this journey.”

“I tried telling you,” Finnen says from between his teeth. His white hair slides in a curtain around our faces when he

bows his head to kiss me softly.

“Yeah, but I fell for your long lashes and sweet voice back in the dungeons,” Rhian says, deadpan. “So what’s it gonna be? Are we moving from here before we become lion fodder?”

“Haven’t seen a lion around here in years,” Aless mutters. “Bet they’ve been following her scent for miles.”

“Our scent,” Taj says. “We all perfumed when she went into heat.”

“Fucking great.” Finnen’s knot is slowly deflating, probably sooner than it would have under normal circumstances, his alpha protective instincts helping along so we can get to safety. “What other animals do we have to beware of as we look for another nesting place?”

“You mean apart from humans?”

Finnen lifts his head and sighs. My bite is a red brand on his pale neck, a stamp over the crimson lace of his gland. Blood trickles slowly down to his shoulder.

“Gods, this sucks balls,” Taj groans as he gets to his feet and my gaze snags on the huge knot at his groin.

My mouth goes dry.

“It does,” Kiaran says, standing up, too, and whew, another huge knot for me. “I don’t even know if I can ride a horse with my cock in a knot.”

Aless is already up and reaches down to massage his knot, hissing softly. “I can barely walk.”

*Whoa.*

*Come on, body. You have a huge knot inside you but you also want all the knots around you at the same time? Be real.*

I even want Rhian's knot-less cock. Very much. *Oh yeah.*

Finnen curses again as he gently starts pulling out of me. I squirm, breathless, as his diminishing knot drags against my inner walls, slowly slipping out. It still feels good, despite the ache it leaves behind, though the heat in my blood has abated some.

“Yeah, we can't go far.” Finnen spreads my legs wider and pulls back another inch. His knot is almost out now. “In any case, we only have so much time before her heat resumes. Right, love?”

The endearment from the lips of my otherwise irascible, ornery priest hits me like a fireball in the heart, making my vision blurry and my chest tight.

With a final tug, he's out of me and I want to weep, grab him and pull him back inside of me, hold him there.

But he's already helping me up, wrapping me in his arms, lifting me in them.

It's time to run.



TAJ

Haze.

Fog.

Darkness.

Heat.

Agony.

*Need.*

Carrying the saddles of our horses doesn't help. Putting on our clothes is misery, the pants way too fucking tight and painful.

How do you run with your cock in a knot? This should be a bawdry joke among soldiers and mercenaries.

*Knottily*, I suspect. Is that the answer?

Also, from my current experience, *slowly*.

With your cock in a knot and heat bubbling through your veins.

An alpha's heat depends on an omega's and right now we're in a full-blown blaze, a moving furnace with our omega

at our center. The wick of our flame, the source of the light. I catch glimpses of her in Finnen's arms as we make our way out of the ruins, the fall of her dark hair swaying, her moon-pale limbs loose.

Around me, my alpha mates are stumbling and staggering along like me, groaning and cursing as their knots are caught in the way of their legs, the sensitive sacks getting bruised.

Rhian is leading the way, not having our knotty problem, that bastard, urging us along. I see eyes watching us from the dark periphery of my vision, big and yellow.

The lions. How many are out there?

I reach down for my knot, curl my hand around it, protecting it as best I can from further injury as I hurry toward my horse.

Having a knot is a weird feeling. In the heat of the moment, pun intended, it feels so right. It's like popping wood in the morning, like growing hard at the sight of a sexy woman or man. Popping a knot when your omega goes into heat is perfect, it's exactly what you need to fuck her and lock your bodies together, to milk as much pleasure from the act as you can.

But the act was interrupted and racing naked with a heavy knot between your legs toward the whinnying horses is shit, let me tell you. It fucking hurts. It's damn uncomfortable.

And with the instinct telling me to protect our omega warring with the need to mount her, I can't concentrate.

This is damn dangerous.

How am I to think clearly, find a solution to our current predicament, when my dick keeps trying to take control?

“Where are we going?” Ariadne asks as Finnen carries her to his horse and helps her up. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes dark. “Did you find a cave?”

“No caves around here,” Kiaran says.

“I smelled smoke earlier,” Finnen says.

I mutter, “A village.”

“And then?”

“Let’s get there first,” Finnen says, “then we worry about it.”

So be it. I carefully hoist the saddle onto my horse and then climb on it, wincing and cursing under my breath. “Are the lions still there?”

“Still there,” Rhian confirms.

*Ow. Goddammit.* Knots were not meant for horse riding.

They weren’t meant for anything but fucking.

And now we’re the ones who are fucked.

Let’s hope this village is welcoming to our knotty needs...



The lions follow us for a while, but then they drop away quietly, one moment there, and the next gone.

*Good.* One thing less to worry about.

With the shift in priorities and the easing off of our heat, I realize that our claws have gone back a little, too, but my ears, when I touch them, seem as long and pointy as before, and under my clothes I swear I can feel the scales on my skin—patches of horn-hard plates shifting with my every move.

Gods dammit, my knot, pressed inside my pants, trapped against the saddle, is pure fucking agony. My jaw aches from gritting my teeth so hard.

I glance again at our omega, helpless to resist the pull, and find her to my right, leaning back against Finnen's chest, eyes closed.

Our knots may be painful, but I bet she's having a rough time, too. Emotionally as well as physically, once they enter their heat, omegas may suffer badly unless they are satisfied—held and cuddled, kissed and licked, fucked and bred.

The thought of her suffering is a jagged splinter in my mind.

The need to replace her pain with pleasure is the reason I'm drawing every single fucking breath into my lungs right now.

It's the reason I can think, even a little, instead of grabbing her, throwing her down and thrusting into her, locking our bodies together, come what may.

"This way," Finnen says, taking the lead. "Can you smell the woodsmoke?"

I still can't, my senses swamped with her burned sugar and cream perfume, the other alphas' smoke and musk, our beta's

moss and pepper, but I trust his nose more than any other's. His lack of sight seems to have tuned his other senses to the maximum, making them extraordinary, even for a Fae-blood.

Though now, as we canter on, I'm starting to smell it, too. It reminds me of the smell of campfires in the army, and something like nostalgia grips me.

I shake it off.

The nostalgia is for a dream that was never real.

This, including the pain in my cock and the joy and fear in my heart, is real. My love for my mates is real.

I grin as the village comes into sight and my cock gives a happy twitch.

Just need to find a hole to hide in with my clan until we finish what we started.

"Slow down," Finnen says, lifting a hand. "I can hear voices."

"Soldiers? Clerics?"

"I only see villagers," Kiaran says. "I doubt they know about us."

"But they have eyes and could describe us to anyone who comes asking."

"So what do you suggest we do, priest?" I mutter, my smile fading. "Kill everyone? Because my knot isn't going down, and just because you had your release doesn't mean that we can keep going forever. You said it yourself."

“Shut up, Taj,” Finnen says. “Can you, for once, think before you speak?”

“What—?”

“We split up,” Aless says, “that’s what he means.”

Did the newbie just translate to me one of Finnen’s cryptic statements? I stare at the dark-haired alpha skeptically. “And where do we meet? Did he also hint at the place, somewhere in between his words?”

“I appreciate the sarcasm,” Finnen says, “I truly do, but no, I have no fucking clue where we could hole up. Because, as you may recall... I can’t see.”

“There’s a building behind the village.” Rhian points, rising in the stirrups. “It’s quite tall, can you see it? It may be abandoned.”

“Remember we need doors this time,” Finnen says. “And four walls. We’ll be animals enough ourselves, don’t need extras.”

I choke on a chuckle. “Looks like a temple.”

“A temple?” The word seems to have shaken Ariadne out of her heat-induced stupor. “We can’t.”

“Look who’s worried about the gods after everything.” I whistle low.

“It’s not that,” Finnen says. “What if the Temple people will stop there, looking for us? Even if the place is abandoned. We should press on, but...”

“What’s wrong?”

“I can’t,” Ariadne says, so faintly I barely hear her.  
“Can’t...”

“Her heat is returning,” Finnen says. “We need to find a place right here and now.”

