



ZIVAH ROSE



KINGDOM
OF SHADOWS
DEATH OF LOVE

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Dedication

For my husband, for always supporting me, even when my ideas are crazy – I love you.

To Brittney, for reading and loving my books even when they were total dumpster fires...Thank you for always having my back. Beta readers and ARCS – You are amazing. I hope you enjoy falling into my world.

Content Notice

This book is suggested for readers over the age of 18. There will be explicit scenes and mature content including but possibly not limited to:

Nudity, graphic violence, blood, gore, sex, abuse, death, war, demons, witches, mention of miscarriage, mention of stillborn or death of an infant, smoking, drinking, depression, mental illness, ritual sacrifice and stealing.

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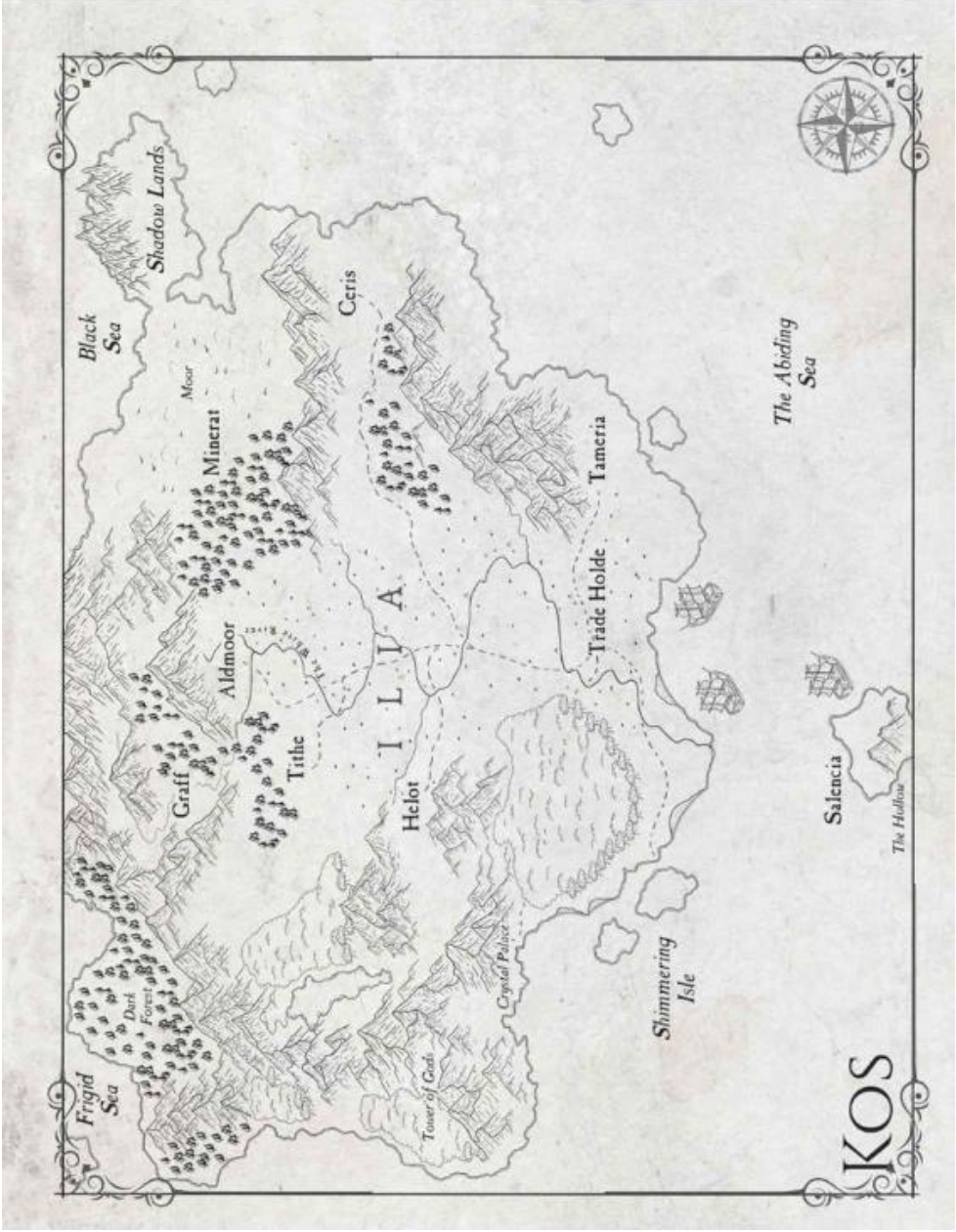
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Chapter 1

The duty I felt toward my family's throne darkened the day they promised me away from Callum. Separated by meaningless castes and my parent's need for grandeur, these moments of stolen delight burned bright. The desire to remain wrapped in his arms piercing deep within my soul.

My back pressed into my teal sheets as he leaned toward me. A rush of heat ignited over my body as he lay me down, his callused fingers spreading over my breast, his lips brushing across mine. Our breath intertwined as I arched against him, desperate for more of him. I breathed in, cherishing the scent of him – iron, and leather. The feel of his skin on mine, rough. He was both the rock that I clung to and the air that I breathed, and I needed all of him.

Separated by thick layers of pink chiffon and his brown leather, I twisted my fingers into the strings at his middle. His golden-brown eyes locked on mine as I undid the last of his hilt strap, his sword clattering to the white marble floor of my bed chamber. Our eyes widened, and a wave of excitement rushed through my body like electricity. “No one heard,” I whispered.

“Let us hope not, paramour,” he said as his head dipped below the canopy of my dress. “I’d hate to miss something so sweet.”

Every inch of my skin ignited as his tongue slid up my center. A low groan rumbled in his chest, letting me know he was satisfied with what he’d found. His tongue circled between my legs, sucking me into his mouth. A tingle pulled tight in my core, the sounds from outside the castle falling away as I succumbed to my need. I clutched him helplessly, my legs tightening around his head as my hips rolled against him, his whiskered lips quirked up in a grin before his tongue plunged inside me. I gasped, gripping the back of his head,

grinding into him as it slid in and out slowly, deeper with each turn. “Callum,” I moaned, my words husky and desperate.

“I want to taste your pleasure, Lisah,” he said, his voice low between my legs.

It had been too long since we’d last had each other, and soon he’d be missed from his post. *There wasn’t enough time... There never was.* “I want you inside me, please,” I begged. His eyes locked on mine over the peak of my dress as he shifted my gown back, revealing me to him.

“As you wish, Princess,” he said, eyes darkening.

My heart skipped at the sight of his warm brown fingers as they spread over the pearly white skin of my knee. A wide smile spread over his teeth, pulling into the dimple at the corner of his mouth, making me melt. His shirt lifted over his head in one swift move—my breath leaving me in a rush as I took him in.

Being able to see all of him was a gift, so much better than the hastened moments we’d stolen in the castle stables. This moment alone was more than worth the risk of being caught if it were only me who’d face punishment.

This was the first time I’d seen all of him and I never wanted to look away. I wanted to curl my fingers in the dark hairs on his chest. Lick the scars of war that lined his body. He was glorious.

I trembled with need below him as he removed his pants, his erection springing free. Biting into my bottom lip, I grinned up at him. His golden eyes practically burned as he stared back at me like I was the only thing in the world that mattered. Like if he didn’t have me here and now, he’d die. My insides clenched, wetness pooling between my thighs.

There was no one like Callum. Born of a line of witches, but not blessed with their divine powers, he dedicated his life to swordplay and the evidence was clear in the muscles that rippled at his center. He’d moved through our army’s ranks quickly, winning battle after battle for my father, making my

request for him to be my personal guard unquestioned as war neared our border.

I gasped as he tore open the corset that kept me from him in one sharp movement. His body pressed down on mine, blurring my mind. I was lost in the feel of his skin as our tongues intertwined. My breath hitched as his arm slid between my thighs, his fingers curling inside me.

It wasn't enough. I could never have enough. I took his shaft in my hand and slid it into my opening, rolling my hips against him. His fingers twisted into the hair at the back of my head as he watched me, his other hand firm at the bridge of my back, holding me steady as he moved inside in one swift motion. I moaned against his hammering thrusts. My mind was a flurry of pleasure as his thumb rolled over my clit until I lost all sense of self. We were one thing floating through the abyss.

Pleasure coiled between my legs, tightening around his pulsing shaft until I exploded around him. His hands held my face as he planted soft kisses from my chin to my hair, resting his forehead against mine.

“I love you, Lis,” he whispered softly. “You are the only thing that keeps me going through this war.” His eyes held mine, a slight quiver to his lips. “You must know this—no matter what happens, my love will never change.”

“I love you too.” Our lips together again in desperate need. “You should go before we get caught.”

“Leave you in tears? Not a chance.” He pulled me onto his chest, his fingers trailing down my arm and making my stomach flutter. “It’s going to be alright.”

But it wouldn't be okay. Soon, everything would change and there was nothing either of us could do. “In three months, I’m to marry Lord Thadius. How is anything going to be, okay?” He squeezed me tight, his lips on my hair. I knew he wanted to comfort me, but I was breaking inside. To everyone around me, I had always been Princess Listitia, heir to the throne of the Crystal Palace. But now, after my parent’s latest conquest,

I'd become a broodmare for the highest bidder. A quick fix to my parent's ever-growing fear of a decade long war.

"We all have our roles. Yours is to secure the safety of our kingdom. I'm proud of you."

"How can you be content with me marrying a Dragon Lord?" Nausea washed over me as I pictured Lord Thadius' hands on me... bearing his children. My throat tightened, and my heart raced at the thought before twisting into a rage. I was going to lose Callum, and for what? So, my mother could feel more power? For my father to be more protected by an alliance with that greedy horse lord? "What kind of dragon likes horses so much, anyway?"

"I believe it's the gold he makes from them he likes, Lis." Callum sat up, pulling my hands to his chest, the soft thud of his heart beating under my palm soothing me. "It beats for you, and only you," he said, taking a long, measured breath as he gazed out of the palace window. "I knew what it meant when I fell in love with a fae princess. I accepted it long ago. To hold you, even for a moment, is worth the pain I'll feel when you ascend the throne."

"Damn you." I shoved him, tears rolling wildly down my cheeks. "Stop making me cry."

"Paramour, never shed a tear on a pleb like me," he said, his lips soft on mine. "Come now, I'm risking the noose to see you smile, and all I get are tears?"

I rolled my eyes and shoved him off the bed, flashing a fake smile his way, trying to hold in my despair. "You've stayed too long." The image of him hanging at the palace gates flashed in my mind. Stumbling to his feet, bowing before me with a grin, he pulled his shirt off the end of my four-poster bed. *God's, he was beautiful.*

"As you wish," he said as he pulled on his leathers and boots. His shirt was still half-untucked as he worked the strings of his hilt. I pulled my sheets around me as I sat up to watch him, my mind already worrying about when we would get to be alone together again, but I knew we'd already risked far too much. He had to go.

Suddenly, my chamber door thrust open without warning. I threw up a glamour instantly, but my mother's eyes flew wide at my shredded dress on the floor before they narrowed on the place where Callum stood. I attempted to make him look like a pile of clothes, sweat beading on my brow from the strain of holding the enchantment. She pushed through my glamour quickly, my months of lessons on illusions proving useless against her as her beady eyes squinted tight at him.

My handmaiden Gretchen skidded to a halt at her heels, her mouth dropping at the sight of her brother in my chamber as my mother's voice shrieked through the room. "Listitia! What is the meaning of this? Guards!" The clang of the guard's iron boots echoed through the hall as they rushed toward us. My heart in my throat.

Callum dropped to his knee before my mother, his voice strained. "Queen Alora, forgive me."

I jumped to my feet, rushing between them. "I ordered him to enter, mother." Lines creased across her forehead, her eyes hard on my own as she looked between my torn dress and his disheveled attire.

"You are promised to another. You've disgraced our family." A slap rang out as her hand connected with my cheek. "Whore!" she spat, looking over her shoulder at Callum with a sneer. My cheek throbbed from her touch, but I dared not move.

Guards filed into the room, their faces stricken, confused at what to do. Before them stood their princess wrapped in a sheet with her dress torn apart on the floor, their queen, and the man who had led them safely through more battles than one could count.

"I'm not a whore."

"You think I'm a fool?" She paced across the room and back. Callum remained with his head bowed. "You are to marry. To take Tameria's throne and extend our armies, our kingdom. This is your duty! Instead, you've defiled yourself. Ungrateful, stupid girl." She grabbed a chunk of my hair and wrapped it around her hand as she pulled me behind her

toward the door. My feet fought to not trip over the sheet wrapped around me as she moved without remorse before stopping at the threshold.

I snuck a peek at Gretchen from the corner of my eye. She was in shock, frozen in place, watching us both. “What if he won’t have you now? Do you know what this would mean for me?”

“I don’t want him to have me. I don’t want any of this. Why can’t I just live my life like everyone else!” I screamed, shoving her off.

“Stupid girl, you don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“Listitia, please, listen to your mother,” Callum said, rising beside us.

Her eyes fell on him as if he were a common criminal. Disgust lined her pale skin, creases forming on her brow. Her long white hair, a perfect match of my own, was normally pulled tightly behind her head but now fell around her bright green eyes wildly. She was my mirror image, less the difference in our age. Except, she was full of rage and hate, and it made us different in a way there were no words for.

She sneered at him, her hands trembling as she pointed at him. “Take him to the executioner!”

“Mother, no! He did nothing. I didn’t command of him.”

The guards flanked him, and a rock dropped in my stomach at the sight. *This was my fault. I’d pulled him into my chambers. I’d done this* “He is not to be harmed,” I screamed in her face. “What would father say if you had his best general killed?”

She froze, her eyes cutting back at me. My words had struck a chord. My mother was a rash woman, but my father was calculated and smart. He knew Callum held the respect and trust of his armies. He wouldn’t risk an uprising now when King Aldrich and Immekus’ armies moved along our border.

“You can explain this to your father when he returns. Until then, the traitor will remain in chains,” she said through

clenched teeth as she stomped out the door, her voice calling back to my handmaid. “Gretchen, have her bathe of his stench and dress for dinner. Mathious awaits us in the dining hall.”

The guards pulled Callum from the room, but his eyes remained on mine. “It’s okay,” he mouthed as the door slammed shut behind him.

Chapter 2

Gretchen's dark brown eyes were wide, her sage hair wrap disheveled around her crimped ebony curls, and her usually full lips were pursed tight. She stood a head taller than me, and right now I couldn't have felt smaller.

"How could you invite him into your chambers, Lisah?"

"We hadn't seen each other for a month!" I sobbed. "When I saw him ride through the gates... I just..." I fell to her feet, my arms around her stiff legs. "I'm so sorry. I swear I'll get him out." I gazed up at her from the floor, tears welled in my eyes. "Even if I have to break him out."

She studied me and I waited silently, hoping.

Her eyes softened slightly as she stared down at me, the princess kneeling at the feet of her handmaid. Our stations meant nothing to me, but to Gretch it always seemed to be at the forefront of her mind. Her eyes ticked to my bare knees on the marble, and she sighed. "Come on, Lisah, up with you." Her hands gripped my arms, but I resisted her gentle tug. *I deserved to be on my knees begging for her forgiveness.*

She was my best friend, neither of us better than the other, yet even when we were little, sneaking through the gardens, she was always careful to remember our statuses and I hated that. She'd even refused to speak to me after catching me and Callum in the Aldmoor stables years ago saying her brother was not good enough for me. *And this was why, the real reason she'd been mad, it must be. The thing she'd always feared. That my love would get him killed.*

"Every action, down to your very thoughts, has a reaction Listitia, you must control yourself at all times," Mathious had said that week during one of my glamour lessons and I couldn't help but feel the truth of those words now.