“Abandoned temple it is,” I mutter, my jaw clenching as I get a whiff of her renewed perfume, meaning she’s slick and wet for my knot. Burning hot. Loose and ready. I kick my heels in and bend over my horse’s neck as much as my knot allows me. “I go in first, check the place out. Come one by one. And let’s hope for the best.”

## FINNEN

Taj takes off, saying he'll make a detour around the village and head toward the temple.

My horse beats its hooves, impatient to follow. To my left, I can hear Kiaran muttering something—a prayer or a curse, who knows. Certain words are interchangeable between the two.

But it's Aless who takes off next, without warning. "See you there!" he calls out.

"Hey!" Rhian shouts. "Who said you get to go second?"

"I'll help Taj if there is trouble!" he calls back.

"Does he think we can't fight, that ass?" Kiaran grumbles.

Still, a good initiative. A brave man. A protective mate. I appreciate that, I think, as I kiss the top of Ariadne's head and stroke her forehead. He could make a good mate, if he stayed with us.

Ariadne is shivering as if with a fever, her skin scorching hot to the touch. Her lush ass is pressing back against my erection. My knot may have gone down but it's valiantly trying to fill out again, my body rallying to satisfy my omega.



I won't be fucking her again today, I don't think, with the other alphas aroused and in heat, like me, waiting in line with their knots ready, but maybe tomorrow...

I lick my lips, my mouth going dry as the memory of our rutting back in the ruins rushes back in, broken pieces and bits of it but still hot enough to make my ears burn and my cock harden some more.

Pushing into her in degrees, my knot stretching her.

Her body opening to accept me, soft and warm and slick and perfect.

Her scent spiking, her mouth opening to mine, her blood filling my mouth, her taste flooding me.

Seeing flashes of her body, silver and golden outlines of her face, her breasts, her arms.

Being inside of her, rocking into her, making her come, feeling the flutters and the clenching as she came on my knot

—

“Finn, your turn,” Kiaran says. “Can you see the building?”

“My senses are heightened enough that I can see living things,” I say, “but not buildings.”

“I ride with you,” Rhian says. “Kiaran, you make sure nobody has seen us or followed us and then you join us, too.”

“Good thing I have you to tell me what to do,” Kiaran mutters, “huh, beta? Got a lot of experience with hunting and being hunted, do you?”

“Ignore him,” I tell Rhian who brings his horse beside mine. “He’s grumpy because his baby knot hurts.”

“Hey, I heard that!” Kiaran says.

“Good. So make yourself useful. Rhian is only helping us think in a time when we are only thinking with our little head, got it?”

“Damn.” Kiaran huffs. “Yeah.”

I smirk as Rhian clucks his tongue and we surge forward.

Her bite on my neck burns pleasantly. Erotically. It sends pulses of desire through me. Blood still drips from the mark, a hot line trickling down my chest.

She marked me. I am hers.

*Fuck...*

Let’s hope this temple is abandoned indeed and that nobody disturbs us there for a while. Something in me tugs at the thought of doing this inside a temple, abandoned or not. A Fae-blood orgy, right where the gods and goddesses are supposed to be looking. I imagine their disapproval.

A life of discipline and faith is hard to shake off, even after you think you’ve lost all faith.

But protecting our omega is my priority. Protecting her, pleasuring her, stopping the hurt, making sure she survives her heat.

Making sure she stays with us.

That we will have a family.

That driving force leaves faith far behind me as we gallop toward the building Rhian has seen. Faith is good, but my love for my clan is tangible. I don't need to believe in it because I *know* it's there.

And that's the change in me.

That's who I really am and what I really want.

This. This clan. These mates.

This omega in my arms.

---

The building is quiet. Birds flutter on the roof, and the echo tells me that there *is* a roof, indeed. A door creaks.

Doors, too.

Perfect.

I have helped Ariadne down from the horse and Rhian has wrestled her from my arms to carry her inside. I follow with a hand on his shoulder so that I don't have to mind my every step.

Because this is my clan and I'm allowed to lean on them once in a while, it seems. So they said. It's a strange notion that goes against everything I've strived for until I met them, against the way I thought the world was supposed to work. Lean on no one. Trust no one.

But I trust them, and I think they mean it. So I'm trying it out, for the first time in my life.

Also, Taj is right, this hurts—the knot, the constant hard-on, the heat licking over my skin, racing through my veins, and I can't imagine how it must be for the others who haven't had their release yet.

How it must be for Ariadne who is the center of this conflagration.

We enter the temple, our steps echoing, a chill in the air despite the warmer climate now we've reached the southern border. All that stone and marble. I imagine the niches on either side, empty, the dome over our heads, the altar.

Our steps and Ariadne's shallow breaths seem to be the only sound.

Then I hear the others—wood creaking, muffled voices. Are they already building a new nest?

I sure hope so.

The door behind us creaks again and I recognize Aless' tread.

"Nobody has followed me," he says, his voice rough. Then it changes. "Let me carry her."

Rhian hesitates, his arm tensing under my fingers. Then, "Be careful. She's in pain."

"I know." The roughness returns but his voice remains soft. There's a rustle and a small grunt as he receives her in his arms.

I wonder if he's falling already for her, for this, as we all have.

What is holding him back.

What his family is like, to make him want to stay.

And then I hear my thoughts and almost laugh. Why would anyone with a normal life want to join us on our flight? He doesn't know us. Why would he leave it all behind? The rest of us have nothing to lose—nothing of real value, nobody depending on us, needing us.

I still can't fathom how my mind survived, mostly sane, without this until now.

But no matter how deeply I've fallen for Ariadne and my mates, I can understand not swapping one love for another. Even if these are our fated mates.

Sometimes fate has many paths.

I'm on the one that makes me... happy.

I turn that thought over as Rhian leads me deeper into the temple. I have never thought it a possibility. Happiness. This deep contentment that makes you smile, that makes you grateful to be alive.

*Best time to discover how you really feel, I think, in the midst of her heat, on the run, about to rut inside a temple.*

I almost laugh out loud.

Yeah, this is what happiness is. Not being afraid of the mornings, or the nights. Not being afraid to be alive. Not regretting it. Not wanting it to end.

And yeah, I'm right in the midst of it.

Thank all the gods.

---

“Here,” Rhian says, guiding me through more echoes and rustlings and voices, until I see the flashes of light marking my mates—their bodies, their heartbeats, their heat signatures on the air. “Are you all right, Finn?”

I shoot him a smile. “I’m good.”

“If ever you need anything, you know you can tell me, right?”

The affection in his voice will never stop catching me off guard. This servant who cared for me from the start, who is now taking care of all of us.

“You, too,” I return and he doesn’t laugh at the thought of a blind man taking care of him.

I don’t know if to feel proud or humbled.

“Have they made a nest?” I ask.

“Same as before. Minus the horse saddles. But there are two hay mattresses so they’ve laid their clothes on top.”

“Hay mattresses?” I frown. “Dammit. That might mean that people spend the night here. There are doors, you said? Actual doors that close?”

“Yes.”

“Good. We need to fortify them. You and me, Rhian. The others are pretty much useless right now.”

He finally gives a short laugh. “But not you?”

“My sharp wit can’t be dulled by desire,” I mutter—a quote from the hermit Alianus, though Rhian wouldn’t know that—and stop.

It’s starting. Ariadne is kneeling in the middle of the three other alphas, her body pulsing red. Taj has a hand fisted in her hair and I want to give him a command, see him react, see how much more aroused he will get—but not today, not for this. He’s fully aroused, his knot... I can see it outlined and fuck, I think it’s bigger than mine. He’s ready for her, and she’s waiting.

Better not distract them.

“Finn?” Rhian is still chuckling. “Your sharp wit is not dulled, huh? Could have fooled me. I should leave you with them and go close the doors myself.”

“Wait,” I breathe, and have to swallow hard. My cock is fully hard now, my knot starting to fill again. I know I should move now, go with Rhian, make sure the temple is locked up and we’re safe, but...

They move. Ariadne is moaning in counterbeat to Taj’s possessive growl. He has her on all fours and is pressing into her from behind. Kiaran and Aless are purring, a deep sound that echoes in my chest, and I start mimicking them before I check myself.

Dammit, I wish I could watch, really watch, not just their outlines but every detail of their face and body, their skin and their scars, their hair and their eyes and mouths.

But I'll get what I can. Anything is better than nothing—and the sounds and smells give away almost everything anyway.

“Let's go,” I rasp, the words hard to come out. “Now, Rhian, before I lose my mind again and join them.”

“Come on, then.” He grabs my arm, pulls me away from the nest. “Let's get this done so I can finally jump into the fray.”

“We owe you one,” I mutter as he guides me away from the flashes, the scents, the sounds of mating. “You're the reason we're still alive.”

“It's fine. Just don't let Ariadne shoot me full of arrows again.” I can hear the grin in his voice.

“It was only one. And you still haven't told us your story.” We're back in the main temple, the echo bouncing against tall walls and high ceilings. “How you ended up a slave at the castle. Who your family is and what happened.”

He's quiet for some time until he halts me and places my hand on a rough wooden surface. “This is the main door,” he says. “It will need some shoving, the wood's swollen from the rains. I'll bring the horses in.”

“Into the temple?”

“Where else can I hide them?”

“Good thinking,” I decide. *Get over your prejudices, Finn,* I tell myself. “You do that.”



I don't confront him about avoiding my question, avoiding any talk of his past. Who am I to judge, right? One day, he'll tell us about it. I have patience. We have time.

Once we're over the border, once we're safe and free, we'll have our entire lives to get to know each other better, and I can't wait.

## ARIADNE

I'm losing track of time and space. Everything is up in flames. Everything is need and ache, release and pleasure.

Taj pushes me down on all fours, and my body likes his dominance, likes it way too much. It likes his big hand on my back, the strength in it, the way it pushes me into submission. It responds to it fiercely, my slick flowing freely down my legs.

Then he winds my long hair around his fist and pulls my head back as he molds his muscular body to my back.

“Ready for me, sweetheart?”

*Oh goddess, yes...*

All I can do is moan in reply as his fingers slip into me, stroking, smearing my slick on my inner thighs, down the crack of my ass—and jerk when he dips a finger right there. I almost come from that, but he just keeps stroking, dipping his digit in and out.

“Please,” I choke out. “Please, Taj, I can’t take it any longer...”

He groans. His breath feathers over my sweaty neck. My knot is bigger than Finn's. Need to get you ready.

"I'm ready," I whine, pushing back, gasping when his finger slides deeper into my ass. "Now, Taj, please, it's too much, I need your knot now..."

"You're killing me," he breathes and then his thumb—I think it's his thumb—pushes into my pussy. Kneeling behind me, he's fingerfucking me in both openings at the same time, and I gasp out his name, letting my head fall forward as he proceeds to slowly drive me crazy.

I'm almost there, on the edge, almost, almost...

But I'm an omega in heat and his fingers will never be enough.

"Take her, Taj," Kieran growls, his fingers curling around one of my arms. "Take her now!"

"Yes, please. I'll be good, just take me." *Take me over the edge that's cutting into me like a knife...* "Please."

"Gods dammit, keep talking, baby, fuck..." His fingers leave me and his cock presses against my entrance. It slips into me easily. After taking Finnen's knot, I'm pretty loose, I suppose, though it's strange to think about it. He thrusts into me, cursing, and then his knot slams against my entrance, against my clit, making me see stars.

"Taj, you feel so good..."

"Fucking hell," he chokes out, pulling back an inch and trying again. "Open up for me, sweetheart."

I turn my head, needing to see his face over my shoulder. I can't spread my legs any further but I need his knot, I need him inside of me. "Push," I whisper, "please, Taj, it doesn't hurt, do it, I want it, I want it so badly..."

"Dammit..."

I need my clan around me for this. I glance up. "Finn," I whisper. "Rhian. Aless."

"We're here," Aless says, stroking his fingers down my other arm.

"We're here, too," Finnen says, kneeling down in front of me, presenting me with a nice view of his hard cock and half-inflated knot. Rhian is beside him, flushed and panting, his cock hard and purple. "We're here with you."

Taj groans again and presses his knot into me. It's huge, hot, hard. It pushes into me slowly and I shudder as he opens me up so perfectly.

"You won't feel any other knot after mine," Taj is growling in my ear, another inch slipping into me, and another. "I'll stuff you until you can't take another knot."

My mouth is open but no sound comes out. It's as if my breath has been punched out of my lungs, same feeling I had with Finnen's knot. And despite Taj's brash words, I'm still debating whether he will fit inside of me.

But he does. Of course he does. Another inch of his knot slips into me and I'm spread so wide my thighs burn. Then again, everything burns. My skin, my flesh, my thoughts, my emotions.

My pussy.

My core deep inside my belly.

I'm on fire and my alphas' knots are the only salvation.

“Oh yeah...” Taj thrusts, once, twice, and his knot fills me up suddenly, its entirety inside of me, and I start to come with a cry, my pussy pulsing around it. “Oh, baby...”

It's all turning hazy again, the edges of the world flickering silver. I stare down at my hands, braced on the clothes they've strewn over the hay mattresses on the floor, and patterns flicker over them—scales, diamonds, crisscrossing lines, stars and moons.

Taj is roaring now, his seed spilling into me—more flames and fire, more pleasure—and his teeth find the back of my neck and clamp down. His canines break the skin and sink in. I jerk in his hold as the pain translates into pleasure, and another release washes through me, making me clench down on his knot.

I almost pass out this time from the pleasure of it. Darkness closes in.

Time fragments.

“Want your mark, sweetheart,” he growls sometime later, his knot still lodged inside me. He has pulled me back against his chest so that I'm sitting on his lap, my head propped against his shoulder. “Fucking need it. Make me yours.”

I need it, too, and I lift my head, turning it to the side as he bares his corded neck for me. My gums ache, my hand trembles as I reach up to touch his stubbled cheek. I lick at his

skin, where his pulse beats, and moan as his scent and taste combine to make me clench again.

His knot pulsates inside me, his cock continuing to spill.

My lips close on his mating scent gland, now marked in crimson lines, and bite down.

“Oh, fuck me...” His cock jerks inside me as his back arches and his hold on me tightens. “Hell...”

His blood tastes of him, fragrant smoke and fiery spice, with an aftertaste of resin and tart berry. My senses sharpen, the bond between us stretches and then snaps tight.

Armies marching.

Acrid smoke rising.

Torches and bonfires and burning cities.

Blood and pain and anguish.

I come back to my senses with a gasp. Some time has to have passed because I find myself curled up in Taj’s arms, his blood drying on my lips. Rivulets of crimson have made their way down his pale neck and chest.

He’s gazing down at me with an unfathomable expression on his handsome face.

My lashes lower, the darkness gaining ground, and the world goes away.

When I lift my lashes again, some undeterminable time later, it’s not Taj anymore holding me, it’s Kiaran, and he’s arranging my legs on either side of him. His knot presses

against the lips of my pussy. He's been waiting for me to wake up, I realize.

Yeah, some time must have passed, because the need is back. It feels like only moments ago I was coming on Taj's knot, and now I want Kieran's.

Crave it.

Hunger for it.

"I'm ready," I whisper.

---

Kieran isn't Taj—just like Finnen took me in a different way before him.

It's surprising how my body likes all these versions of alpha dominion over me, how it craves all the ways they take me.

I'm breathless, waiting to see what he will do.

His pale hair tickles the tips of my breasts as he leans in, his blue eyes fixed on my mouth, his own lips parting on an exhale. His sculpted chest is solid under my palms, his heart thudding heavily.

He captures my mouth suddenly, his tongue thrusting, stroking. One of his hands comes between us and clever fingers find my nipple. A tug, a flick of his thumb, another tug, a small twist, and I'm gasping into his mouth, liquid fire flowing through me.

I'm gushing wet between my legs, where his knot is rubbing over my clit, over my slit, over every sensitive, aching part of me.

My hands curl against his chest, nails scratching at his skin when he grabs my breast and squeezes.

*Oh goddess...*

Need him.

Need his knot.

His cock enters me, thick and hard as steel, pushing deeper and deeper until his knot starts grinding against my entrance.