I squeezed Gretch, my head on her thigh, soaking her dress with my tears, praying she'd forgive me. She dropped in front

of me, her hands still on my bare shoulders. “It’s not all your fault Lisah, my brother has no sense in his head when it comes to you either. If you’d protested, I’d gather he’d have been here all the same.”

She was right. Since I’d had him stationed here, our need for each other had only grown. It was like the more we had each other, the more we needed.

Gretch stiffened before me, her eyes going cloudy, her mouth slack. “Gretch!” I said shaking her. “What’s wrong? Shit — another one.” I laid her back on the floor as her eyes flitted, and I started counting, remembering her last warning.

“Never let me linger more than a count of one hundred,” she’d said.

The last time I hadn’t known better. Her nose was bloody, and she carried a headache and a grouchy attitude for a week after that vision. I threw water on her face as I hit ninety-seven, not wanting to risk a repeat of that. Her eyes popped open, snatching the rest of the water from me gulping it down.

“You, ok?”

She nodded, her eyes on mine as she drank. “I saw you, and Callum. He looked... different, older maybe? And you... were holding a baby.”

Her face lit in a bright smile. I didn’t know how it could be, how it was possible when I was on the brink of losing him, but it was the most wondrous thing I’d ever heard.” Really?” Tears glossed her eyes as she pushed herself up beside me.

“Yes.”

I wasn’t sure how, but somehow Callum and I were going to find our way through this. My body went rigid at the realization of my mother’s earlier words. “Did she say Mathious was *here*?” Gretch stood and pulled me up with her, both of us on shaky legs.

“Yes. He arrived only a short time before we came to you.”

What was the youngest of gods doing so far from Aldmoor Palace when it was under siege? Ten years the war has raged,

nearly half of my life, but even my father had said things had grown worse in these last months. Certainly, my teacher, The Master of Dreams and Delusions, was needed at the side of his father, Dune and his mother Sha, our creators.

A rock dropped in my stomach at what this visit could mean. “Did you see him?” I asked. Peering over my shoulder from the corner of my eye as I moved into the washroom. Her head dipped away from my line of sight. “Not yet, my lady.”

My eyebrow quirked up. She was back to titles now? I smirked as I dipped my cloth in the clean water on the table, washing my body. During my three years of lessons in Aldmoor, Gretch had accompanied me. There wasn't a moment we were in that palace that my serious and shy friend did not smile in the presence of the God of Dreams. Unlike his siblings, Mathious was much like me. Disgusted with the separation the castes caused and bored with the dances and uptight etiquette. It made us fast confidants. Being of high station was a lifelong sentence of sacrifice and utter and complete boredom, we'd both agreed. And for us... a life sentence could be a very long time.

Gretch pulled a silver gown over my head and went to work braiding my hair. She always preferred I wear braids as often as possible since she insisted on brushing out my white hip length hair every night despite my protests, saying it saved her from having to help her mother in the kitchen. I never understood why we wasted Raza's talents in the kitchens. Her skills as a spell worker were renowned. Even the goddess Sha had sent for potions from her from time to time. But Gretch insisted her mother had requested to be stationed here after the death of their father. He was the first of many to lose their lives when Immekus convinced King Aldrich, one of the first High Fae created by the gods alongside my parents to take up arms against our creators.

We would be nothing more than powerless humans if they hadn't come and bestowed their powers on the twelve. And as much as I hated being the daughter of one of the first, the thought of being human made me cringe. Their lives were so fragile, and they were often abused at the hands of those who

possessed power. It was something I would strive to change if I wasn't able to find my way out of marrying Lord Thadious.

With my hair finished and my appearance returned to that of a stuffy elitist, we were ready to go. My stomach was still in knots over Callum's imprisonment and my mind swirled with all the things I would say to convince my father to release him. I was so distracted I nearly walked into the door. Luckily, Gretch opened it in time, her hand at her belly as she motioned me forward into the long candle lit hall. She must have felt the same way I did, completely and utterly sick with worry.

I offered a small smile of comfort as my mother's private guard flanked us, before making our way down the golden veined marble floored hall. Our every step echoed into the massive sixth floor expanse that opened all the way to the ground level as we made our way to the dining hall.

Chapter 3

We had many meeting places within the palace, but the main dining hall had always been my favorite. Its polished bismuth crystal floors were breathtaking, and its tall arching iridescent windows displayed the pink sandy beaches below. It was a view even the gods couldn't ignore. Knowing my mother, that was the reason we were using it.

Today was not a day to become lost in its splendor, though. In fact, this meeting couldn't have had a darker premise. I could sense Mathious' power protecting the room that lay before us. An unnatural chill swept through the humid hall and up my spine as we neared its double doors, the buzz of his magic crackling through the air like static that only other magic users could feel.

My stomach was in knots as I pushed the door open. Gretch turned to leave, but I gripped her hand and pulled her inside with me, ignoring her slight protest. Mathious and my mother sat at the decorated table at the far end of the hall in front of the arched windows. It was filled with crystal platters full of boiled crab, and honey-glazed white fish garnished with sugared lemons and star fruit. Tall white candles lined its center, shadows flickering across their faces as they talked. I fought the urge to roll my eyes as we made our way toward them. *She really was aiming to impress.*

I took in the entirety of the over-decorated hall in front of us with its fuchsia walls and black Druzy Quartz ceilings and was surprised to see it so empty. The Crystal Palace, only second in riches to the Shimmering Isle with our many precious gems and crystal mines, was always hosting celebrations, even with war raging within our borders. This room was almost always filled with maids rushing about, serving the High Lords and Ladies of our wealthy city.

Today, however, it was completely empty. Only a short plump kitchen maid remained holding a pitcher of wine for them. Mathious clearly had not allowed the henchmen that followed my mother's every step to enter. But I wasn't surprised. His trust in others had diminished years ago when Immekus, his cousin and once best friend, betrayed him and his family by starting a rebellion.

My mother's eyes squinted as she took in Gretch's hand in mine. She hated to be in the presence of those she deemed below her and made no attempt to hide it. It was absurd, of course, because before Sha and Dune had imbued their powers on the twelve, my mother and father included, they had been nothing more than simple humans too. There were no palaces, high lords, or kings before. These lands had been ruled by the Natural Witches. All of these things were born in the years following the creation of the High Fae and Dragon Lord's.

It all began when twelve humans were chosen as playthings for Sha and Dunes children who'd grown bored growing up among the "simple" humans of Ilia.

So, in order to quell her children's complaints, Sha bestowed her power on six humans in her likeness, granting them powers of the mind and manipulation of the elements, thus creating a race of fae. Her magic transformed their physical appearances. Their simple human features replaced with eyes and hair of unnatural colors and pointed ears. Each blessed with advanced healing, unnaturally long life, and an insatiable taste for power. The first of her creations was known as First Generation or High Fae. Carrying the highest levels of magic within their blood. Second generations like me as well. Fae born in the later years had grown far weaker as the blood thinned over time, only adding to the over-importance my mother felt for herself.

The same was said of the Dragon Lords. Though their powers varied from ours. Dune had created a race of Shifters that could change into dragons, like his true form. They could create magical fire and held unnatural speed and strength with accelerated healing that surpassed even that of the fae. But their power and abilities were not without fault. They were

aggressive and desired to possess those around them. They were a dangerous race, driven by their need to claim and take what they wanted, but had mostly been unconcerned with the political workings of the realm until recent years. The most powerful of their kind now claiming castles and lands, putting a strain on the political structure of Ilia.

But the creations of Sha and Dune were nothing like the natural witches of this realm, whose powers were steeped in tradition and drawn from this world's very core. Though most witches were without active magic, and only wielded power through their coven's rituals, spells and practiced healing. The strongest of them could commune with the elements and animals on much larger scales than we could. So even though their spells took more time to create, their magic was connected to this world in a way the god's powers never could. This made them a threat to the gods, causing most to flee into the Dark Forest long ago to avoid being forced into promising allegiance.

"I hear you've had quite the frightful afternoon Princess Listitia," Mathious said, raising his wineglass, breaking me from my thoughts. The slight curl to his full lips told me he had not been fooled by my mother's lies. His black hair had grown since I'd seen him last and came to his bare shoulders and twisted around his sharp jaw and hazel eyes in a wild tangle of curls. The youngest of the gods was rarely seen fully dressed. He wore dark cotton slacks and open shoes on his feet. He was slender and pale, even more than me, but the power that rippled out around him set the room alight with luminescent gray and white swirls only those of magic could see. A silent vibration hummed through the air, intensifying as I moved to his side, which told me my friend and teacher was on high alert.

"It was a simple misunderstanding, I assure you both," I said, giving my mother a pointed stare. I pulled in next to him, Gretch taking her place by the kitchen maid, picking up a fresh pitcher of wine. Her eyes looked anywhere other than toward us. I hated making her uncomfortable, but I needed her with me. Even if I'd never admit it.

“His Grace has come with news of the war,” my mother said as she slid her long white nail around the top rim of her empty glass, causing a high-pitched ring she knew only I could hear. I’d always possessed keen hearing even for a fae and she’d used that to her advantage since I was little. A punishment she enjoyed because she could hide it from father.

“Allow me,” Mathious took the glass from her with a quick nod to Gretch, who jumped forward with more wine, the pitcher trembling as she filled it. Mathious’ hand softly folded over hers and my eyebrow shot straight up at the comfortable way in which he held her. She swallowed and dipped her head in thanks before rushing toward the kitchen door. His eyes stayed on her the entire time. I squinted at him. A knowing curl of his lip settled as he handed the wine back to my mother, who seemed annoyed at having to wait for the entire time it had taken Gretch to leave.

“Now, let’s get to the reason for my visit, shall we?” Mathious leaned back in his chair, a star fruit poked on the end of his knife. “I’m here to advise you that I will be passing through your lands.”

My mother straightened, her voice an octave higher than usual. “You mean, you aim to receive permission?” she said, sipping her wine.

“I will also require a maid and two horses, and I don’t recall asking permission.”

My mouth dropped open before I clicked it shut again. My mother had hung men for less. But Mathious was not a man, nor a king or high lord. He was above all of that. It was like the air was sucked from the room. It vibrated and crackled around us, an impending feeling of dread filling the room. I recognized the tendrils of his power curling through the air like silver snakes, circling the top of my mother’s head before touching her mind with her worst fears. Her eyes seemed to tremble a moment at the feeling, but she would never understand what it was. I had trained with him for years, and one lesson he had tried to teach me was not to enter their minds by force, but to slither into their subconscious and drop into their darkest memories undetected.

“Yes, of course,” she shifted in her seat. “Now, what of the war?”

I, too, had many questions about that. My father had worked hard to keep the Crystal Palace and its lands neutral throughout all of this, which meant our news was limited. The only battles ever fought by us were on our borders when passing armies came too close and threatened our crystal mines.

“My parents have fallen to Immekus.”

It was like I’d been kicked in the face. Stars popped behind my eyes at the news. It couldn’t be. *How could Immekus, half Dragon Lord, half god, destroy the most powerful beings ever to exist?*

Mother’s eyes bulged wide over her glass, her hand trembling. “How?” her voice was no more than a whisper.

For the briefest of a second, I saw Mathious’ pain flash in his eyes before he popped the star fruit into his mouth. He chewed slowly. “The Shade, as we call his kind, can consume the powers of others once they’re in their grasp.”

“How could he have gotten Sha and Dune in his grasp?” I blurted out.

He bowed his head, his fingers curling on the edge of the table. “After he murdered my brother, his own father, and consumed all that made him a god, Immekus was able to prevent my parents from using their magical concealments. They are no longer part of this realm.”

“I can’t believe it.” My mother’s voice trembled in a way I’d never thought possible.

“So, how do we kill him?”

“We don’t Listitia.” He stood, his eyes locked on my mother. “Send word ahead that I will pass through.”

She nodded. “Where do you mean to go?” Her back was rigid as she pushed her chair away from the table. “You could stay here?”

“Salencia.”

“The undiscovered Islands? You can’t be serious. Those people do not welcome the gods as we have. What can they offer that we cannot?”

“Mother!”

“Hush Listitia, you’re in enough trouble,” she hissed.

Mathious laughed, pacing around the table. “Listitia in trouble? Impossible.”

My mother rose as well. “I assure you, though she may look like a rose she is a thorn. And tomorrow I will be free of her.”

I jumped to my feet, my head spinning, the air constricting in my chest. She couldn’t mean what I thought. Mathious glanced my way for a moment. “It seems you two have things to discuss. Alert your patrols of my departure, I leave at dusk and I’d hate to send them wandering, unable to recall their names for interfering with me.”

With that, he vanished. My mother’s eyes bored into mine and I felt the blood rushing into my face, my heart pounding in my ears. *She couldn’t mean it. She couldn’t send me away now. What was the point if the gods had fallen?*

The hall door cracked open and in walked my father. My heart leaped at the sight of him. *He will make everything right again. He always does.* “Father!” I ran for him, my arms tight around his neck. His kiss fell on my forehead. “You can’t let her do it!”

My father’s eyes cut across the hall to my mother’s. “Come now, little one, let us sit and discuss matters.” The idea of sitting at a table with her again made my skin crawl. I wanted to be anywhere but here. Deep inside, I knew I loved her. She was my mother, but it had been buried below many layers of pain at her hands. For years, her words were like knives in my heart. The physical pain she caused with her mind powers nothing to the pain I felt when I looked into her eyes and saw nothing but disdain. My mother, the woman who should have loved me above all others, hated me.

“Oh yes, Goren, give her what she wants... like always.”

“Alora, sit!” My father’s voice boomed through the hall.

I had to sit in silence as my mother told him everything. She painted Callum like a rapist and me like a whore who asked for it. Well, she wasn’t wrong about one thing. I wanted him. But loving someone who was not of high status did not make me a whore, nor him a rapist. She prattled on and on as my fingers dug into a roll of bread, imagining it was her eyes I was gouging out. I glared at her across the long table. The air cracked around us with an iridescent static. She shot straight up with a shriek, gripping her temples. “Listitia, how dare you!” Blood ran from her nose. “How dare you attack me!” Her voice already recovered from the pain I’d unintentionally caused as she blotted away the blood with a napkin.

“Father, please. Callum is innocent. I commanded him to enter my room, but I swear, nothing happened.” I hated lying to him, but I had no choice. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I slid my hand over his, looking over at my mother. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to.”

“Of course, you didn’t. Years of lessons with the best teacher and you could neither fool a stable boy nor harm a mouse of your own will.”

“That’s not true.”

“I’m not talking about your silly knives. I’m talking about true power of the mind.”

“Enough, the two of you.”

My father’s fingers pinched between his eyes. Dark shadows lined his tired face, and now that I looked closely, I noticed a multitude of fine cuts littering his warm skin. His once brown beard was now speckled with ash. He had only been gone a month. What had caused such a drastic change? “Father, are you alright?”