*Oh...*

Sliding my hands up to his broad shoulders, our tongues still entwined, still eating at each other's mouth, I lift myself a little, spread my thighs more, and push down on him.

Letting his knot spread me. I'm so loosened and wet by now, both from my own slick and Finnen's and Taj's cum, that his knot slips more easily into me. I gasp when it fills me up, popping into me, and he groans long and tortured against my lips.

His muscular body trembles against me as his knot fills me utterly and completely. Seated in his lap, riding his knot, it feels more intense than it had in the other two positions. Maybe his knot isn't as big as Taj's, but it sure feels bigger right now.

His nose sniffs along my neck as he settles inside of me, sharp canines scraping over my skin, and I shudder. I know



what he's about to do, and a whine rises in my throat, my breath stuttering.

*Yes...*

He bites me.

Sharp points breaking the skin.

Digging deeper.

Leaving a permanent mark.

It shatters me.

I come, shaking and moaning, breaking the kiss, pressing my forehead to his shoulder as my core tightens like a fist, milking his knot. My hips roll, and another rush of pleasure hits me, making me cry out loud. I'm gripping his biceps, where my hands have slid, trying to breathe, as wave after wave batters me, and his answering howl tells me that he's unable to hold back any longer.

His seed bathes my contracting pussy, stopped by his knot, his seed mixing with Finnen's and Taj's.

*Sweet Goddess...*

This is really happening.

I'm in heat and being bred by my alphas.

My clan.

Familiar panic grips me through the haze of pleasure and I press my forehead harder against his firm, muscled shoulder. My choppy breath can be taken to be due to orgasming and not fear, but Kieran seems to sense something is off.

“Ari,” he rasps. His knot pulses again and he grunts. “Are you okay?”

I nod a little, huffing out a breath, moaning when I clench again around him. How to explain in the midst of all this that a sudden clear image hit me—me, with a big belly, me with babies in my arms—and it’s both scary and appealing and oh goddess, I think I’m losing my mind.

Because it is happening. Right now. No way am I walking out of this temple without conceiving. I’m an omega in heat with my completed clan servicing me.

It will be a veritable miracle if I don’t walk out of here pregnant.

When will I know? How will I know? What should I do?

*Shit, shit.*

*A little late to doubt all this, I tell myself. After all, you didn’t have a choice. And come on, be honest... You love your clan, these alphas and this beta, and somewhere deep inside, you’re scared just because you can’t believe your good luck.*

I smile against Kiaran’s shoulder, rub my nose against his skin, taking in his scent—pepper, nutmeg, thyme and sage. My mouth waters. I part my lips, lick at his jugular, then the side of his neck, the juncture of neck and shoulder where he smells the strongest.

Where he smells like my fated mate.

I bite down and he groans, clutching me to his chest, thrusting up into me as I mark him. His hips are rocking, seed

jetting into me, and another release hits me, so that we shudder and ride it out together.

*Holy shit...*

I see trees and jaguars, I see lions and snow, I see tracks and darkness, I feel so much loneliness and pain that I can't breathe.

The bond between us tightens and tightens until we're one, one heartbeat, one thought, one feeling.

One mind.

I pant, releasing his flesh, licking over the mark.

*Dragon god... is this what you want?*

Dark laughter fills my mind and I blink heavy lids.

Sweat is cooling on my skin.

It's done, right? I can't do this again. I'm done, wrung out, blissed out, the fire in my flesh finally subsiding, the fever leaving me.

It's over, right? It has to be.

But nature has her plans and it's far from over.

## ARIADNE

“Ari, are you all right?” Aless asks and it feels like he’s asked it a couple of times already. Something about the quality of his voice, that hint of worry. “Ari.”

“Yes,” I mumble, “I’m okay, I’m—”

My voice breaks on a moan and I grip his arms where they are wrapped around my middle.

I’m in his lap, my back to him, locked on his knot, and it feels every bit as huge as the knots of my other alphas.

Yeah, I’m okay, really okay, the pressure building inside of me, though I’m annoyed I lost track again—of when and where I am, of what is going on. My body is barely starting to cool down when it starts burning up again.

*So this is why they call it a heat, I think fuzzily.*

Of course it is.

I’m just getting so very tired.

Even if a huge knot is lodged inside of me.

Then Aless nuzzles the back of my neck, where my mating scent gland itches and burns. His rough tongue, like a cat’s,

licks over a spot, his teeth grazing it, and my entire body clenches.

*Oh wow.*

*Shit.*

“Oh...” I clench, and clench again when his teeth press down, breaking skin. The sharp pain shoots through me like a blazing arrow, and suddenly the exhaustion is gone, replaced by a blinding flare of need and want and scorching desire.

He’s here, as he promised, getting me through my heat, and oh... His knot inside me seems to swell bigger, his teeth in my neck to press harder, and a sound leaves my throat that’s closer to the wail of a wraith, closer to a scream.

“Ari,” he groans against my skin, “omega...”

“Oh yes. Yes.” I ride his knot and it’s perfect, eyes-rolling-back good, and although his scent isn’t as familiar as my other mates’, it hits the spot. It’s what we lacked, what we needed.

What *I* needed.

When he lifts his mouth from my neck, I twist around as much as I can on his lap, on his knot, making him hiss.

He bends his head, baring his neck for me willingly. Does he realize he’s binding himself to me? He’ll have to have another bite over mine if he hopes to break the bond one day—but my thoughts scatter as his ambered liquor and earthy spice scent wind through me right before I bite him.

*Oh, dragon god...*

Aless tastes as heady as he smells.

I feel drunk.

His blood is like sweet spiced wine.

His knot pulses, his body jerks, and his hands slide up to cup my breasts, grip them, pull on my nipples. I feel him coming inside me, his roar shaking me, and then the pressure breaks and orgasm rolls through me, crushing me.

I detach my mouth from his neck to draw breath, but blackness is closing in once more. I'm falling through the night, through space, through stars and comets and sunbursts.

Someone is calling my name.

Something is nagging at me.

Can't let go yet. The cycle isn't completed. I'm missing... missing one of my mates.

"Ari! Ari, I'm here."

Big, green eyes fill my vision, and I lift a hand to wind my fingers through soft curls.

"Rhian," I whisper.

His eyes shimmer and twinkle. "Come to me, my pretty. The last act is mine."

---

"Rhian..." I moan, pleasure lapping at me. He has hooked my ankles around his neck and is thrusting into me, his handsome face drawn in a frown of concentration, sweat beading on his forehead.

His pointed ears poke out of his curls and his muscular arms hold me in place, hands spread under my ass.

*So good...*

Not as intense as having a knot inside of me, but his cock is long and quite thick, and it's stroking me deep, in places my alphas' cocks couldn't reach—because of their knots, obviously.

Talk about a big obstacle.

Less intense but at the same time it's exactly what I need right now, his beta scent calming as well as arousing, his leaner physique and sweeter face making me melt from the inside out. It's more... normal, somehow.

Though, what is normal, anymore?

Doesn't matter. It's perfect, and the pressure is building up inside me once more, a low burn that keeps rising, a low flame that nevertheless is spreading through me like wildfire, consuming everything in its path.

I'm falling again, flailing, reaching for something to hold onto as the pleasure suddenly sweeps through me, different from the knotty orgasms I had so far, and hands grasp and clasp mine. Hands on my wrists, my arms, my legs.

My alphas are right there, around us, and a deep purr is rolling out of them, so deep I feel it vibrate in my bones as I jerk and cry out, releasing the last of my need, the last of the fire.

Rhian puts my legs down and pulls me up in his arms while I'm still shaking from the force of the pleasure. He's

panting, his cock still fully hard inside me, and I cry out again when this different angle pushes it deeper into me.

“Rhian!” I grip his shoulders, my core tightening so hard around his fat girth I think I’m going to pass out again. “Gods…”

“Here,” he grinds out, baring his throat to me. “Do it.”

I get to bite him before he bites me. A beta thing?

I don’t overthink it. His long neck smells delicious, like grassy prairies and crystal water, pine and wild honey. I sink my canines into his flesh with a groan of appreciation.