“Yes, it’s nothing. Listitia, your mother had me look into that damn crystal again.” He pinched between his eyes, squeezing as he spoke. “Callum will not be executed, but he must face the whip. It’s forbidden for a guard to enter the room of a princess unless her life is in danger. All know this.”

I sucked in a breath. My eyes glossed with tears. “How many lashings?”

“One hundred,” he answered without a flicker of emotion. If I had any color in my face it was surely gone at that moment. No one had ever survived that many lashings. It was done with a silver whip, the tip adorned with a razor star.

A wicked grin pulled up on my mother’s wine-stained lips. I could practically feel her joy.

“Punish me instead! Let me take his lashings, please!”

My father’s eyes went wide, his forehead filling with lines. “You will do no such thing.”

“I can survive it. He’ll die! Surely you know this?”

He stood and came to my side, his hand moving for my arm, but I jerked away, ice in my eyes. His hand pulled back in surprise before straightening. “You are to go to your chambers and pack your things. Tomorrow you will ride to Tameria. The Dragon Lords have finally taken up arms in the war and if we are to survive, we need this alliance.”

“No.” My words trailed off, lost along with my will to draw breath.

This is all my fault. I ran from the hall as fast as my feet could carry me, the door slamming behind me as I left.

Chapter 4

Slamming my chamber doors, I leaned against them, sliding to the floor with my face in my hands. *One hundred lashings? Nobody had that many and survived. Callum's strong though, he had the blood of the witch, maybe...* The image of Callum strapped to a barrel, back torn wide, seized my mind and my heart raced. I couldn't risk it. I would never survive eternal life knowing I'd caused his death because of my own selfish needs.

Father had never refused me before, why had he now? I made my way to the window, trying to control my breath. The waves rolled in and out over the pink sands below, wiping away the footprints from the day. The world didn't know it was coming to an end. Time continued to move as if nothing had changed, as if my world wasn't falling down around me. This city didn't care that I was about to lose my love — after it happened, they would return to their homes, maybe discuss it over clam soup, and by the morning the streets would fill with peddlers and fishers would go to sea. They wouldn't think of him again or even care. It didn't matter who their king and queen were, let alone who their general was, only that they were protected and provided for. *Why should I give my life to the Dragon Lord for them?*

The door clicked open and Gretch stood, tense, waiting for my permission to enter. Permission she had never needed from the time we were five yet continued to ask for.

“Come in Gretch.” I met her midway across the room and was pulled into her arms. She was one of the very few people I allowed to touch me. Not because I didn't like people, but because it made me uncomfortable. Maybe it was because of the lack of kind touch from my mother, or perhaps it came from the years of angry glares I received from the people who lined the market streets. Father always loved to dote on me and take me shopping when he returned to the palace after

long expeditions. Dressed in gold and jewels, he paraded me through the streets, allowing me to pick anything I wanted. All the while, other children begged for meals and wore rags, their parents looking on. Guilt pinched my heart at the memory. It wasn't until I was older that I noticed their glares and my mother's vile comments about my father spending time with me instead of her, when I understood I wasn't loved by my people. That all I had was my father, Gretch and Callum.

"What news of my brother do you bring?" Gretch's words were strained.

"They mean for him to face the whip."

She stepped back, taking me in. "How many lashings?"

"Too many," I said, moving to sit, tracing the pink and white roses stitched into my purple bedding.

"How many Lisah?"

"He won't survive it."

She kneeled somberly at the end of the bed, each word careful. "You meant what you said before? That you'd break him out?"

My earlier words swirled in my mind. I never thought my father would refuse me. He had never my entire life. Mother said *no* to everything, but Father always came through. His ashen face floated through my mind. *He wasn't himself at all, was he? What had he seen in the Orb?* The news of Sha and Dune came to the forefront of my mind.

If I did this, I could never return. Callum would be hunted, and our people... I would abandon them and destroy any chance they had at an alliance that could save them. I swallowed the lump rising in my throat along with the guilt I felt over the answer coming so easily.

"Lisah." Gretchen shook my hands, bringing me back. I guess I was just as awful and selfish as my mother said, because there was nothing that would stop me from coming for Callum.

“Yes, I meant it.” I stood. With my future as queen tossed to the side, a weight lifted from my heart.

Gretch smiled and walked to the closed door. “Good.” She opened it and in walked Mathious. My eyebrow quirked up in surprise.

“What are you doing here?”

He moved behind Gretchen, sliding his arms around her, resting them across her stomach. My mouth went slack at the sight.

“What have you two been keeping from me?” But I already knew. It was written all over them. A look I had seen a thousand times on mine and Callum’s faces.

Gretch stammered. “I hope you’ll forgive me. Our relationship is not one most would approve of.” Her long lashes batted, her eyes moving away from mine. Mathious remained wrapped around her with a smile. The energy radiating off him was infectious.

“Oh, my gods.” I giggled, “You should have known you could tell me.” I rushed to her and took her hands in mine as she at last looked up. “You are my best friend. Don’t think for one second, I would’ve ever considered you less than. As a matter of fact—” I glared at Mathious. “—I am not sure he is good enough for you.” The Mathious I knew from training stood before me now, his laughter shaking the walls.

“I would have to agree,” he said, planting a kiss on her pink cheek. “I plan to spend eternity trying though,”

“Stop it,” she gushed, before they shared a deep kiss that made me blush. I was so happy for them I had almost forgotten the situation at hand.

“You didn’t come here for my mother’s permission, did you?”

The energy in the room shifted, and Mathious ushered Gretch onto my bed. “I cannot have more than one reason to visit?”

“You hate palaces. Stop holding back. Whatever is going on, I’m in.” I cut a look at Gretch. “You can trust me.”

She pulled his hand to her belly with a nod. “I’m with child.” Her lips pursed nervously, and Mathious’ face lit from chin to hair. I had never seen him like this before. Usually, he was a bit indifferent, but now it was like a fire had been lit within him.

“When? How? How far along are you?”

“Listitia, I visit Gretchen as I please. It could have been any time.” His lip curled. “Do you need me to explain the *how*?”

“Mathious!” Gretchen squealed and slapped him playfully.

“No!” I laughed. “This is cause for celebration!” My mood darkened instantly. The realization that no one could ever know about this... and that soon I would commit treason. “I’m going to get Callum out, I promise.”

“How do you plan to do that without your mother seeing?” Mathious asked.

He was right. I hadn’t thought of my mother’s foresight or her damned crystal ball. I wouldn’t get fifteen feet from the dungeon. “I can’t, but you could. She would never see you if you cloaked yourself.”

“This is true, but I cannot. Things are far worse than I let on to your viper of a mother.”

“Worse?” What could be worse than two murdered gods and Callum being imprisoned?

“After Immekus destroyed my parents, he moved Aldrich’s armies through the valley, destroying the witch villages. It would seem he has promised Aldrich, Aldmoor Palace for his cooperation.”

Gretchen’s head dropped and every part of me wanted to go to her, but it was not me she needed. *How had I missed them?* “I don’t understand?”

“My father betrayed my mother with a witch named Ravina. Took her against her will. Through that act, he fathered a son.” His hand squeezed Gretch’s shoulder gently.

“Now Immekus seems to have no other desire then to free this realm of his family’s bloodline.”

“Immekus killed the child?”

“The babe was still at his mother’s breast when he pried him from her arms.”

Gretch’s hands shook in her lap, and tears started rolling down her cheeks.

“You’re not saying he will come for your baby?”

Mathious sucked in a breath, the back of his hand wiping away her tears. “I believe he would crack her open as she sits here and now without a second thought. Therefore, I cannot use my powers and we must leave tonight.”

I wanted to smack him for being so callous, but that was Mathious. It simply was not in him to placate others. My sweet Gretch, the witch with the kindest heart I had ever met, and now she faced this. To be hunted by a Shade. “Why don’t you travel with her the way you do? You could be there in a moment!”

“The baby would not survive. The act is stressing on both mother and child.”

“So, we ride there. Together!”

“This is Gretchen’s wish.” Mathious sat beside her and held her.

I’d never seen her shaken like this, but I supposed if a monster wanted to kill my child, I would be the same. “I promise he will never touch your baby, Gretch.” My eyes landed on Mathious taking in his worried appearance.

“We will leave as planned and wait by the pass for you. If you have not come by the time the second moon dips, we will assume you’ve failed.”

“You can’t help at all? My glamour is still weak, my mother — she is...”

“It’s true, your power of the mind lacks confidence, but did I not spend a year perfecting your talent of water and the sing

of your blade for nothing?”

It was true. My ability with the sword was fierce. I'd spent years training with the blade and knife to dual Callum. And my ability to control water... I was born with it. It came as naturally as breathing but left little room for the survival of my opponents, so I tried to avoid using it. I swallowed hard, taking in a steady breath. There was no other way. I'd never harmed anyone before, but the thought of losing Callum or Mathious' powers calling that monster to Gretch... I had no other choice.

“You must steal the Orbuculum from your mother's chambers. If you fail to procure it, she will know my plans and I do not trust that viper with the life of anyone's but her own,” he said.

“Will Queen Alora not just assume Lisah followed us?”

“She will, but by the time Immekus finds his way here, I will be ready for him.”

Nausea threatened to overcome me. I swayed for a moment, catching myself on my dressing table, noting my reflection in the mirror. My silver dress flowed, and my hair reached past my hips. This would not work. I grabbed the dagger from my drawer and sliced through a handful of hair, taking it to my shoulders. Gretch screeched, running up behind me.

“Why?”

Mathious' voice curled through the room, a tingle filling the air with an exhilarating thrall. “Listitia is going into battle, that's *why*, my dearest.”

I twisted over my shoulder at him. “Go make your horses ready and be sure to make a spectacle of your departure so they see you've left before what I'm about to do.”

He gave us both a wink and was out of my chamber door in an instant, set on his portion of the plan. Now, how the hell was I going to steal a future-telling crystal ball' from a Mind Fae?

Chapter 5

Mathious held to the plan and left with Gretch, allowing me time to sneak up to the tenth floor. Hours had passed before the castle finally fell silent, the scent of extinguished kitchen fires filtering through the dimly lit halls as I made my way toward my mother's chamber. It was the most guarded floor in the entire palace, since my father's room was just around the corner. I passed several sleeping guards and used glamour to conceal myself. If they awakened, they would see nothing more than a mouse scurrying across the floor, *hopefully*.

I took in a breath, trying to steady my erratic heart as I stood in front of her room. The doors were closed for the evening and the guards that usually flanked her chambers were gone. *Perhaps she went to father's room for the evening?* A weight lifted at the thought of an easy snatch and run. I pushed open the door, a slight creak echoing into the darkness that lay ahead. Stepping inside, I found it empty. Her silken white sheets were undisturbed, and a low fire burned in its hearth.

Everything was in its place as usual. The white marble floors gleamed, the high arches draped in fresh flowers. A row of crowns with jewels in every color decorated the dressing room wall and a portrait of her hung on the adjacent wall, greeting me as I stood there. A thief in the night. Her cold eyes glared down at me as I inched forward into the room I had never been permitted to pass the threshold of. A chill ran through me as I moved into the center of the wide open space, my eyes falling on a long table under the window. The moon's light cast down on her Orbuculum, the light cascading onto the stone wall behind it. I stepped toward it and the sconces on her walls burst to life, setting the room alight.

"So, this is it, then? You mean to rob us of the only thing left to defend us?" she said, stepping into the light from the dark corner she'd been standing in.

“Mother!” The blood drained from my face, my heart hammering in my ears.

“I swear, if I had not birthed you myself, I would never believe you were mine.”

I was frozen to the spot, fear crippling me. “You left me with no choice!”

“No choice? To betray your house... your own mother? I’ve given birth to seven children and miscarried more than I can count to give your father an heir and you’re all I have to show for it? An ungrateful daughter with no care for her duties!”

Her words cut through me like a blade. I knew she’d suffered through her failed pregnancies. I’d watched as she wept over the graves of brothers I’d never get to meet.

“None of it matters now. He’s replaced us.” She said, stopping only a foot from me.

“What do you mean?”

“Has he not told you of the new wife he brought home? One of those half-breed fae whores from Tithe.”

Shifting back on my heel, I was frozen, trying to decipher if she was telling the truth. *My father would never do that... would he?*

“Such surprise.” She laughed, but it sounded more like a forced cough, not reaching her eyes. “Did you not notice you were no longer wrapped around his finger? As a woman, you must learn that we are all replaceable in the eyes of men.”

I couldn’t believe it. Memories of him walking through the market with me on his shoulders flashed behind my eyes, and the first time he’d brought me with him on a journey through Ilia... He’d stopped the carriage to pick me flowers in every new region. “You’re lying!” I snapped.

“Have I taught you nothing?” Her eyes roamed my silver armor and short tied back hair as she stepped toward me. “You look ridiculous. Do you really mean to give up your status for

a man?" Her fingers pulled at the strand of hair that lay on my cheek. I slapped it away, backing up.

"I need the Orbuculum, mother. I'm not leaving without it." My left hand curled around the hilt of my sword. The diamond at its tip gleamed with the burst of my power rushing into it.

A wide smile flitted across her face as she spoke. "You're just as much a fool as your father." She waved her hand. A glamour I had not tasted fell down around us, revealing five armed guards, swords drawn and ready. "Well, come get it then," she hissed, walking to the side of her bed out of the way, her long white nails curling around the silver post. "Seize her."

They lunged for me in unison, making me dive to the floor to miss their grasp. Rolling, I came to my feet again, spinning. My sword sliced through the closest guard's face, the bottom half of his jaw landing on the floor in a bloodied puddle. The others rushed my way. I ran and leaped onto the wide window frame and pierced the neck of the next one. They may have been trained guards, but they were human. Nowhere near as fast as me.

I flipped frontward, rolling onto the stone. Three guards rushed toward me as I ducked into my mother's covered dressing area, revealing a steaming bath that could only have been filled a short time ago. Crashing through the room divider that separated her bathing area from the rest of her room, they came for me, the narrow entrance allowing only one to face me. Our swords clanging together, I met his swing for swing as the other guard remained trapped behind him.

"Do *try* not to kill her. I haven't finished with her yet." My mother's voice sounded entertained.

I slipped, trying to get around the end of the bath, his sword slicing my cheek, taking advantage of my misstep. Wiping the back of my hand across my face, I felt my blood smear. Gasping in a shaking breath, I lifted my sword just in time as they began pounding me with blows, my arm shaking with each strike. The agonizing clang of our swords drowned out all sounds.

The largest guard swung his sword over his head like he was swinging a hammer. My bones vibrated as I blocked each strike, coming harder each time. The smaller guard squeezed into the tight space and attacked to my right, cracking into my armor. The feeling in my arm was gone instantly. I ran around the bath, pulling the water from it in a swift motion, making a whip form in my hand. I flicked it through the air, cutting through them in one fluid motion.

The large, bearded man's upper half slid from his hips onto the floor. The smaller guard's eyes were wide, moving to mine for a moment. Death hadn't been instant for him. He moved his arm to reach for me, the pressure pulling him apart, his top half sliding off onto the white marble floor.

I met my mother's surprised stare from across the room and ran for the Orbuculum. The crystal ball barely fit in the palm of my hand. Visions and flashes of blood and stone and screams popping into my mind as I held it. I stashed it in my satchel, running for the door.

"Don't you dare!" she shrieked, running toward me. I pointed my sword at her as we met in the center of the room, circling each other with the door to my back. All I had to do was turn and run.

"If you take that, you have condemned us twice!"

The door burst open behind me, my name on the lips of the new arrival. "Listitia stop!" I turned to see an armed guard, his sword mid-swing at my throat. I dodged him, slicing into the side of his neck, his body thudding to the floor.

A low laugh from behind made a chill slide up my spine. I turned to face my mother again.

"You think this is funny?" I said through labored breaths.

"It seems everyone gets what they deserve."

"What are you talking about?"

"I saw your future girl. It will be everything you ever wanted," she said as laughter lit her eyes.

I shook my head, casting my eyes away from the woman who was meant to love me but never had realizing there was nothing I could have done to change it. Yet still, it hurt. “Goodbye, mother.” I turned, the breath lost from me like I’d fallen from a high branch landing on my back.

“Father! No, no, no... how?” My mother’s laughter grew again. “How could you!” I screamed at her. My father’s body lay on the floor bleeding. He was unarmed. The slice of my blade had opened the side of his neck, his hand cupped at it. His face, ashen, eyes wide on me as I dropped to my knees putting pressure on the wound. “Father no! I didn’t mean to — I didn’t see.” His other hand covering my lips, his tear-filled eyes on mine. I glared over my shoulder at her again. “Why?”

She moved toward us slowly, her long shimmering gown dancing in the candlelight as she kneeled at my father’s head. “No one replaces me.”

His eyes were on her as his last breath slid between his lips. Her sharp eyes flicking to mine, her hand rolling open between us, revealing her open palm. “Now, give me the Orb.”

I could hardly breathe. My father’s empty eyes stared past us. *I killed him. He’d come here to stop this, to save me from myself, and I slit his throat.* I gagged, choking on the vomit rising in my throat as my body trembled. “I can’t give it to you.” I sobbed, my words hardly audible through my tears as I stood.

She lunged for me, but I was too fast. I pulled father’s blood from the floor, covering her in it, freezing her where she stood.

I left her, frozen in a crimson cage with my father dead at her feet. I slipped into one of the secret royal passages that hid behind a painting of our family. The stairs wound down in total blackness, a landing where each floor began. But I dared not stop, my hand sliding on the rough stone wall to keep from falling. The total and complete nothingness that surrounded me in the dank stairwell was a warm companion to my mind. The emptiness intertwined with the painful agony raging in my throat. It hurt to breathe. Every inch of me was numb but my

mind. That was a blur of hate and blame. A torture that ate at me till the very last step.

There would be a guard on the other side of the door I sought, so I pulled my sword from my side and attempted to push the door. A sharp pain flared like a knife cutting through my free arm. I couldn't lift it. My sob filled the darkness as I pulled the arm into the support of my satchel, resting it on top. A slight relief to the burning pain that now screamed at my side.

I kicked open the door, knocking the guard to the floor, and smashed the hilt of my sword into his head, knocking him unconscious. Making my way into the dungeon was easy. The night watch comprised of one doorman. I pulled the large rusted keyring from the wall and bolted down the first corridor. Rusted iron cells lined the dirty gray stone halls and rats scattered as I ran toward the single burning torch at the farthest end. My breaths echoed around me, every inch of me attuned to the surrounding room.

I ripped the torch from the wall, tearing around the last bend. Revealing the last cell.

He was asleep in the dirt wearing nothing but his leather pants, the smell of moldy bread and an overfilled chamber pot wafting toward me. "Callum, wake up," I hissed through the bars as I turned the key, unlocking them.

He jumped to his feet, eyes bulging as he took in my blood stained armor.

"Lis! Paramour, what have you done?"

"Come on, we don't have the time. We have to leave before they notice."

He grabbed my shoulders, gazing into my eyes, but I winced back in pain.

"Until they notice what?"

Just then, the bell rang. "We have to go," I cried.

He pulled the sword from my hand sheathing it at his side, his eyes tight with concern.

“Come on,” he said.

I followed behind him in a daze as he led us out from the dungeons and into the forest. Light flooded more and more palace windows as we fled into the trees.

“What happened?”

“I killed my father!” I sobbed, tears flowing freely down my cheeks. “We need to make it to the pass of the Isle before the second moon wanes.” I knew I wasn’t making sense, and that he must have had a thousand questions, but I just didn’t have it in me to explain everything now. His eyes filled with sorrow as he took in my appearance.

“Oh, paramour,” he whispered, before sweeping me into his arms and sprinting for the pass.

My head lay against him, the steady thud of his heart and quickened breath in my ear as he ran a soft caress on my damaged soul. Everything around us was only a blur. The pain in my body was dull compared to what raged inside. *I’m so sorry, Father, please forgive me.*

“It’s going to be okay, I’ve got you.”

Chapter 6

My head rocked against Callum's chest as I came to, the warmth of his arm curled around my waist a comfort as I took in our new surroundings.

The patter of rain on leaves sounded around us. Warm drops speckled my cheeks as the water made its way through the arch of trees that covered the path to Naurin, the first and wealthiest seaside town of the Shimmering Isle.

The air was thicker now than when we'd first found my mare at the Isle Pass last night. We hadn't made it in time to meet them, but they'd left her safely tethered behind a tree. The wrinkled note was soft between my fingers as I listened to Nyra's hoof falls as we rode. The image of Gretch's handwriting in my mind. A single word was all she'd had time to scrawl before she'd tucked it under the saddle.

Sapphire

A smile pulled at the corners of my mouth. *She'd known I'd get him out. Even when I had no faith in myself... she'd known.*

I slid my uninjured hand over Callum's, letting him know I was awake. His kiss instantly pressed against my hair. "Paramour," he whispered. I tilted my head back to meet his lips. He tasted of salt and sea. "How are you, my love?"

A question that struck like a blow. My father's icy stare flashed through my mind. "I'm sore," I said, casting my eyes toward the sandy path ahead, trying to downplay the throbbing pain in my arm. "How long have I been asleep?"

"We should reach Naurin within the hour."

I could see it now in the light that snuck through the trees, the white lights changing to a soft pink. I'd slept all night and day. Dusk was upon us, and my body was stiff and sore. I longed for the comfort of a bed.



Night had fallen as we came upon the gates of Naurin, its tall marble pillars flanking our entry as we stepped onto the white marbled street. The street-side lanterns quivered in the easterly sea winds as we made our way toward the Ivory Inn. Far from the main square, the Inn was owned by a wealthy witch named Lamaria and was avoided by the Selk people of the Isle as royals often stayed there when traveling. Gretchen's mother had taken us when we were small, after my father's carriage was attacked by a group of bandits. Raza concealed us and took us to the Inn, as Lamaria was her close friend. They had rushed us to a room for the night and gave us bread and sweet jellies straight away. It was the best night of all my childhood. We ate and laughed and bounced on the beds. No one ordered me to stop or sit like a princess. Raza and Lamaria told us stories about the way of the Natural Witches. They told

us how they once worshiped the light and dark, the moon and the sea before the coming of the gods. Stories of how the wind and rain and animals were all connected with us and that those of great power could command them in a way the gods never could. It was fascinating and, before long, Gretch and I had fallen fast asleep. It seemed like a million years ago now.

The street was empty as we stopped in front of the Ivory Inn. Its white walls caught the shimmer of the moon off the waters behind it. All was silent except for the sound of the tides and the chirp of crickets. I hopped off Nyra, grunting from the pain in my arm, running my good hand down her side, the bright white of her damp from the heat and the effort of carrying us both for so long. Callum dismounted next, rubbing her neck, thanking her for her hard work before his eyes found mine.

“She is a beautiful animal, Lis.”

That she was. I had chosen her myself. Pure white from head to hoof and the palest blue eyes. She was a sight like no other. No other horse was as perfect as Nyla. “Thank you.”

“We will need to hide her. She will not go unnoticed.”

He was right. But where? Looking, there was nothing but trees swaying in the breeze. Other horses slept, tethered together, brown and gray and black, none like her. She stood out like a beacon. Even with the Inn being set off the main path, this would be the first place searched because of its location.

“They have no stables here, Lis. We need to cover her in mud and take the saddle to our room.”

I grimaced at him, but he had already gone to work smearing her gorgeous long wisps of white in the mud. I was sure it would protect her from the buzzing pests and keep her cool, but I hated it.

Once he finished, we watered her, and she went to work on a thick patch of grass. It wasn't enough, but it would have to do for the night. Every inch of me hurt. The silver armor I wore was heavy and stained in blood. Even with the Inn

appearing to be full of sleeping patrons, I would be hard to miss. “What are we going to do?”

Callum stepped to me, his hand sliding to my cheek. “You’ll need to trust me now. Things are far more dangerous outside the palace walls.”

“I do trust you, but I’ve been outside the walls.” I snorted and pain shot through my shoulder as I did.

“You have been outside with an entourage of guards, my love, never alone and always under the protection of your father’s crown.”

Annoyance bubbled in my chest at his comment, but he wasn’t wrong. I’d never been allowed to go anywhere unattended. He pulled a dirty blanket from one of the other horses’ backs. “Wrap this around yourself and when we enter, do not speak or look at anyone.”

“I know how to handle myself.” He just nodded, wrapping me in the putrid-smelling blanket. “Do you have any coins? I didn’t have time to take any gold.” I asked.

He opened the door and guided me into the dimly lit room. Empty white tables filled the space and a young man leaned against the pristine bar, fast asleep.

Callum rapped his knuckles on the wall, startling him, and part of me couldn’t help but feel sorry for waking him.

He jutted straight up with scruffs of red hair poking out in all directions. His skin was freckled and his eyes black against the dark of the room, the light of the fire flickering in his pupils as took us in.

“Sorry to wake you young sir, but me and my lady need a room.”

His eyes roamed over Callum’s dirt covered body and then fell on me. I looked to the floor right away, pulling the blanket tight around my head hiding my hair.

“You can’t afford to stay here.”

“How much?” Callum asked.

“Five silvers,” he said in a slight tone of annoyance.

Callum pulled his hand from his pocket, dropping three coppers on the counter. “This is all I have tonight, but tomorrow I can bring you the rest.”

“I guess you didn’t hear me. Five silvers now, or you can take your reeking whore back outside to ram.”

I didn’t have time to move. He had him pulled onto the bar by his shirt collar.

“What did you call her?”

I rushed to his side, my good hand sliding over his biceps. “It’s fine. He didn’t mean it. He’s just tired.” I leaned in, my eyes locking on the young man’s. They were wide and round and bulging. A slight tremble vibrated on his lip. I fell into his stare, deeper until I felt the softness of his human mind brush against my own as a crackle of static filled the surrounding air. “What he meant to say was that one copper was all he needed, as most of the nights passed.” I held his stare. Picturing his agreement in my mind, soft and pleasurable, the word yes felt on his tongue.

“Ye—Yes...” he stammered.

Callum’s hands slowly unfolded from his collar. The young man straightened, speaking in a rush. “One copper is plenty. Most of the night has passed,” he repeated, his eyes glazing as he swiped the copper piece from the counter and pulled a key from the wall.

“Thank you, that is most kind.” I took it from him gently, the room number etched on its round flat handle. I was desperate for the comfort of a room and to get my injured arm out of this sling.

“It’s the top floor, miss. One of the best rooms in the entire inn. We usually save it for the royal ones who pass through.” He smiled as he sat leaning back in his seat, falling asleep straight away.

I beamed at Callum, whose chest still rose and fell rapidly from the altercation. I pulled him with me to the stairs at the corner of the room, still surprised by my success. In the

palace, I'd mostly practiced glamour on other fae. It had been all but impossible. But here, now, on a human. It felt easy. Exciting even, and I couldn't believe our luck. I remembered this room. Number three. Last time I'd stayed in room one, but I had to imagine they were similar. We reached the top, my legs trembling and my arm screaming at my side with burning pain. All I wanted was to curl up with a bottle of wine, drink away my pain, and fall into a dark sleep.

The key turned in the lock with a loud click and the door creaked open, revealing a wide, open space. It was dark, but the light of the moon lit the room just enough. A long table was at its center on a furry gray rug and the bed at the back wall faced the washroom with a balcony to the left. It was clean and well-maintained. Relief washed over me as we stepped inside, locking the door behind us.

Callum had the fire lit within moments, and several candles as well. The furniture was white marble and the sheets a sapphire blue. They decorated the table with sapphire bowls and glasses and a large sapphire crescent moon sat upon the mantle. A smile swept across my face as I watched him. His eyes worked over the elegant pieces.

"This is how you knew what she meant?" He motioned to the table and mantle.

"It was something that me and your sister contemplated stealing." I giggled. Pointing to the sapphire moon. "The other room has a full moon."

He took it down, examining it. "They are like our moons. One full and two crescents." He smiled, setting it back down.

"Well, I've only seen this room and the other. I wouldn't know about room two's decor."

He moved to me, pulling the blanket from my shoulders. "Trust me, my love. I come from a home where the old ways are the only way."

"I do trust you." We stared at each other for a moment, his eyes looking into me. I closed them, looking away. I didn't want him to see. To know the pain I felt. To feel guilt for what

I'd done to free him. I didn't regret saving him, and the thought of him thinking I did, I couldn't handle. My pain was *my* punishment to carry, not his.

"Lis." His hand curled around mine. Leading me to the bed, easing me down. He slid my boots from my feet and removed my armor piece by piece, dropping them to the floor with soft clangs. This was the first time I could see it. My right arm was black and blue, but the broken skin had already repaired itself. His fingers pressed along the edges of the bone, working from elbow to shoulder before he let out an inaudible sigh. "It's not broken. But the muscle is badly injured. Your bone is bruised."

It felt broken, but I trusted his analysis. He had seen more battles than I liked. He disappeared into the washroom, leaving me to myself. When he'd returned, his eyes seemed to darken as they took in my new mood. I couldn't help it. Everything inside of me seemed to flip between raging pain and a silent, empty, nothingness.

He sat by my side with a bowl of water and a cream-colored cloth, dipping it into the water and ringing it out. Naked and covered in blood, I sat, allowing him to wipe my skin clean. The water became muddied quickly, forcing him to change it again and again before the white of my skin shone, but the stain on my soul was unreachable.

My body felt like iron. To lift my legs was a chore, every inch of me aching. His touch was like a velvet caress that reached deep into my shattered heart, smoothing over its broken edges one piece at a time, only to be undone again by the guilt that burned inside.

After he finished cleaning himself, he joined me under the sheets and I didn't fight his touch or refuse his kiss as he lay beside me, but lovemaking was the farthest thing from my mind. *I deserved no such pleasures.*

The pain I felt in my soul weighed on me like the walls of a dark room closing in. Yet his kiss was like the light, holding back the walls at the last moment before they came crashing down. He was gentle. His lips light on my cheeks and eyes. Tears rolling onto my pillow, only to be kissed away. My chest

felt as if it was going to cave in or break open. His kisses trailed down my neck as if he could feel it, like he could taste my heartache and wished to take it away. He was silent and slow. Trailing my skin with his love. Breathing me in, drawing the blackness from inside me.

He moved on top of me. His hands clasped my face. “Share it with me, Lis, share your pain.” His mouth covered mine, and he breathed in my breath, slipping his tongue into my mouth, coaxing mine to his own. I felt him harden between my legs, rocking against my body. His hand traced my skin from my hip to my breast. A tingle stirred within me. A light in the dark flickered at his touch. I pushed it away. I had no right to feel anything but the night. He turned me back after I twisted from him.