His cock jerks inside me, but it’s still rock-hard as I suck on his neck, his taste flooding my senses. He tastes more like honey than pine, I think, and smile against his skin.

“My turn,” he rasps, and I reluctantly lift my mouth off him. “Ready to close the cycle, pretty one?”

The shudder running through me this time almost shakes my skin loose. I can’t speak. I turn my head, tilt it to the side, giving him access.

That’s answer enough, I reckon.

His breath ghosts over my neck, hitching when his lips press over my mating scent gland. My neck is ringed by bites now, on both sides and behind.

He bends me back a little, so that my head tilts back instead, and bites me in the front.

Right over the hollow of my collarbone.



A light bite, just enough to break the skin, worry at it a little.

And that's when he finally comes, his seed bursting inside me, bringing on another orgasm that finishes me off.

As the darkness closes over me, a deep calm settles in. A deep satisfaction. A deep relief.

Now, it's done.

All done.

The circle has closed.

We're officially a clan.

## ARIADNE

“A ri,” Finnen is saying, pressing kisses to my hair. “Wake up. We need to move.”

“Hm...” I would like to help but my body isn’t obeying. It feels heavy and lax, my muscles like lead. “Can’t...”

“Can you see them?” Rhian is saying.

“The farmers and villagers?” Kiaran sounds like he’s about to laugh. “They’re holding actual pitchforks.”

“Not funny, Kia,” Taj says. “We need to get out of here, grab our horses and make a run for it. Someone is bound to tell our pursuers about this.”

“Oh shit...” I try to lift my head but it lolls against firm flesh. A firm chest, hard pecs serving as little cushions.

*Finnen*, the scent tells me. He’s the one holding me in his arms.

I almost giggle. I feel as if I’ve inhaled the sacred smoke of the altar where the officiating priestess burns the blessed *kendi* leaves to hear the goddess’s voice.

“Is there a back door?” he asks. “All temples have a back door.”

“Of course it does. Question is, will there be pitchfork-y villagers on the other side of it, too?”

“Only one way to know,” Finnen says. “Open it and find out.”

“Yeah, you’re so funny, too,” Kiaran mutters. “But you know that.”

“I’m hilarious,” Finnen says flatly.

“I’ll get the horses ready,” Kiaran says. “The border isn’t far. If we make it past the locals and their grievance, whatever that is, we may be able to cross even today.”

“We’re that close to the border? Rhian’s voice holds wonder. “I hadn’t realized.”

“He’s right, it’s close,” Taj replies. “We’re almost at Stalia, the town is practically visible from here. It sits right on the border, on the river. Most trade routes go through there.”

How can they think straight after what we did, after what we spent... how long doing? I can’t recall. I can’t sit up straight, let alone think straight.

Then again, they weren’t the ones who got nailed six ways to Sunday by cocks and knots.

This time a giggle escapes me.

Is this normal that I feel so high? Has something happened and they aren’t telling me? Why am I giggling? I’m not the giggling sort.

Finnen strokes my cheekbone with his thumb and it stops the threatening hysteria. “You’re okay,” he says, “it’s just the aftermath.”

As if I’ve been to battle. To war.

It feels a little like it. My body feels... battered. It aches deep inside.

“Trust us,” Finnen whispers in my ear. “We’ll take care of you. It’s what we exist for.”

“No.” I deny that. “It’s not. You’re great, and I love you. I...” Tears sting my eyes. “I love you so much.”

“Shush.” His breath caresses the shell of my ear, it’s all right. But the quality of his voice has changed and I can’t name the emotion filling it. “It’s all right.”

Taj kneels down beside me, takes my hand. “Are you okay, kitten?”

“I love you all,” I tell him, choked.

“And we love you, too,” Taj says with a soft smile, lifting my hand to his lips. “I swear it. Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“You can’t die.” My breath hitches. “Please, don’t.”

“Then I won’t,” he swears solemnly, lowering my hand.

“That’s good.” It doesn’t ease the sudden misery but it’s good.

Kiaran is there now, taking my other hand, stroking my knuckles as he talks to Taj over my head. “So we get to Stalia,

and then what? Patrols will be everywhere, soldiers controlling everyone. Tell me if I'm wrong."

"You're not wrong," Taj says quietly. "We can't ride there as a group."

"And what about that disguise we talked about?" Rhian says. "I thought we were going to say we're vendors or some such thing."

"We will."

"Selling what?"

"Fumes and dreams. I'll figure it out, don't worry about it," Aless says, his deep voice heavy with something dark. "I'll take care of that."

"Take care of it? How? I—"

A boom shakes the temple.

"They're about to tear down the main door," Aless says. "We need to get out of here, right now."

I blink, another emotion trying to worm its way through the alternating states of misery and silliness. Is silliness an emotion?

Is misery?

"Come on, love." Taj scoops me up in his arms, hefts me against his granite chest, and I rest my cheek on it with a sigh. He grins fiercely down at me. "It's time to hit the road."

---

The horses are saddled. Taj helps me up onto one, pushing until I manage to swing a leg over, and then I moan. My insides feel like they've been beaten to a pulp.

"She should be resting," Finnen is saying. "She may still be in heat, and after all the pounding she's taken—"

Pounding. *Yeah.* That's how it feels.

But it's not that bad, and I say so, out loud.

My words drop into a pool of silence.

"What isn't that bad?" Finnen asks, his tone careful. "Ari?"

"The heat," I mumble, steadying myself on the saddle as Taj swings himself onto the saddle behind me.

"You don't feel hot anymore?"

"No. I..." I shiver. "I'm cold."

Another silence spreads, widening circles in dark water.

"So her heat is over," Kiaran says cheerfully. "Good! Let's ride."

"If her heat is over so quickly," Finnen starts, "then it's—"

"Not now, priest." Taj slides his arms around me, pulling me back against his chest, and grabs the reins.

"But—"

"We need to go." Another boom punctuates Taj's words. "Get on your horses. We break the front door down."

"What about the back door?"

“Can’t ride through it on horseback.” Taj’s voice shines with a sharp grin, dangerous like a blade. “Can we?”

“Right you are,” Kiaran says and then we’re galloping through the temple, hooves clacking and echoing on stone and marble, and Kiaran’s horse kicks the grand doors open and into the howls of a small crowd who’d been waiting outside.

It’s dark. Night has fallen. But there are torches blazing, being waved about.

I catch glimpses of anger-distorted faces and the aforementioned pitchforks as we ride through them, eyes glinting in the flickering flames, mouths bared in animalistic snarls.

Some are holding knives.

All of them hate us.

“Freaks!” someone shouts. “Fae bastards! Fucking beasts! Go back to hell! Burn in hell!”

But we’ve already burned, burned like living flames, and if that was hell, then I’ll gladly return to the flames.

I see my men—Kiaran and Finnen like pale ghosts in the night, hair streaming behind them, I see Rhian with his graceful posture on the saddle, I see Aless cantering like a shadow, and feel Taj behind me, solid and warm and real.

I’d burn for them again and again.

From the flames, we will rise.

## ALESS

I t's time for me to leave.

The thought keeps trying to punch through the haze in my mind as we gallop under the moon, heading away from the abandoned temple and the spiteful little village where we'd taken refuge.

I should go.

My task here is done, my promise fulfilled. I helped them get away, helped Ariadne through her heat. Everything went just fine.

I should head back.

Back to the family, back to my old haunts.

A vise grips my chest at the thought.

Don't want to. Why would I want to go back to that? Why, when I could be with her? Watch her belly grow, be with her and with her mates.

Her bite on my neck burns like fire. Like a promise.

*No choice, I tell myself firmly. Don't even fucking consider it, Aless. He'll come after you.*



*After* them.

*You can't risk it.*

But if we cross the border... I did promise to help them cross before I take my leave. At least I can do as much, and—

“Hold up!” Taj calls out, stomping on the nascent idea before it fully forms. “Let’s plan. Time to decide how we pull this off.”

I pull on the reins, turn my horse around. Everyone is slowing down. “We should split,” I hear myself say, “and I go first to get everything we need.”

I expect some objection, some gainsay. Sending me off first on my own implies an insane amount of trust for someone they don’t really know.

For someone who said he was leaving and is still here.