“Let me in.”

“I don’t deserve it.” I said, as I turned my face into the pillow.

“You are not to blame for this.” His fingers gently turned me back to him. “Look at me.” His kiss danced across my brow and to my lips. “You saved me. You saved us.”

“I know. But I’ve condemned them all. I killed him.”

“You did not! She did.”

My voice trembled. “He looked so scared.”

“Shh.” He stroked my hair, my face, wiping away my tears. “Come now, my love. You mustn’t think of it. He wouldn’t want that.” His lips dusted across mine. “Share it with me,” he whispered. He was like a warm summer wind blowing through the icy abyss. I felt his love reaching into me. The draw of his kiss trying to pull the black cold from within, but there was too much. It went on forever inside, like an inky pool. Like an endless night had taken up home inside me and he was the singular star in the distance, too far for me to reach, yet... the only thing that kept it from swallowing me.

“I will hold you till the dust covers our bones. If that’s what you want, we don’t need to do anything. I’m just afraid to lose you.”

He inched closer to me, pulling me into his embrace, kissing my forehead. The need of my body was growing despite my mind's attempts to fight it. My cheek rested on his hand as his eyes searched mine.

“I know what it is to lose someone, to feel as you do. I won't leave you to its grasps. I won't let you chain yourself to this guilt.”

I could see his desperation, his need to save me, to find the light of my soul. A light I was sure was gone from my eyes. I gave him a brief nod of permission, pulling his hand to my heart, and then my breast. I didn't want to deny him, even if I knew I could... if I wanted to. But somewhere deep inside, I hoped he might reach me.

His lips pressed against mine, his hand massaging my breast and dipping between my legs, sliding inside slowly, gently before he moved his hardness between my thighs. Positioning himself between my folds, moving against my clit. His tongue massaged mine in a rhythmic dance that matched his hips, and my flesh heated, my body awakening to his touch. “Share it with me.”

He wanted my pain. He wanted to draw it from me like venom from a snake's bite, but I didn't know how to let it go. How to forgive myself for what I'd done. To let myself feel pleasure or love when right now all I wanted to do was cling to the pain... wallow in it. Revel in its icy touch because deep down, that is what I believed I deserved. But my body's need was calling. A flutter began in my stomach, reaching my core. He sucked my breast into his mouth, pulling at me, suckling me until I could no longer ignore it. I rocked against his shaft, pushing it into my opening.

He moved inside torturously slow, a mere inch with each rhythmic roll of his hip, till it was all I could feel, all I could think of. I needed him. Kissing him back, I rolled against him, my low moan at his ear as he slid fully inside, filling the empty void I felt.

We moved together, full of want and need, pulling the length of himself almost completely out before sliding fully

inside, his palms holding my face. His kiss deepened, my mind blurred, and my body filled with pleasure. The low rumble in his throat made me clench around him, coiling tighter as he moved faster until I came undone beneath him.

Collapsing around each other, he kissed the dried stains of my tears, his warm eyes the light in the dark. It was as if the world had fallen away and all that remained was us. His love circled me and wrapped me in his protective embrace. Our foreheads pressed together, our limbs wrapped around each other as we drifted into sleep.

Chapter 7

Watching Callum with the pirates for the last hour had been a relief. Seeing him laugh again, even for a moment, was a comfort. The last two weeks of hiding and waiting for Gretchen to appear had been daunting. Both of us were terrified of what may have come of her, but he insisted we had to move on. Now, here at the Tavern of Sands, I sat on the outside deck, baking in the sun as the selkie women warmed themselves by the water and I sipped an exotic liquor as Callum threw knives for coins.

The pirates were good. I'd give them that. Four of them remained in the game. They were dressed in sleeveless leather vests and had unkempt beards and rings of tobacco smoke circling their heads. Most had hit their marks in the knife toss and so far, it had remained friendly with each of the men winning a match here and there. Callum still managed to work us closer to dinner with each throw, which I was grateful for. If only I could muster the courage to use my glamour again. But we'd both agreed that if I got caught, I was too much of a risk.

I was looking forward to sleeping in a room tonight. The last five days had been hard, sleeping in the dirt as we traveled. But without coin, and not wanting to draw attention, it had been the best option, until it wasn't. I couldn't bear another night in the sands. The smell of my body followed me like a cloud. Callum swore it was normal, that it was nothing compared to what he'd seen while traveling with our armies, but for me, to go unbathed for so long... I hated to admit it, but it was weighing on me, and as we passed Sands Tavern, I'd become no more than a whining toddler. So here we were, in disguise, my hair dyed light purple with some lavender root I'd gotten at the Inn's apothecary, and Callum's hair shaved down to his scalp because I'd thrown a tantrum. I had been insistent and selfish in my demand. A small shadow of guilt hung in the back of my mind as I watched him across the room. Despite how the day had begun, he at least looked like

he was having fun. We'd spent the last of our coins on drinks and entered him into a competition. The prize... seven gold pieces and a room for the night. Something we needed desperately if we were going to make it all the way to Salencia. Plus, I seriously needed a bath. I was tempted to strip with the Selkie women and enter the sea that lay before us. Its white sand and aqua waters rushed onto the beach and receded into the sea in a rhythmic dance. The women were practically naked, some still as seals, while others lay together eyeing foolish sailors who passed by on the docks. The Selkies were a free-spirited people, and I enjoyed their company even if I was still too nervous to join them. Watching them live, the laughter and their freeness was like a tall glass of water on a hot summer's day.

“Lis, Lis, Lisah! I need you. We need partners for the final round!”

Callum was breathless as he ran up to me. More like the young man I had fallen in love with years ago than I had seen him in ages. His eyes were bright and wild. “They will allow a woman to compete?” I asked, eyebrow raised.

A grin swept across his lips. “Their mistake.” He laughed, pulling me from my seat and flipping off my hair wrap. “Take this off, paramour. We've seen no one from the mainland in three days.” It had been Callum who suggested the appearance changes and had insisted on my cloak all this time, so if he felt we were safe, who was I to argue? I tossed it into the chair a bit embarrassed about my outfit. But at least my brown woven crop top let my body breathe. My slacks came to my knees and were torn at the bottom, my waist pack tight around my hips, and a dagger tucked at my thigh. They stared at me as I approached, and Callum walked tall as he introduced me. “This is my partner, Lisah.”

The man with shaggy brown hair stepped forward, a cigarette hanging from his thin lips. His one eye was whited out. “You ever thrown a blade?” He asked, reaching for my arm in greeting.

“I have.” I grinned, taking his arm firmly.

“I’m Del, and that’s my brother Ellis.” he said with a smirk. His brother was skinny, and his clothes were tattered, but when he turned to us, his wide toothless smile was so bright I couldn’t help but choke on a laugh.

“See something funny?” Del barked. Callum stepped between us, pressing Del back, and an apology was fast on my lips before Del doubled over, rolling with laughter, patting Callum’s shoulder. “Calm down, I was only joking.”

“Hi!” Ellis ran up to us. “So, you’re our opponent, then?” He stuck out his long, dirty arm and greeted Callum first. “We usually win this, ya know... once a week.” He turned to me with a slight bow. “But if we have to lose, I couldn’t be happier to have done it to someone as pretty as you.”

Callum and I stared at each other for a moment. A tavern full of pirates and sailors and some of the sea’s hardest fishermen and we found the two oddest men in the entire place. Typically, women competing in anything like this had been heavily frowned upon, but they seemed at ease. I looked over at myself, trying to ignore my own stench, working to understand how this kid found me appealing in any way as I walked over to the line.

It was a simple game, really. Throw your dagger into a wooden target, each ring earning your points. The closer to the center, the higher the point. One challenge was that with each round, you must take a step back. Partners always rotated and if you missed, you lost a dagger. Each of us began with two. So, losing a blade was essentially like losing the game.

I’d seen it before. This game was popular in some of my palace’s lower levels, but I’d never played. I’d never been allowed to mingle with the common folk in any way, but knife throwing was a bit of a hobby of mine. Sitting in the palace bored out of my mind, it was something I had done since I was a girl.

“Show ‘em what you got, Lis!” Callum yelled over the crowd, clapping from behind me, sucking down his third ale. I shook the nerves from my wrist, pulled the daggers from the table, and made my throws. None hit the center, but solid

points. A sharp whistle sang through the air as Del came up behind me.

“Not bad at all, for a first throw.” He clicked his tongue, pulling in a long drag of his cigarette as I returned from collecting my blades and rested against Callum. His arms pulled around me, his nose nuzzling my neck, his kisses trailing toward my cheek.

Del’s throws were powerful. His blades landed closer than mine, but still no one had managed the center that was worth a cool one hundred points. Next up was Callum. His throws had deadly precision. Although he had missed the center, both his blades landed a mere centimeter from each other, earning him double points.

“Ye big brother, we got ourselves a game!” Ellis yelled, rushing up for his turn, slopping ale down his front. He was unkempt and vulgar, and I loved it. He was an energy like no other I had come across, and his brother looked at him adoringly despite his varied insults as Ellis made his throws. He was good, too. This would not be as easy as I’d expected.

An hour later and we were neck and neck, the targets getting harder to hit. I had missed entirely my first throw, losing my blade. Luckily, so had Del. Ellis had done well and Callum had made up for my miss giving us a strong lead.

“So princess, where’d you learn to throw knives like that?” Del asked.

Callum spit out his ale at the question. We both froze. Del’s bushy brows pulled together at our strange pause. He didn’t seem to realize why we were nervous. *Was it just a nickname?*

“My father was a soldier and taught me.” I grinned, taking my turn, nearly missing the target.

Followed by Ellis, nailing a center shot. “Woo! There ya go, brother!” He yelled, returning with his blades. They clapped their hands together, throwing back their ales.

“Don’t celebrate early boys, it’s bad luck.” I joked. My stomach was in a knot as Callum went to take his turn. *I really needed that room.*

We had drawn quite a crowd, the tavern filling with more people now as dusk set in. Callum's first throw missed. The target was so far now, I wasn't sure how any of us could make it. His second shot was much better. We were seventy points down as Del walked to the line, rolling his shoulders back repeatedly before making his shot. He missed. And then again. "Blast." He laughed, turning to me, sucking his cigarette, blowing a puff in my direction. "All yours."

My hands were trembling. Although the coin was vital to our trip, the idea of another night in the dirt stinking felt even worse. I had to make it. I focused, drowning out all sounds around me despite the calls and hollers from drunken patrons. My dagger cracked the center of the board wide open when it landed.

Ellis yipped and laughed over everyone's roars. "I guess that's the game! Yee! We can't play without a target!"

I'd nailed the center perfectly. Splitting the target wide open, making half fall to the ground. A laugh burst through my lips. Callum's arms pulling me in, kissing me hard. "Yes! That's my girl!" He spun me around. People laughing all around us.

"See, that's why women shouldn't get to play!" Ellis yelled, laughing. He handed us more drinks. "This one's on me. Come, join me and my brothers for a round."

Callum collected our winnings, and we joined them at a table. Another hour passed and everyone had more ale than anyone should consume. My fruity liquors made me sway a bit too as we sat.

Del's other brothers left us, following around some Selkie women with their tongues out.

I sipped my drink, smirking over my glass. "You're not worried they will get themselves in trouble?"

Callum's hand slid under the table onto my thigh, his nose in my hair as I talked with Del.

"No more than they usually manage to get in." His eyes narrowed on Callum. "I couldn't help but notice you two

seemed a bit strained for coin.”

“Times are hard, but we’re managing,” Callum said a bit tensely.

“Well, if you’re interested, there’s a man-to-man combat match tomorrow. The main prize of the night is one thousand gold pieces.”

I’d heard of these matches before. They had been outlawed years ago due to their brutality, but it did not surprise me they still went on in secret. “No—”

My words were cut short by Callum. “I may be interested. What’s the entry?”

“Callum!”

“Lis, please.” He squeezed my thigh.

“That is, if the princess isn’t opposed.” Del said, eyeing me.

My lips pressed firmly at the thought of Callum fighting in one of those barbaric matches. “We don’t need it.”

He turned to me, his hands on my face. “It’s my duty to provide for you.” His kiss was warm, a tingle spreading through my body.

“We provide for each other.” My eyes were serious on his, but he turned back to Del, sliding me onto his lap.

Del’s brows were raised as he drank his ale, looking at us before continuing, like he was waiting for me to protest, but I didn’t. Callum was not mine to command, even if I wanted to, and since we had been out in the world it had been wonderful being together. But the stress of finding food and trying to survive the elements without a home had put great stress on him. My constant complaints the last two days were not helping the matter either.

“It’s fifty gold pieces to enter.”

Callum sucked in a breath. I was instantly relieved. We had nothing even close. I leaned against him, pulling the last of my drink into my mouth, enjoying its flavor.

“I will buy your entry, if you will split the winnings with me.”

“And if I lose.” Callum sat forward, pulling me tight around the waist.

“Well, then I guess we both lost a gamble.”

They stared at each other a moment, and despite his rough demeanor, he seemed to tell the truth.

“Why would you pay my way?”

“I haven’t been able to enter since my eye was lost, and I miss the gold. What other reason does a man need?”

A tussle broke out behind us. Ellis flew across the tavern floor, landing at the foot of our table. “Apologies miss,” He laughed, looking up at me and Callum from the floor.

“Guess that’s my queue,” Del said, tossing his cigarette to the floor standing. “See you here tomorrow night?”

“I’ll be here.”

Dell and Ellis disappeared into a tussle of fighting parishioners, glasses breaking and Selkie women shrieking with annoyance.

“Best we find our room, my love.”

Callum had been happy to rinse in the water basin out back, leaving me with the pleasure of the tub. I sat in the bubbling water until it turned cold and then sauntered into our darkened room, wrapped in a towel. It was small and warm. A bed and a table and nothing more.

Callum sat at the table in nothing but his gray-colored under shorts, sharpening his new sword in the flicker of fire light. It wasn’t the best blade, but it had been all he could manage with the small amount of coin he had won.

The room seemed to shimmer a bit from the liquor I’d drunk. A small hiccup was on my lips as I moved across the stone floor. It was small, and we were a day’s time away from running out of food and coin, yet `this was the happiest I’d ever felt. I loved seeing him at the table. Me, fresh from the

bath in our little home. No one to interfere or stand in our way. Time belonged to us, and I'd never seen anyone so beautiful in all my life. This was all I'd ever wanted. Here in this moment, he and I together.

The muscles rippled in his arm as he slid the stone down the edge of the blade, his eyes focused. The muscles of his legs flexed, and his back arched over as he worked. My core clenched at the sight of him.

I dropped my towel to the floor. The cool of the air raised bumps over my flesh. The stone clattered to the ground at his feet.

He leaned the sword on the chair, striding toward me. My heart hammered at his approach. He pulled me against his body, his hand at the small of my back, the other behind my head, his kiss hard and wanting. "Lisah."

I wrapped my arms around his neck, meeting his passion, our tongues circling each other, his hands cupping my ass, lifting me up.

I locked my ankles as he walked us back to the wall, his shaft pressing against me. "I want you," I breathed.

"I'm going to take my time with you." His head dipped, his nose trailing down my breasts, taking my erect nipple between his teeth before pulling it into his mouth, grinding against me before turning and carrying me to the bed, setting me down.