“Fine,” Rhian says, and I turn to him, kind of surprised he’d be the one to speak, though I shouldn’t be. He’s our beta. He’s the one looking out for everyone. “But I’m coming with you.”

*Ah.* There it comes. “You don’t trust me not to betray you?”

He cocks his head to the side. “I trust you. I want to help.”

I study his face for the lie that has to be there, written in some sort of half-invisible ink, but come up empty. “You do?”

“How did you think you could steal enough to pretend to be a trader and haul it around on your own?” He opens his

hands, palms up. “You’re doing it for us. Least I can do is assist you.”

It’s hard to tell in the silver moonlight but his eyes seem guileless, his expression open.

Even if they don’t trust me and want to keep an eye on me, what does it matter?

It shouldn’t.

I’m not staying with them, anyway.

*Remember that*, I tell myself.

Why do I keep forgetting it?

“Let’s go, then.” I nod in the direction of the town. “In a few hours, it will be dawn and I’d like to do my thieving under cover of darkness, if possible.”

Rhian frowns. “We won’t be there before dawn.”

“Yeah, I know. But even early dawn is better than noon, so let’s get to it.”

“Where do we meet?” Taj asks.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Rhian mutters.

“I’ve been there,” I say. Once. A memorable time, for sure. “There’s a tavern called the White Jaguar. Let’s meet there at dusk. That should give me—us—enough time to create our disguise.”

“Are you sure you’re up to this?” Finnen sounds skeptical. Sometimes I think he sees way more than the seeing people can. “You seem jittery.”

“You’d be fucking jittery if you had to steal enough merchandise to pass off as merchants,” I mutter.

Silence greets my words.

Then Kiaran says, “He’s got a point.”

“Of course I’ve got a point,” I grumble.

“Okay, don’t get your loincloth in a twist,” Taj drawls. “We’ll hang around here and come in waves to the town. Blessings be upon you, boys.”

I give him the finger, which earns me a pleased laugh, and turn my horse back around, toward the south, a direction I somehow feel in my gut.

Rhian draws his horse beside me. “Ready when you are.”

Without answering, I click my heels and we’re off.

---

Dawn is bleeding into the horizon when we finally come into clear view of the town.

Pale spires and glinting domes, red roofs and greenery, trees and gardens spread alongside the blue snake of the river.

I’d forgotten how pretty this place is.

Then again, my only visit here hadn’t been for pleasure.

*Neither is this one, I remind myself. Funny how the mind likes to wander. Focus, Aless, fucking concentrate.*

*This will be a tough one to pull off, even for a seasoned criminal like you.*

Damn, my cock fucking hurts from knotting her, the sac at the base of my dick stinging. I hadn't popped a knot since I was a horny teenager in my bed.

The memory of being with Ariadne, with my mates, it's—

*Not your mates.*

*Not your omega.*

*Fucking get off it.*

Time to perform.

I pull the hood of my coat up, hiding my ears and hopefully also the marks on my neck and the bite from my omega—*not yours, dammit, not yours*—and then glance meaningfully at Rhian to get him to do the same.

His coat is an expensive-looking one, as are those of the other alphas, made of fine wool and lined with silk. Gifted, I assume, by the duke. The hood he pulls up has silver embroidery.

“You'll stand out,” I mutter.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You look like a young lord.”

“Am I supposed to look like a thief in order to steal? Is it a requisite?”

I chuckle. “Don't be an idiot. You need to blend in with the crowd. And you'll stand out as you are.”

“So what do you propose? I'm not standing by, waiting for you to do everything.”

“Because you don’t trust me.”

“It seems to me,” Rhian says, that pretty green gaze on me, “that you’re the one who has trouble trusting.”

*Touché.*

“In that case, you will be the distraction,” I inform him.

“What?”

“You shall distract people,” I say with exaggerated slowness, “while I steal from them. Got it?”

“Distract them, how?”

“Smile at them. Flirt with them. You’re pretty and look like a lord. They’ll be honored every minute you spend with them. People are like that.”

“You think I’m pretty?”

“You prefer me to say you look handsome? You’re handsome, Rhian.”

“I... “

“Your eyes are green like spring meadows and your cheeks rosy like the first touch of dawn on the eastern sky.”

“... what?”

“That’s how you do it,” I tell him and he blinks. “The flirting bit.”

Slowly more color rises to his face. “Fuck you,” he breathes.

“I meant it,” I tell him.

“Meant what?”

“That you’re pretty.”

“Aless...”

I hadn’t meant to say that and I frown at myself. “Now let’s get on with it. Come.”

“Wait,” he calls out, hurrying after me.

“What is it?”

“You don’t look so bad yourself.”

I grin, despite myself. “Oh yeah?”

“I hope... I hope you’ll stay with us.”

*Fuck.* That’s hitting under the belt. “Go flirt,” I tell him. “We got a job to do.”

“You sure you know what you’re doing?”

“I’ve been thieving since I was a toddler,” I snap, more irritated than I thought. Or maybe I’m just out of sorts. “I’ll be fine.”

“If you need help, hoot like an owl!” he calls out, stopping.

And I shake my head, feeling his concern like a blossoming warmth in my chest.

We’re at the border. The border. That means—

*Steal what you need, I tell myself, and stop dithering.*

I can be a hard boss to myself.

I’ve learned from the hardest.

---

It works.

Against all odds, our distraction-slash-thieving works.

I watch from the shadows as Rhian saunters up to stalls at the market and chats people up. They fall into his gaze, mesmerized, girls and boys vying for his attention, their parents with stars in their eyes at the thought that their progeny got a pretty lord's attention, while I stalk to the back where the merchandise is stored in carts and wagons and gather up as much as I can.

Cloth. Cloaks. Mittens. Socks. Hoods. Small rugs.

Lightweight, but also innocent goods. I steer far away from weapons of any kind that could make the border officers suspicious.

Bundles. We need to bundle up the merchandise so we can sling it onto our horses, and hang it from the saddle. Surreptitiously, I direct the pretty beta to a stand of shawls and bags. Quickly I determine that the saddle bags they sell won't do for our purposes. The horses and our clothes are rich enough to rouse suspicion without the aid of worked leather saddle bags.

We would be wiser, in fact, to ditch the horses, and just carry everything on our backs.

Now that's an idea.

Though it makes running away harder, if we're chased.

There's also that.

I'm carrying my last load of goods to a hiding place I found, feeling tension seeping out of me at a job well executed, when I hear shouts and the sound of pounding feet.

“Get him! He's stealing my goods!”

*Oh fuck.*

Abandoning the last bundle, I turn and run, not waiting to see who is after me. Dammit, I thought it was done. Now I have to lose my pursuers and manage not to get caught or my mates won't find the cache and won't be able to flee.

*My mates.*

*What the fuck, Aless?*

Cursing to myself, I run harder, diving into a side street, hoping to lose my tail, when a strong hand grabs me, almost lifting me off my feet.

“Follow us,” a familiar voice says before I even begin to struggle. “Where's Rhian?”

*Fuck. Okay.* It's Finnen and Taj. The relief that hits me is almost painful.

I shake their hands off me. “He's still chatting up the merchants.”

“He is?” Finnen's pale brows go up. “Was he in the mood for a chat?”

“He's my distraction.”



“He sure *is* a distraction,” Taj mutters, licking his lips. His gaze swings to me. “Then again, so are you.”

“Are you in heat again?” I growl, though my mouth twitches despite everything, another spot of warmth thawing my chest.

“This is how he normally is,” Finnen grinds out. “Always in heat. In reality, he’s a horny tomcat. Focus, Taj. No, you can’t jump Aless’ or Rhian’s bones right now.”

“But we didn’t even get to play with each other.” There’s a slight whine in Taj’s voice. He waggles his brows at me suggestively.

“Yeah, maybe after we cross the border,” Finnen says.

“You promise?”

Finnen rolls his eyes. “Okay, Aless, do you have the goods?”

“I was in the process of getting them,” I mutter.

“How much more do we need?”

“In fact, I may have enough.” I try to calculate all I stole in my mind. “Yeah, it could work. Better draw Rhian away and not give them any reason to suspect the game. Lie low and wait for nightfall.”

“Good.”

“Where are Kiaran and Ariadne?”

“They should be arriving soon.”

“Is she...?” I swallow hard, the worry hard to express when I still don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. “Is she feeling better?”

“Yeah, she is.” Taj claps my back, gives me a smile that seems much more real than his usual grins. “Thanks for sticking with us, man.”

I open my mouth to tell him that I still can’t stay but the words stick in my throat.

*The border, my mind insists. Cross the border and you’re gone, out of the Black Fist’s reach, out of sight. Cut your hair, be someone else.*

*Be with them.*

*It could work.*

“That’s it,” Taj says, as if reading something in my face, and I recoil. “That’s what I want to see. You’re one of us.”

*Dammit.* Are they all mind readers?

“Go to the tavern,” I say. “I need to check on our things. Meet you there at dusk as agreed.”

Taj lingers, gazing at me. Then he nods and grabs Finnen’s arm, gesturing at Rhian who’s hurrying toward us to join them. “Don’t be late or I’ll turn the town inside out looking for you.”

A threat has never felt as heart-warming as this, and I find myself smiling, too, as I walk away.

---

The hiding hole where I've stuffed all our spoils is a shed behind an old, abandoned-looking house. I checked the yard for footprints before I chose it, and found nothing fresh.

When I open the creaking, crumbling door, I find everything where I left it, so I enter and sit down to bundle it up.

The bundles are heavy but if need be, we can carry them. We're alphas. We can carry a man on our backs without breaking a sweat, so lifting these bundles should be easy-peasy.

Finishing, I close the door again, secure it with a piece of twine I filched among all the other things, just to deter any curious peeper, and walk back to the street.

And stop dead in my tracks.

"Alessei." The man stepping in to intercept me is familiar, if out of place here. "So our sources were right."

"Your sources?" I feel sick. I should have seen this coming. "What do you want, Emeret?"

"Black Fist demands the gold you promised from the duke's horses."

"I lost the horses."

"You don't say."

I study their hardened faces. Emeret and Irvald, the Black Fist's right-hand thugs. "If I give you some horses, will you take them and leave us in peace?"

"*Us?* Who is *us?*"

*Damn.* I bite my lip.

“Told you he’s with a group,” Irvald says and I want to cut off my own traitorous tongue.

“I’m alone,” I tell them, injecting every ounce of persuasion I own into my voice. “But I decided to stay here.”

“Oh, sure. Nice town.” Emeret shoots me a narrow look. “So where are those horses?”

“No here, obviously. I’ll hand them to you at the city gate before dusk.”

“Why should we trust you?”

“I have to steal them back,” I tell my half-lie.

“That sure is an interesting story,” Emeret says.

“I’ll bring you the horses. Take them to Black Fist with my compliments.”

“You’re really not coming with?”

“He won’t miss me.”

“He’ll miss your thieving abilities.”

“That’s too bad.”

“It is. So you’re coming with us.”

“No, I most definitely am not. I have business here.”

“We can make you.”

I clench my fists. I tower over them. “Can you, really?”

They take a step back. “Black Fist will come after you.”

“How is he going to find me?”

“Asking around. You want to cross the border, don’t you?”

I stiffen. “No.”

He smirks. “You’d better watch your back, Aless, or he’ll do worse than cut up that pretty face of yours this time. He can hurt your mother. You don’t want that, do you?”

“She made her choice.” I turn my back on them. “And I’m making mine.”

## ARIADNE

Something is off.

I feel it the moment we dismount at the tavern where we're supposed to meet. Dusk is closing over us like a dark dome over the temple of the world.

"Let me take your horse," Aless says.

"Take it where?"

"The stables, where else?"

"Aren't we leaving?"

"When it's dark," Aless says, a strange expression in his eyes. "After the horses have rested and we have settled on a plan for crossing."

"Right." Kieran looks sheepish. "You're right."

I catch Aless's arm before he leads our horse away. "Are you okay?" I take his callused hand in mine. "What happened?"

He shakes his head. "No idea what you mean. Everything's good. All set to go."

“No, something’s up with you.” His face tightens. “You’re leaving, aren’t you?”

A small flinch, a look of shock. “Let me take the horses away, Ari. Then we can talk.”

I nod, accepting the concession.

He returns much later and sits down with us in the tavern, where my men are discussing the crossing of the border in quiet voices. The bad feeling lingers in the pit of my stomach, weighing it like a rock.

Taj pushes a mug of ale toward him. Rhian passes him a trencher with stew.

Aless just sits there, not touching either.

I reach across the table for his hand. “Aless. Please, stay with us.”

The conversation around me stops.

“You don’t understand. My father...” He swallows hard. “My stepfather. He may come after me. After us. I can’t... can’t risk my family.”

“Aless—”

“*You* are my family. All of you. I can’t risk you.”

A knot stoppers my throat. “Oh.”

“I had to give away the horses,” he goes on and Taj lets out a hiss.

“You what?”

“Otherwise Black Fist’s men would have killed me. In fact...” He glances around. “I don’t know if they left or not. They may be watching.”

We all glance around. Men are quaffing ale and munching on roast mutton. Wenches do the rounds, carrying trays of food and drink. Nobody seems to be paying us any attention.

“So we’ll have to walk over the border?” I ask.

“Yeah. Then again, the horses were too conspicuous,” Finnen says. “This may be for the best.”

“I thought we were leaving the horses here anyway,” Rhian says.

“Let that fucker the Black Fist have fun fucking the horses,” Taj says cheerfully, and Aless gives him a wary look.

“You believe me? You believe this crazy story?”

“I know of Black Fist. And you saved my life some days ago. I trust you.”

“We trust you,” I tell him gently, seeking his hand again. “You could have betrayed us many times over. But you didn’t.”

“Dammit. You keep making it so hard to walk away,” Aless grunts.

“Then don’t walk away,” Taj says. “Stay.”

Aless looks like he’s about to think of more arguments, but I get up and walk around the table to him, put my arms around him, my soft curves pressing into his hard planes, my perfume mingling with his musk and spice.



He makes a wounded sound. Capitulation. His last defenses crumpling to the ground. I love that sound. It makes my heart glad.

He pulls me onto his lap, his arms coming around me. “I’m staying. But if my stepfather comes after us—after you... Then I’ll do what I must to protect you, including leaving you.”

“We’ll burn that bridge when we get to it,” Finnen says.

“We’ll burn everything,” Taj whispers, and it should be disturbing but it only makes me smile.

I nestle in Aless’ hold, closing my eyes, taking this win, this small victory, this moment to regroup—because so much is happening, so much is at stake.

And there’s something I have to tell them...

---

“Let’s do this.” Taj walks into the shed and hefts one of the heavy bundles Aless prepared for us. “That’s heavy. But manageable.”

There are four big bundles and two smaller ones. Doesn’t take a genius to know who they are meant for.

I step forward, bend over to lift the smallest one and dizziness hits me.

I fight it, lift my bundle, test its weight. “It will do.”

“All right, sweetheart?” Taj glances at me, a shadow in his eyes as if he’s sensed something.

I smile at him. “Yes. Who will try to cross first?”

“We go in twos,” Rhian says. “I’ll go with Aless. Ari, you go with Taj, and Kiaran can go with Finnen.”

“All so balanced,” Finnen mutters, annoyance in his voice. “Strong alphas accompanying their weaker partners.”

“You’re not weak.” Taj glares at him. “Stop pretending to be.”

“Bastard.” Finnen smirks. “I approve of the plan.”

“Because you can keep giving me stupid lessons on manners?” Kiaran grumbles.

I stare at them. “Finnen gives you lessons on manners?”

“Every chance I get,” Finnen says with a martyr’s expression. “Sacrificing myself for the greater good.”

Taj laughs. “Oh boy.”

I glance at Kiaran who is smiling faintly, his pale hair wild around his handsome face.

As we had galloped toward the town, Kiaran’s arms around me, my senses hazy, I’d heard the god inside my head. *Sidde drakai*. The dragon God.

He said, “*Drakai inassa. Drakai elenen. Anissenen. Evalon.*”

And I wept silently, my fear overcome by joy, my panic replaced by resolve.