He dropped to his knees at the foot of the bed, wrapping his arms around my legs, pulling me to his mouth, his fingers tight on my thighs. His tongue wet, lapping at my center, suckling me. A rush of heat spread over my skin like fire. My fingers dug into the blankets at my sides. I could feel myself tightening as his fingers slid inside.

"Don't come, Lis... not yet."

He had to be out of his mind. I bit into my lip, trying to keep from tumbling over the edge.

He stood, and pulled off his shorts, kneeling on the bed next to me, sliding his fingers inside me again, his other hand

pressing down on my lower belly, his pace quickening. It was too much. I arched off the bed, gripping the sheets. “Ah.”

“Sh.” His words a hiss. “Back, now.” His golden eyes were on mine. But I was about to come out of my skin. I sat forward on my hands and knees and sucked his shaft into my mouth before he had the time to argue. A long-drawn-out moan rolled in his throat as I swallowed him deep, circling the tip of him before taking him back till he touched the opening to my throat again and again. I pushed, forcing him through the tightened muscle, his hips moving against me. Wetness ran down my thigh, it felt amazing to please him, to have the time to revel in his body. The feel of his shaft pulsing between my lips.

His movements became rough and wild until he stopped, pulling himself free. “Oh no, you don’t, you little vixen.” He grinned, shoving me back onto the bed, and flipped me over onto my belly.

The bed pressed down as he crawled up behind me, his hands on my ass cheeks before he spread them out. “Callum!” I hissed at him, squeezing my cheeks together and twisting around.

“I want all of you, paramour.” His voice was husky before dropping between my cheeks, his tongue sliding between them. At first, I pulled from him, embarrassed at the foreign feeling, but then, I was a prisoner to the pleasure. I relaxed into the wet slide of his tongue. His finger slid into me. My moans, loud as I moved against him till, I felt the tip of his cock slide between my ass cheeks, his hand curling around my neck, his mouth on mine. “You’re mine...” His voice was rough in my ear, a pain starting at my bottom as he slid against my opening. A slow gentle pressure. His lips brushing at my ear. “All of you. Forever.”

“Forever.” My words were lost to the sound of my strain as he moved inside me. One hand on my breast, the other round my throat, a gentle squeeze as he moved inside me. The pain had passed and soon it had turned to a blinding pleasure, as he moved hard and fast.

“Touch yourself Lisah.” He moved my hand under my body, and I did as commanded. His cock slammed into me hard, the slap of his body on mine echoing around the room. My mind emptied of all things other than the feeling of him deep inside. I came, my body shaking, clenching around him. “Yes.” He growled. His body went stiff, a roar of pleasure escaping as he found his release before he rolled to his side, pulling me into his arms.

Chapter 8

The warmth of the bath caressed my body like a glove, my heart swooning over the memory of waking in Callum's arms. Thoughts of my father tried to creep into my mind and break down my moment of happiness, but I pushed them away. A morning like this should not be lost to pain. I walked back into our little room to find a pale blue dress on the bed and Callum at the table with breakfast.

"I did a bit of shopping this morning." He came to me, wrapping me in his arms.

"You shouldn't have wasted coin on me."

"Wasted? Paramour. Please."

He held it to me. It was the perfect size. The material was soft and smelled of flowers. I pulled it over my head, squeezing my hair in my towel.

"Come," he said with a smile, the dimples pulling at his cheeks. He was impossible to disobey when he smiled like that.

He led me to the table, where bread, cheese, and eggs were set on two plates, pulling out my chair and joining me. He'd gone to some lengths for this moment. I couldn't ruin it for him with my worries over what tomorrow would bring. "It's wonderful."

"You feel, okay?"

"Yes," I blushed, remembering last night.

I'd stuffed myself until not a crumb was left and then watched as he sucked the jelly from his fingers.

Everything was as close to perfect as possible. If only I wasn't terrified about Gretch.

"Where do you think they went?" He knew who I meant, his eyes falling on mine with concern.

“I don’t know, but I know my sister could not be with a stronger protector.”

Even though Mathious was aloof and relaxed half the time, his powers were unlike any other. Yet, I was still worried. She had left me a clue only to disappear. “I know, but it isn’t like her to leave a message and not follow through.”

“She is with a god. If he deemed there was a safer course of action, I do not expect he would have allowed her to remain.” He stood and walked around the table, kneeling before me. “We will continue to the Volcanic Isle and look for them. But please understand, my duty is to keep you safe.”

“I don’t need your protection.” My eyes narrowed on him. “I need only this heart.” My hand pressed to his chest.

“Don’t need protection, aye?” His eyes gleamed a moment, and he snatched me from the chair, throwing me over his shoulder as I squealed in surprise. “What will you do now?” He spun around.

“Put me down, you fool!” I laughed, my breath lost from the speed of his spin.

“Down, I command you.” He dropped me onto the bed, crawling on top of me.

“As commanded.”

He leaned in, kissing my lips, drawing my dress past my hips, his hand undoing his belt. We’d had each other only hours ago, but my need grew at the feel of his tongue against mine, as his hand palmed me between my thighs.

“I want you Lis. I want you every day of my life until the last breath I take.”

I pulled his pants past his hips, tasting the skin at his neck as he lay on me, our bodies fitting together as if they’d been made for each other. My leg hooked around his, the softness of my skin rubbing across the hair of his legs, his muscles flexing as he moved, his hardness inside me.

I could never have enough. “I love you.” A tear rolled down my cheek as our lips pressed together before he pulled

back, eyes on mine.

“Marry me Lis. When we reach Salencia, marry me?”

My heart seemed to expand past the limits of my chest, tears streaming from my eyes without warning.

We were joined, his movements slow and deep inside me, my heart full of happiness. I moved against his thrusts till we crumpled into each other’s arms, our breaths shallow.

“You have given me the very world, Lis.” His kisses covered my face as he pulled a small silver band from his pocket.

“How?”

He bowed his eyes from mine. “The hilt of the sword and three gold coins and the smith made it this morning. I know it’s not fitting for a Princess,”

I lifted his chin. “Nothing has ever been more fitting.” I kissed him hard, hoping I could show him what this meant to me. My heart thudded in my ears and the stream of tears seemed to spring free again, without control. “I love you. I love you more than anything, you fool. It could be braided hay and I would treasure it.”

“All the same, as soon as I can I’ll be getting something better.”



I sat at the back table of Sands Tavern, tapping my foot below it, waiting for Callum and Del to return from paying his entry. I hated the idea of him fighting, but no amount of begging changed his mind. He was insistent on winning and having the gold to take care of me. *Foolish man. All I needed were his arms.*

I sipped my drink, the same fruity one from before. Coconut, berry, and orange. It was refreshing and tasted more

like a snack. Tonight, I would be careful to sip them since last night both of us had to many.

The men returned, enormous grins spreading from ear to ear across their faces.

“It is done. I compete within the hour.”

Del smacked his back. “Alright, will you be joining us, or do you prefer to wait here?”

I stood, my hands on the table, leaning toward them both. “I think you’re both fools. Let me make myself clear on that.”

“So, you’re coming then?” Del said with a laugh.

“Shut it,” I said, walking out the front of the Tavern.

“Come on, Lis.” Callum said as he ran to my side, his arm around my shoulder. “I’ll be fine. There are no weapons in this match.”

We walked down the beach to a massive bonfire with thousands of people around it. It was dusk and the orange and pink skies hugged the sea line. A circle of rocks and rope cleared an enormous expanse on the beach, with burning torches surrounding it. People standing about with ale, and money changing hands in excited flurries.

“I don’t like this Callum.”

“It’s gonna be fine, Lis.” He kissed my hair and Del pulled him through the crowd. I followed, pushing through the arms and elbows till I came to the ropes. Ten men stood in the center and Del ducked under the rope, pulling Callum inside. Everyone cheered as soon as they saw Del, falling silent as he raised his hand.

Del’s voice boomed. “Thank you all for coming out. Tonight, I have a special surprise for you all, so get your coin ready.” He pointed across the circle to Ellis who sat on a tall chair with a paper and feather pen in hand. “Make sure you get all your bets to Ellis.” He raised Callum’s arms in the air and a rock dropped in my stomach. Callum looked as stunned as I was. Del was running this thing. “Tonight, I bring you a very special contender. The General of the Crystal Palace’s army.”

Excited screams erupted around the group. *Shit. He knew exactly who we were. He had played us.* I pushed through the crowd until I reached Ellis, shoving him back in his chair. Selkie woman erupted with laughter., “Hey, hey! What are you on about?” Ellis said, scrambling to his feet.

“Let the fight begin!” Del screamed from behind us. The cheers filled the night sky.

“What the hell! You knew who we were the entire time!”

Ellis dusted himself off, standing. “What’s the problem?”

A hand closed over my shoulder. “Calm down princess, you are in no danger. With your castle in ruins, no one is searching for you. It was merely a good business decision. The bets for your General will make this the best night we’ve had in years.” Del said.

My blood boiled. I wanted to destroy him.

“Get the princess a chair, Ellis. I will collect the bets.”

“Callum gets half of what you’re making in coin,” I hissed.

“This is more than you could have hoped for. You know, the bounty on your heads was twenty thousand coins. Useless now that the Palace has fallen to Aldrich.”

“What?” I couldn’t breathe. “What do you mean, fallen to Aldrich?”

“You mean to tell me you both didn’t know?”

Ellis returned with another chair and I sat, fearing I would fall to my knees if I didn’t.

It had already happened. My people, my mother? “What of the queen?”

“Checking if someone finished her off for you, aye, princess,” Del said with a short laugh, sipping his ale.

“Screw you.”

“Not very ladylike.” He winked. “The queen has not been found. She was taken. Thousands perished in the attack from what I heard. Your armies were decimated.”

Whoops, and hollers erupted around the circle. The fighting started and ended quickly. Callum destroyed his opponent in three blows and was ushered off to his corner before cutting me a glance. He was furious. He didn't know all I knew, but he knew enough to understand we'd been lied to.

The news settled on my heart like iron as I watched the fights. Bets rolled in, forcing Ellis to bring another bag for the coin.

"It's all harmless princess," Del said. "Go get our guest of honor another drink, Ellis."

"No thanks," I growled. "As soon as this is over, we're gone."

"If you insist, but I've heard of your general's skills. He may enjoy the coin. Perhaps we will become best mates?"

I stared at him from the corner of my slitted eyes. "Unlikely."

The fights moved on and the gold filled more than four bags. Callum won every fight he was in. The final fighter was a massive man with red hair. A clear Isle born. He had won with ease and had a nasty technique. He had broken his opponent's arm, one leg, and crushed the throat of another. Despite the only requirement for winning being to get your opponent to yield.

The fight began, Callum ducking his swing, landing a hard blow into his ribs. The other man earned a chant from the crowd. "Rikon, Rikon, Rikon." My heart raced as they fought. A hard hit cracked Callum's nose, blood splattering across the faces of those closest. He shook it off and went at Rikon again, his elbow busting open his cheek. Blood beaded in the sands before soaking into the ground below their feet. I shifted uneasily from side to side. This was not going like the others. Both men were bleeding, wrestling in the dirt. Rikon slammed his knee into Callum's stomach, wrapping his hands around his throat. The crowd was going wild, and I felt like I was going to puke. I twisted the ring around my finger over and over. *Come on Callum.*

Callum flipped the man with his legs, making him land face first in the sand, Callum wrapping his arm around his neck in a tight hold. I sat straight up. Praying the yield would come, but it didn't.

Instead, another man dove into the ring, ripping Callum off him. The two men launched on top of him, Rikon's heel slamming toward Callum's neck. Callum only just managed to block it. The other man pulled his leg, dragging him to the center, a hard kick slamming into his head.

"No! You have to stop this!"

"There aren't any rules against this." Del grinned.

"How is this fair?"

"The only rule is no weapons."

I stood, kicking back my chair. There was no way in hell I was going to sit by and watch.

"I'd really advise against your interference, princess." Del's hand squeezed around my arm.

"Release me now."

"I believe the General would prefer if I kept you out of harm's way."

I glared at him with slanted brows. "It's not against the rules, though?"

"Well, no... but—"

I left him no time to finish the answer. I head-butted him in the nose and jumped over the rope, leaping onto the back of the other man, flipping him over onto his face. Callum's eyes were wide before flashing me a wide smile.

Another man joined now, and the fight was on. I threw my elbow into the closest man's face, only to be snatched up by the other and thrown across the ring to Del's feet, who was still rubbing the knot that was forming on his forehead.

Just then, the crowd split and my heart stopped. A voice rising above the noise,

“Well, this hardly seems fair,” Mathious said. Stepping over the ropes, he bent his head from side to side with a crack, interlocking his knuckles, popping them next before yanking the other man from Callum’s back. My eyes locked with Gretchen’s across the arena as she ran towards me. Del cackled behind me with joy as the crowd went crazy.

“Gretch, you’re alright!”

Our arms around each other, squeezing each other tight.

“Lisah, I’m so sorry. I wanted to wait, but Mathious said it wasn’t safe for us.”

“It’s alright, you’re here now.” I leaned back. “How are you here?”

“I needed only to wait for one of you to make a foolish decision.” She glanced at our men fighting at the center.

Mathious moved like a feather in the wind. Spinning and ducking, missing every swing that came his way, a smile and laugh fresh on his lips. Callum and Rikon beat on each other, the crack of the blows echoing into the night.

Mathious’ laugh rolled on the wind as he used the back of his hand to guide the other man into the dirt as he lost his balance before a yield ripped from his lips. Mathious stepped on the man’s chest, raising his arm in defeat, winking at Gretchen.

Callum flipped Rikon over his head, slamming him onto his back.

“Yield!” Callum screamed in his face, but before he could respond, screams poured through the crowd.

Black smoke coiled through the sands before pulling together into black, slick, human-like eyeless forms. Rows of white teeth were revealed as they opened their mouths lunging at the people in the crowd. Long claws carved open the chests of the people closest to them before bowing down to feast on them.

“What the hell is that!” Gretch’s voice was a screech as we both backed away, people running in every direction. Callum

and Mathious rushed to our sides.

“What are they!” I directed my question to Mathious, whose eyes were wide.

“I haven’t the slightest idea.”

Callum grabbed Gretch and pulled her into a fast hug, turning back to me and Mathious.

“We need to go now!”

I turned in time to see Del and Ellis running from one of the shadow creatures. Bloodied, cracked open bodies littered the white sands. I snatched a bag of gold off the chair and ran for Nyra, but as I came around the corner, I slammed to a stop. She was gone. All the horses were. A hoard of shadowy demon creatures rushed to us as if traveling on the wind. Pulling the water from the horse’s troth, I made a wall of ice between us, slowing them down as we all rushed across the street and into the forest.

“Did you see this in your vision, Gretch?” I screamed as we ran into the trees, the screams of the people we’d left echoing into the night behind us.

“No!” Her voice jumped for a moment. I turned to see Mathious sweeping her into his arms, rushing ahead of both me and Callum.

We ran until we found silence. Stopping at a small lake with a short waterfall on the far side that covered a cave entrance. We stepped onto the stone and me and Gretch huddled together. Callum getting to work on a small fire and Mathious casting a cloak around us.

“I hate to use my powers, but I’ve never seen anything like that in all my years, in any realm.”

My heart pounded in my ears as I tried to catch my breath.

“Are we safe here?” Gretch asked Mathious as he pulled her onto his lap. She was showing now. Her belly was round and full. My teeth pinched into my lip at the sight of it. She and I shared a grin, her hand caressing her stomach.

“For the night, yes, my darling.” He kissed her lips, pulling her to his chest. “Rest, please. This stress is not good for our so, or his mother.”

She smiled, laying back on him, his head leaning on a smooth rock.

“So, I will have a nephew.” Callum beamed, pulling me between his legs.

“If my visions are correct.” Gretch smiled.

Chapter 9

“We can’t sit around and wait for those things to come. We need to find a better way to travel,” I huffed, watching the barmaid carry over our drinks.

“Lisah, I’m fine. Really.”

Gretch tried to look sincere, but I wasn’t blind. We had been walking for months and even with her riding Nyla, she could hardly stand when Mathious lifted her down each night. I don’t even want to think about what we would’ve done if Nyla hadn’t found us in the forest. Gretch would never have made it this far.

Callum held her hands across the table, his eyes filled with concern.

“With my parent’s castle fallen, it’s only a matter of time before Aldrich comes for the Shimmering Palace,” I said.

Mathious slid in next to Gretch with a plate of food, directing his attention toward Callum. “I’ve spoken with the barman, and he says there are sailors who make trade runs to Salencia.”

“That would be much faster than trudging through the marshes,” Callum said, leaning forward, snagging a piece of bread from the basket.

“Like, hitch a ride?” Gretch asked.

“I believe we would pay, my darling.” Mathious’ eyes shifted to mine.

“If we can find someone to take us, I’d give them the entire bag.”

All of us were eager for a break, none more than Gretchen, with the baby’s arrival only days away.

A few men sat at the other end drinking ales, and a barmaid carried food over to them. It was quiet, the first place we'd come to that hadn't been ravaged by the shadow creatures in days. But even here, people whispered things I never wanted to hear again. They had decimated entire villages. Babies and children tore apart. These creatures seemed to take no notice of youth or innocence. They were driven only by hunger. A hunger for blood, from what I had learned so far. They were something unnatural and even Mathious seemed shaken by them.

"Callum, join me on the dock. Let us see if we can pay our way across this damned ocean."

I gave Callum a reassuring nod, letting him know I would keep Gretch safe. She leaned back in her chair, holding the underside of her enormous stomach, a slight grimace on her face.

"I never realized how long the Shimmering Isle was." she said as she stretched her back.

"Or how far Salencia is." I laughed, grabbing my wine and taking a long gulp, relishing the flavor as all we'd had was water this last month. "Walking in the forest hasn't helped." I said.

She sipped her glass of red and held it up with a smirk. "Clearly." She giggled.

"So, what's it like?" I eyed her belly.

She looked down and back at me. "It was like the winds... at first," she laughed. "A flutter, low inside that came so quickly I thought I'd imagined it at first. But now, it's as if a tiny warrior is trapped inside fighting his way out."

We both laughed, startling a few of the men across the room, earning squinted glares.

"We best behave or Mathious might get himself worked into another tiff."

"He's just worried," she said.

"I've never seen him so tense. He really loves you, Gretch."

Her smile could have lit the room. “And I love him.”

The door swung open behind us, pulling us from our talk.

A tall young man walked in with wavy chestnut-colored hair. His shirt was white silk and was unbuttoned at the top, he wore black slacks tucked into matching leather boots, and a wooden stick carved with runes was tucked in his belt.

The air seemed to suck from the tavern upon his arrival. Several candles went out as the door swung shut, earning some complaints from the men across the room. He pulled in a long breath through his nose and turned toward us, tilting his head in our direction — he blew a kiss at me and walked toward us.

“Who the hell is that?” Gretch asked.

“I have no idea, but here he comes.”

He stopped in front of us. His skin was chalky, and he was young. Maybe even younger than I was.

“Such a lovely aroma. Much better than your mother.”

“Excuse me?”

“May I?” He motioned to the chair next to me but didn’t wait for my answer. Sitting much too close, he pulled my wrist to his nose as his eyes moved from my wineglass to my eyes. “Such a lovely claret. I will endeavor to let it find its ripest age before consuming it.”

I yanked away from him, pushing back my chair.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Oh, you are full of fire, aren’t you? You’ll make a lovely queen.” His eyes moved across the table to Gretch. “And how are you? Baby’s healthy?”

She stood, backing away. “Stay the hell away from my baby.”

His hands raised by his shoulders. “I’m insulted. I’ve not harmed any babies... today.” He grinned at her. “Now sit.” The chair slammed into the back of her knees, forcing her into the chair. A grunt of pain left her lips as she landed, catching

an older man's attention from across the room, drawing him over.

"You ladies alright?" The old man asked. His bushy gray beard bounced with each word he spoke.

The young man's eyes rolled around to the man as he sucked his teeth. "Do they not look alright to you?"

The old man shifted on his feet, glaring down at our uninvited guest. "I know what happy women look like and this isn't it, young man." He motioned toward us.

"Are you insinuating that I don't know how to please my ladies?" He stood, towering over the short plump man, his hand resting on his shoulder.

I felt the pressure of the room change. It became heavy and cold. Nausea rushed through me like a wave threatening to expel my lunch. This was not magic I recognized. It settled strangely in the air, instead of melding with it the way most magic did.

The old man dropped to his knees. His veins turned black, his eyes watered, and his mouth opened wide. A sick gasping sound came out as he struggled to take in a breath.

I jumped up, drawing my sword, pointing it at the back of the young man's neck. "Stop! Whatever you're doing. Stop it now!" I cast my eyes to Gretch. "Gretch, go."

She stood to leave, but before I had a chance to act, the old man's body sucked into a husk and fell to the floor, crumbling to dust.

Gretchen let out a surprised shriek. I swung without hesitation, but the man blinked out of existence and back in again behind me. His fingers curled around my throat, his lips on my ear, and his eyes on Gretch.

"Sit back down, my lovely, or I may lose my patience."

"Who are you?" Gretch demanded.

"Do I really need an introduction? So sad."

“Immekus.” I said. All my powers seemed sapped from me, my heart quivering as if he was pulling at my very essence.

The men from the other table and the barmaid stood across the room, all too afraid to move. He turned toward them with a sweeping grin.

“You realize you’re interrupting, no?” They ran out the front doors, leaving us without a second look back.

Pulling me into his lap as he sat, his lips trailed my skin, breathing me in. “I might be able to get used to this.”

I pulled away and his fingers grabbed the hair at the back of my head. “Stay still or I’ll turn the little mother-to-be into dust.” His hand slid up my thigh, pulling back my dress, squeezing me between his fingers. “Why is it your magic flows so freely, much stronger than the others I’ve come across?”

“I don’t know?” I yanked my leg away from his grip.” A smile pulled across his teeth as he sipped my wine with his now free hand.

“Surely you must have a guess?”

I’d never been told I was stronger than anyone. My entire life, my mother had made a point of telling me how weak I was, how I was such a disappointment in our line. The first of Sha’s creations. I sucked in a breath as the realization of his question came to me. “My parents, they were Sha’s first.”

“I see.” His nose rested on my cheek. “Intoxicating.”

“Lisah, what do I do?” Gretch said, her voice trembling.

“Do nothing.”

“Have you had the pleasure?” he asked.

“Of what?”

“Meeting the mother of Fae, Sha?”

“I haven’t.” I snipped.

“Lucky. She’s a horrible person.”

“Why? Because she didn’t like you?” I cast a glare over my shoulder. “I can’t imagine why.”

His expression went flat. “It’s a terrible thing to shun a child for such a callous reason. Surely you understand what that can do to one so young?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, but I think you do... Did you not slit your own father’s throat for the very same reason?”

It was like he had ripped my heart from my chest. Is that what she’d told the realm? “I didn’t!”

“Shh princess. It’s ok to admit the truth here amongst friends.”

Gretch stood, her eyes blazing as she stared Immekus down across the table.” If you hurt her, I’ll make you suffer.”

His hand tightened around my throat while the other smashed my glass under his palm. His lips trailed across my cheek as he held eye contact with her.

I didn’t move, afraid to provoke him further. My powers were gone, overshadowed by the Shade’s. My sword lay on the floor, and all I could do was obey, hoping Mathious and Callum would come and get Gretch out of here.

“Oh, my little witch, how I do love your kind. So full of passion. Now please, sit.” He motioned back to her seat. “Had I come here to harm either of you, you would be dead already.”

“Then why are you here?” I growled.

“For my old friend, of course. Where is the proud Papa?”

“That’s none of your concern,” Gretchen hissed.

The room went black, then a burst of light blinded me. When my vision returned, the walls seemed to twist and melt around us until all that remained was Immekus, me, and Mathious.

“Let the girl go, Immekus.”

A low, stretched-out maniacal giggle sounded behind me before his answer came. “But I like this one. She’s like me.” He pulled my cheek to his and flashed Mathious a wide smile.

“Clearly she does not feel the same way cousin.”

“Oh, come now, Mathious. One for you and one for me. It’s only fair.”

“Was it fair when you murdered your father?” Mathious asked.

“Don’t forget your awful parents,” he laughed again.

Mathious walked toward us, the room a swirl of gray and black around us. Mathious had pulled us into one of his delusions, and I couldn’t see my way out of it. My heart pounded in my ears, and my mind raced. I was caught between two gods with no way out.

“What do you want?” Mathious demanded.

“You, of course!” Immekus answered, propping my hand up, leaning around me, and setting his chin on it. “Think of the fun we could have without your parents’ interference.”

“You murdered our family,” Mathious said, his voice strained.”

“They were terrible, really.”

“I stood by you through everything and when my brother brought you home, I was there. I held you in my arms. Taught you our histories... and when my parents turned you away, I stayed by your side!”

“Which is why I’ve come. To offer you and your little witch a seat at my table.”

“And watch as your monsters consume the world?” I said, scowling at him.

He sat straight. “Those aren’t mine. If it’s the ones who move in the night that you speak of. But they are wondrous, are they not?” he giggled.

I shoved his arm from around my waist, trying to stand, but he pulled me down.

“They have destroyed three villages.”

“Oh, my little claret, they have devoured millions. Seems that little witch was quite upset over that squawking little bundle I destroyed.”

“Millions?” Mathious’ voice no more than a whisper.

“Yes, incredible really.” Immekus squeezed my cheeks. “She made them to rid the realm of your kind, actually. But they were fantastic. I couldn’t resist adding my own twist to her creation. A piece of me, if you will.”

Mathious stepped closer, but Immekus raised his hand, stopping him.

“Does Ravina know of your meddling?” Mathious asked.

“Now, where would the fun be in that?”

“You must stop this cousin.”

“When you’re by my side and the princess takes the throne as my queen, then I’ll stop.”

“I would rather die!” I snapped.

Immekus waved his hand, the room returning to normal. “Enough games! What’s your decision, Mathious?”

It was as if the last of the air left my lungs. Mathious strained where he stood. Both of their eyes locked on each other, a whistling sound filling the room, the temperature dropping fast. They were locked in a battle none of us could see.

Out of nowhere Callum lunged forward, released from some hold Mathious must have had on him. “Take your hands off her.” He roared.

Immekus’ eyes glanced his way, dropping Callum to his knees. Mathious strained forward a step, sweat glistening on his forehead as the pressure in the room increased, the tables shook, and the floor trembled below my feet. I slammed my head back into Immekus’ face, making him release me long enough to fall to the floor. A harpoon flew over my head, plunging through Immekus’ chest with a crunch.

“Move that ass, princess!” Del yelled. Ellis ran by tossing a rope over the rafter and wrapping it around Immekus’ neck, teaming up with Callum. The two of them dragging Immekus up to the ceiling together. His body flailed as he hung by the neck, blood raining down around him.

“What the hell!” I screamed.

“We need to go now! That will not hold him for long,” Mathious yelled over our tangle of voices.

“You didn’t think I’d turn away an offer of gold, did ya?” Del yelled as we all ran out the back onto the beach. The shimmering waters glowing against the blackness of night behind them. The water was warm, the glowing speckles that filled the water sticking to our skin as we swam for Del’s that was anchored about one hundred yards offshore.

Once onboard we were all breathless and in awe. It was a massive ship with light black sails at least one hundred and fifty feet long.

“How the hell do you have something like this?” I asked, cutting Del a glare.

A grin reached his eyes. “I think you know.”

“So, this is what you bought with my blood?” Callum asked, his hand on Del’s shoulder.

“Ye, it took all the gold though, so now we need more,” Ellis said, running up to the wheel.

“We saved your asses didn’t we. Them things can’t swim, or haven’t you noticed?” Del said.

Mathious stepped between them, pulling Callum’s hand back. “We’d be dead if it wasn’t for them.”

“So, we’re square then?” Del asked.

Callum nodded and went to Gretch’s side where she rested against a sack of wheat. My eyes locked on Del.

“We good princess? My apologies—” He swept into a bow. “—my queen.”

It was like a wall had slammed into me where I stood. “I’m no queen.”

He raised his eyebrows before turning to Mathious. “Make sure she doesn’t kill me, aye?”

Mathious let out a laugh, the rest of us following uncontrollably. Relief washed over us at the realization that we had escaped.

“Why Salencia, Mathious?” Callum asked.

Mathious turned, the winds picking up as the ship gained momentum, his shirt fluttering around him. “There is no other place that burns hotter. If we can lure him inside the volcano, I may stand a chance.”

“You want us to help you kill your only remaining family?” I asked.

His eyes met Gretchen’s. “I only have one family and it’s right here.”

A long silence filled the night sky between us.

“Awe shucks, thank ya,” Ellis yelled from the wheel, making us all roll in laughter again.

Chapter 10

It's hot, the air in this wretched room is stale and the blankets are itchy. Considering it was Callum's blood that paid for this ship, a room with a window shouldn't have been too much to ask for.

Rolling onto my back, I peered at the ceiling, stretching my legs. Spider webs filled every corner of the cracked wooden walls, salt clinging to every surface... including the cream-colored skirt and top Del gave me. They belonged to his sister Lorna and were woven from netting, but at least they were cooler than leather.

I turned into my pillow, trying to relax, instantly crinkling my nose. "Ugh." Everything smelled like cigarettes, fish, or salt. I slid off the double-sized bed and squeezed into my boots, strapping my sword and dagger to my side.

A knock sounded at the door before I could go in search of the boys. "Princess?" Ellis called and I frowned.

"Stop calling me that!" I said, hurrying to open it.

Ellis stood with a few other crew members who looked anywhere but at me. "But you are the princess."

"Not anymore," I said. Pushing past them into the narrow hall. It was dark, lit by a small candle at the end of the corridor.

"Sorry to bother you, but I thought you'd want to know that your friend is sick."

"Gretchen?"

"Ye, prince—I mean... Listitia," Ellis said. My face must have said everything because he took my arm and led me past the three other doors on this level to the stairwell that led below. "I think it's only seasickness, but I thought you ought to know."

“Thank you, Ellis.” I nodded, gripping his forearm as he led me through the dark, twisted stairway. This level was even darker than the last because the corridor was longer. The smallest flame flickered at the end of the hall. I counted ten doors on both sides until we reached the end.

“Here you are, princess,” he said and then covered his mouth.

I cut him a glare. “This is their room?” Ellis nodded and hurried off, leaving me alone.

Standing outside her door, my stomach did a flip. I’d seen enough trouble with childbearing in my life and couldn’t help being plagued with the worst thoughts as my knuckles rapped against the peeled green paint of her door.