I look at them, my men, and my heart is full. I need... I need to tell them.

Everyone is lifting their bundle, examining it. The men are talking about where we will meet on the other side, where we can find horses, perhaps, how far we will have to go until we're in relative safety, where the Imperial army and the Temple can't reach us.

There's a shift in the air, in the mood.

*Hope.* It's a glimmer, but it's there, turning the fear and worry into the picture of a possible peaceful future.

"Finn," I whisper, letting my bundle drop back to the floor. "Finn!"

"I'm here," he says, putting down his bundle and coming to cup my face. "What is it?"

"I need to tell you something. All of you."

They gather around me, tall and muscular and devastatingly handsome, touching my hands, my arms, my face.

"I need to dance for the god," I whisper.

"But Ari," Finnen breathes, "those were human gods. We're not human anymore. You don't have to—"

"The unnamed god. He spoke to me. I need to pray."

Finn's face stills. "Why? What did he say?"

More tears rise to my eyes, but I'm smiling so widely my cheeks hurt. "That I'm pregnant."

## UNLIKELY LOVE (HUNTED FAE 4)

[UNLIKELY LOVE \(Hunted Fae 4\) is available from Dec 14 on all retailers!](#)

**This Fae-blooded omega and her clan on the run from the Empire have now reached safe haven.**

We made it. We crossed the border and are now safe.

Now our main concern is putting some distance between us and the border, and finding a home for our growing family.

Needless to say that my heat was a success and the project “bring back the Fae” is underway... starting with a couple of tiny Fae who will be born some months down the line.

But at least we are now in safety and we can live and work in peace to build our dream of a home and family.

Or so we think.

The Empire, though, has other plans. Plans to invade the south and finish off any Fae blood that has survived.

My mates can't sit on their hands while the south fights. The war is coming to us and to protect me and our clan, they will put their lives on the line.

Will they make it back to me alive? Will we find our happy ending?

## **OTHER BOOKS FROM MONA BLACK!**

**Book 1 in the Cursed Fae Kings series (standalone fae romance novels series):**

### **The Merman King's Bride**

**A cursed King of Faerie**

**A princess betrothed to a man she doesn't love**

**A kiss that will change everything**

The last thing Princess Selina expects to find in the lake in the woods is a handsome merman. His name is Adar and he saves her, teases her, kisses her, and tells her she could break his curse.

Because, as it turns out, he's a Fae King, cursed to remain in merman form until he finds a princess to kiss him.

But one kiss is not enough and Selina has other problems.

Such getting engaged to a prince she isn't sure she even likes, let alone loves. Marrying him and having his children is not on her list of favorite things.

And now she's falling for the merman.

He's everything she could wish for in a man. Handsome, protective, kind. Except that he is Fae. And has a fishtail.

Still, she can't stop thinking about him. Keeps going back to him. Craves his kisses.

Would gladly have his babies.

Is this a spell, or is it love? Can she break the curse and save Adar? Will there be a happy ending to their story?

All a girl can do is try. After all, true love is worth fighting for and Selina knows she has found it.

\*This book is standalone novella-length NA romance fantasy novel, featuring mature situations with some dark themes and adult language. It is a retelling of the Frog Prince, with all the emotions, romance, spice and heat.\*

---

**A completed Paranormal Reverse Harem series! Welcome to Pandemonium Academy!**

**“Of Boys and Beasts”**

One's a werewolf with an ax to grind

Two's a vampire with a heart of coal

Three's a demon with a taste for pain

Four's a fae with a past of woe

Five's a girl who will take them down all

In revenge for the pain they've sown

So what if they're gorgeous? They must atone...

My name is Mia Solace. You know, the girl who will take them down all? That's me.

When my cousin is returned to us by Pandemonium Academy in a glass coffin, in an enchanted sleep she isn't expected to wake up from, I grab her diary and head to the academy myself.

Because her diary, you see, tells of four cruel boys who bullied her and broke her heart until she sought oblivion through a spell.

Four magical boys, because that's the world we live in now, heirs of powerful families attending this elite academy where the privileged scions of the human and magical races are brought together in the noble pursuit of education.

As for me, I cheat to get on the student roster, and once I'm in, well... it's war, baby. I'll get those four sons of guns, steal their secrets, make them hurt. I'll transform into an avenging angel for my cousin, for all the girls they've wronged, and I bet there are plenty of those.

While growing up, my cousin was my only friend. Now I'll be her champion.

Only these boys aren't exactly as I pictured them. Devastatingly handsome, deliciously brooding, strangely haunted, they're getting under my skin and through my defenses.

Kissing them surely wasn't part of my plan...

Getting into bed with them even less.



---

**Do you like contemporary RH omegaverse? Check out my new series *The Candyverse*. Start with book 1: [Bee and the Honey Crew \(The Candyverse #1\)](#).**

Bee Robinson's dream is to be an omega. What she is, though, is a weird beta on the run from her ex and her small town.

*Weird* as in *unusual*, as in being a lot like an omega, rather than her official designation. It's what got her into trouble with her ex and her family.

But now she's about to get her life straightened out. A new town, a new job, new friends, and a chance to accept who and what she is.

Learn from your mistakes, isn't that what they say?

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

Only her new friends also seem to think she may be an omega, and so do the members of the St. Laurent pack who instantly start courting her.

A pack of four gorgeous males, each with their own insecurities and doubts, a pack needing her to cement the bonds that make them a family, needing her to join them as their mate.

A family...

Does it matter if you're a beta or an omega when all you need is to accept yourself as you are and see where it takes you?

Her new friends and the pack seem to think so, and in the end Bee may have to let nature take its course, come what may.

At the end of the rainbow, there will be a happy ending.

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**Or maybe you like dystopian paranormal RH omegaverse? I have you covered, too. Try my series Golden Cage Omegas – and start with book 1: [Caged](#)**

Finding out I am an omega in a world ruled by betas was only the beginning of my troubles...

Alphas and omegas are considered non-humans. We're thought of as animals, some of whose traits we share. Furry ears and tails, anyone? Oh, and also mating cycles. Finding out I am an omega in a world ruled by betas was only the beginning of my troubles...

That's right.

Not something I thought I had to worry about. See, I thought I was a beta. I thought I was human.

And then, my world is upended once again when my parents are killed by a pack of rogues. Escaping, I head to the city, and there I am captured and sent to the Golden Cage.

A Cage where omegas are kept, to be sold to an alpha pack. To the highest bidder.

I came to the city to find a gang of boys I met many years ago, to beg them for help, but instead I am being sold to an

unknown pack, the choice not up to me.

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**Do you like dark paranormal romance? Do you like fairytale retellings?**

**Try my completed Brutal Never Boys trilogy!**

**[King of Nothing \(Brutal Never Boys 1\)](#)**

No man has ever managed to satisfy me—until Peter Pan carries me away to Neverland and now all bets are off...

I never thought that there is another reality beyond this one. My life is normal—work, routine, a few disappointing flings—when a man grabs me from the street and carries me off the Neverland.

A madman.

Granted, he probably saved my life, and the island he has brought me to is beautiful, the sights including three more hunks like him.

He says his name is Peter Pan and this is Neverland, he says they have been waiting for me and I may be the one...

Yeah, he sounds like a madman, all right.

A pity. He's so pretty. And so are his friends.

Peter and the Lost Boys, living on an island where the mermaids sing in the sea and creatures named Reds roam the land.

It sounds like a fairytale.

But if Peter is mad, the rest aren't much better. Dark forces seem to be at work here, and I'm caught in a web of fear and doubt.

The Lost Boys turn out to be violent, vicious men and I am their plaything.

Caught in a web of desire and pleasure.

Am I really the one they have been expecting?

Can I save them?

And do I even want to?

## ABOUT MONA BLACK

Mona is a changeling living in the human world. She writes fantasy romance and reverse harem romance, and is an avid reader of fantasy and paranormal books. One day she will get her ducks in a row and get a cat so she can become a real author.

Check out her paranormal reverse harem series Pandemonium Academy Royals, and her fantasy romance series Cursed Fae Kings.

Follow Mona on social media to know about new releases and promotions:

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