“Come in,” she said, almost instantly.

I pushed it open and was greeted by the sound of her gagging over a chamber pot. “Oh, Gretch.” Rushing to her side, her hand halted me.

“I’m oka, really. I’m just not made for the sea.” She gave me a small smile as she wiped her sleeve across her pale lips.

She sat on a single bed with gray wool blankets and a small dresser to the right with a pitcher of water on top of it. A single chair pressed into the corner and a wooden chest sat underneath it. I couldn’t believe it. This room was not even half the size of the one I had. How had they slept in here?

“This room is unacceptable! I’m going to demand Del give you better quarters.”

“This is fine. Trust me, it’s the best I’ve slept in months, and Mathious sits in the chair all night watching me.” Rolling her eyes, she motioned for me to return, pointing below the chair. “Get that and come sit with me.”

My heart was thudding in my chest, my complaints ready on my tongue, but I pushed them back. They would have to wait until later when I saw Del. I pulled the chest from under the chair. A rolling and clanking sound came from it as I set it on the bed between us. I didn’t think it was possible, but she actually looked green. “Are you sure you’re, okay?”

“Stop. I’m fine, really. Besides, we have bigger things to worry about now.”

My mind flashed back to Immekus’ icy hand on my thigh and the feeling of being powerless. I sucked a sharp breath through my teeth. I’d never felt like that before. His power was like a blanket of darkness that seemed to smother me from the inside. Like a candle placed inside a jar while the lid was slowly being closed. My very essence draining from me and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I shuddered. Gretch’s hand rubbed my bare arm, which was now goosebumped despite the sweltering heat.

“I won’t let him take my baby.” Her eyes hardened on mine. “Or my friend.”

“Gretch, I swear to you I will protect your baby with my life.”

“I know you will. But he wants you too, for whatever sick reason, and I’m not helpless, Lisah. I will not sit by while the rest of you protect me—risk your lives.” She stood, clicking open the chest, revealing two sets of iron chains, some candles, and a small vial of blood.

“What the hell is that?”

She smirked as she twisted open the lid, smelling the red liquid inside. “You know, even his blood doesn’t smell right.”

“How do you have his blood?” My brows raised as she put the lid back on the small vial, setting it on the dresser.

“When Del’s sister went back last night for Nyla, I had her collect this from the tavern floor for my spell. Along with the other ingredients,” she said, grinning.

She was strong. She always had been, but a spell that could take down a god. “What will it do?”

She leaned forward, lifting the chains, examining them in her hands. “Tonight, when the moons are high, I will bind these chains to their power and that of this world’s deepest core.” She opened the iron cuff between her hands, her eyes focused as she snapped them shut again. “And once we close

these around his wrists, he will be tethered to the limitations of our realm.”

“How does it work?” I asked. Swallowing the knot rising in my throat.

“Do you remember when we were little, and my mother took us to the Ivory Inn and Lamaria told us the stories of the Natural Witches?”

“Yes, but he’s a god, Gretch,” I said, wiping the sweat from my brow.

She placed the chains on the floor and set the candles in a circle as she spoke. “They may be gods, but they are not of this realm—my ancestors are.” She positioned the candles carefully as she continued. “Our magic may be slower, but it binds in a way theirs never can. Even a god is not stronger than reality itself, Lis.”

“So, once we lock him in these chains, he loses his power?”

“Not entirely, no. But it will bring him within the limitations of our world and allow Mathious and me to bind him. Lock him in a prison he’ll never escape.”

“Mathious is ok with you being part of this?”

She cut me a sideways glance. “Well... he doesn’t have a choice. I’m not about to sit by and watch that demon destroy everything I love.”

She circled the chains with moonstones and selenite, pouring dirt from a jar on top of them.

“One more thing.” She said, pursing her lips together as she rummaged through a brown sack I hadn’t noticed before, pulling out four briolette-shaped gems. She laid them on the blanket between us. Aquamarine, Diamond, Obsidian, and Citrine.

“Where did you get these?” My eyes were wide on hers. Jewels of this quality were not a common thing to find and when they were, the cost was high. “Gretch?”

She pursed her lips again, squeezing her own hand into the other. “Please don’t be upset.”

“You can tell me anything,” I said, pulling her hands into mine.

“I took the gold.”

“My gold?” Her eyes locked on the floor, and I knew without her answer. I knew she’d stolen the gold that was to be our payment to cross the sea. “Gretch, how are we going to pay Del? He already asked me about the gold twice. Look at me, please.” Her chin tilted back toward me as she spoke.

“My love has a plan. But it relies almost solely on himself and these chains.” She pulled her lip between her teeth, rocking from one side to the other before piercing me with a burning stare. “If it should fail... we will all fall, Lisah.” She eased onto the bed next to me. “I needed a backup plan, and this is it.”

“Okay.”

She spoke, but the door popped open. Her hands moved quickly to pull the gray covers over the stones.

“My love.” Gretch beamed at Mathious as he stood in the doorway.

“It’s midday, and they have set a meal. I’ve made you a plate.” His eyes flicked to mine. “You should come up as well, meet the crew and perhaps pay Del, thank him.”

“Thank him?”

“Without them, I’m not sure where we’d be now.” His eyes were serious now. “Come on, you don’t really want to stay down here all day, do you?”

“I do.” I said.

“No.”

Gretchen and I had answered at the same time, forcing a laugh from us all.

“We’ll be right up my love, just give us another minute alone please?”

“Of course,” he mumbled, closing the door as he left.

“Gretch?” I took her hands in mine, giving them a gentle squeeze, my stomach in knots.

“I’ll explain everything tonight, I promise. But for now, please don’t say anything?”

She was trembling. Her hands were clammy in mine. “I promise, of course. But later you’ll tell me everything, swear?”

“Swear.”

Chapter 11

I pushed open the door to the dining hall, holding it wide for Gretch. The hall was small, with six faded wood tables and a tattered-looking crew. The fierce set of pirates I'd expected was replaced with thin, tired men and young boys. Each leaned over a bowl of Sea Soup. Which was nothing more than clear broth, seaweed, and a few small bits of fish. All that gold and he couldn't even feed his crew properly. I rolled my eyes at Del, who sat across the room eating the same thing as the rest. *What the hell was he doing with children?*

Joining them, I pushed in next to Callum, who was eating the same sad soup. Actually, everyone had the same, yet my plate was a full fish filet and a bread roll, same as Gretch's. "What's this?"

"As paying guests, we did what we could to offer Your Grace something... adequate," Del grinned.

Paying guest. That hit hard since I knew we were, in fact, unpaying guests and I'd already avoided bringing him payment several times since we'd arrived. Gretch spied me from the corner of her eye as she pushed in next to Mathious, who had nothing in front of him.

"Eat paramour, rations are running thin and the crew's skipping its regular netting to get us to our destination faster."

"And the rest of you?" I looked at their sad bowls and couldn't do it. I couldn't eat while there were children going with less.

I set my fork back on the table, looking at the boys. "Forcing children to work your ships, Del? Why am I not surprised?"

"Better you mind what you know, princess."

Lorna arrived, carrying a steaming bowl of Sea Soup and a roll of bread. Her hair was brown and tangled and she beamed

at us as she sat dipping her bread into the soup taking a bite.

“My top looks great on you.” She bowed her head, her cheeks going pink for a moment. “If you don’t mind my saying.” She grinned, her larger-than-natural teeth quirking over her bread roll.

Taking her in, I realized she was flat-chested, and her bones seemed to poke at her collar. “Thank you, but I’m sure you look great in it too,” I said, casting a look at Callum, who was grinning at my chest.

Lorna turned to Gretch as she spooned her soup. “Eat up, I fished those, especially for both of you.” She beamed. Mathious urged Gretch to eat, but I could tell I wasn’t the only one who didn’t feel right. I let out a sigh of relief once she started.

“Nyla was still there when I returned to shore. I got a great price for her from the horse lord. It was helpful in obtaining your items, miss.” She beamed at Gretch, who choked on her fish. Mathious never flinched except for the slightest raise of his brow. *Her comment had not gone unnoticed by the god.*

Meanwhile, Callum and Del had started a knife toss at the far side of the room, having sucked down their soups in seconds.

I grit my teeth at the sight of them together. A small group of men surrounding them with laughter as the game picked up. My stomach let out a painful grumble, a cramp starting in my side. I sighed, swiping the fork from the table, taking a bite. It was good. Possibly the freshest fish I’d ever eaten in my life. And with each bite, the ache in my stomach quieted while the weight in my heart increased.

“The information you brought back was very helpful, Lorna.” Mathious said. His hand rubbed Gretchen’s back. Lorna nodded as she took another spoonful of soup.

“What information?” I asked.

“They decimated the Shimmering Isles. Word is that The Dragon King and his sons have taken possession of Aldmoor

creating a fortress,” Mathious said, crossing one leg over the other.

“The Dragon Lords?” How bad must something be to wake the dragons? They never showed interest in staying in one place. “I thought the Dragons King’s sons were monsters?”

“Not like this,” Lorna said between gulps. “Those demons that sorceress created killed more people in a month than ten years of war.”

My heart sank. I couldn’t even picture it in my mind, the type of death she was implying. “What does she want?” I said, my eyes wide on Mathious.

“Revenge. Immekus killed Ravina’s child.” His hand rubbed over Gretchen’s belly absentmindedly.

“But the Dragon Lords, they are fighting these things?”

“The flame of the dragon seems to be effective against them. Your race, I’m afraid, has fled.” Mathious said, as he leaned back, pulling Gretchen against him, holding her close.

This was all too much. “What do you mean fled?”

“The fae people have receded into the caverns of Aleria.”

“All of them?” I gasped.

“I cannot know for sure. But Aldrich has recalled his army and nearly all the great Ilian castles sit empty.”

I felt a wave of sickness pass over me. “And the people, the humans, and witches?” My head was spinning, and Gretchen’s lips were white. Nothing like this had ever happened, and I couldn’t wrap my head around it. In one breath, I’d learned a decade-long war had ended only for something much worse to have risen. Something without bias or agenda.

“The remaining human race and witches have receded into Aldmoor under the protection of the newly proclaimed King of the Realm.”

My mouth fell open, and I felt the color drain from my face.

“I know. I felt the same.” Lorna said. “My brothers decided after we drop you in the harbor, we won’t return to the Isle. He

said the sea is the safest place for us.”

A loud rumble of laughter made me and Lorna snap around to the game. The men were all hooting and hollering, choosing sides of who they thought was going to win. Lorna twisted around to me. “You wanna show ‘em up?” She grinned.

Callum had just earned several pats on the back, and Del was shaking his head as he stepped up to the line. I noticed there were multiple targets covering the wall in odd places, some with stuff jutting out blocking them, others twisted at angles.

“Makes it harder. My brothers had to beat me.” She winked, pulling me from my seat. “Come on, I heard you did well before?”

“Go on, Lis, it’ll be fun,” Gretch said, grinning.

I cut her a hard stare. “The last thing on my mind was playing a game.” Mathious looked the same, worry in every crease on his forehead.

“It’s another night’s sail. We may as well have a bit of fun,” Lorna said, giving me a slight tug. She was small. I hadn’t realized it till I was standing in front of her, her head only coming to my chin.

“I’m fifteen,” she answered my unspoken question with a grin.

“Did you say they had to make this harder to beat you?”

She laughed, pulling me across the room. “Yup.”

Lorna slammed two white shells with numbers carved into them onto a barrel. “We’re in!” The men and boys screamed with glee at her challenge. Callum smirked at me, pulling a shell from his pocket.

“Count me in then,”

Where the hell did, he get that? And what the heck is the point of them? “I haven’t got a *shell*, Lorna?”

“I put you in already!”

“What are the shells for?” I yelled, my voice struggling to reach above the whooping crewman as Del approached, slamming down his shell with a grin.

“They are our currency, earned by completing chores.” Del chuckled.

“Or used to pay your way outta doing them.” Ellis laughed.

My brows pinched tight. “So they have no real value?”

“You say that till you have to peel all the potatoes, princess.” Del laughed.

Callum leaned into my ear. “It’s their own form of currency. Great motivation for his crew. Wish I’d thought of something like this on long marches.”

“How do you have one?” I leaned into his neck. His eyes were on mine as he gave me a soft kiss.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“You two lovebirds done over there or is the princess stalling?”

I cut Del a glare as I made my way to the line, noticing Mathious and Gretch at the table in a heated debate. Gretch shook her head at him, rising, leaving a very dispirited Mathious in her wake.

“Good luck,” Callum called across to me with a wink as his blade nailed the center of the upper target.

“What happens if we lose?” I asked Lorna as she stepped up next.

“We won’t.”

“But if we do?”

“We would have kitchen cleanup tonight.”

Flurries rolled in my belly. I hadn’t ever actually cleaned anything. I bit my lip at the thought of having to ask how to wash a dish.

Lorna’s blades hit every target, even one she threw over her shoulder, earning some pretty hefty cries from the men.

The game had ended before it barely began. Lorna hit the center of every single target and Del and Callum were stuck with kitchen cleanup leaving me alone in the hall, restless. I'd been below deck the entire day and was desperate for fresh air.

I made my way above; the stars shimmering as the ship cut through the sea. Nothing but the sound of the ocean and the smell of salt washed over me. I let out a sigh as I leaned against the rail.

"Hope you enjoyed your game," Mathious said as he came up behind me, leaning next to me.

"I didn't think I was going to, but it was actually a pleasant distraction."

He looked tense, and I was pretty sure I'd witnessed his and Gretch's first argument earlier. "Everything okay between you two? "He turned and looked me dead in my eyes, raising the hair on my arms.

"I think she is hiding something from me, but she refuses to tell me."

I felt my mouth fall open. I hadn't expected him to be so certain of it, and my face had given me away.

"You know?"

"I don't know anything." I turned back to the stars, trying to think of anything else.

"Listitia, if Gretchen is planning something I need to know." He took hold of my arm, twisting me back, but I yanked away.

"She has chains to spell tonight." I spat. His eyes turned to slits.

"I'm aware of the chains, Listitia. There's something else. You're not telling me everything. I see it in your eyes."

A tingle spread through my mind, and I threw up my mental wards. Shock plastered across my face. He had never tried to enter my mind without my consent. "Mathious!"

"I will not let her put herself at risk. Tell me Listitia!"

“I don’t know anything!” I grit my teeth as his energy slid behind my eyes, the events of my day fluttering through my mind. He was going to see, and I’d sworn not to tell. I pushed back against him, slamming a series of doors closed in my mind, locking the memories from earlier away.

He beat against them, his roar thundering through the halls of my mind. His burning hands clenched onto my arms. “Listitia, tell me. She could put herself in harm’s way! You are her friend and mine—you must say!”

I grit my teeth, trying to withstand the avalanche that pounded against the layers of my consciousness. My mind trembled from the assault. Nails slid down the softest parts of my memory, teeth ripping at my waking thoughts like a monster in the night.

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I fought back, my voice shaking. “She is my friend, and her choices are not yours to control. “I sent an explosion of wind through the mental tunnel blowing back the monster that raged at my doors.

His voice was like thunder around me. “She is the love of my life. She carries my son, and I will not sit by in silence while she doubts my ability to protect her. Damn it Listitia... let me in!”

“We—are—NOT—yours to rule— we choose our own fates, Mathious!” Grabbing a string of water from the ocean, I slung it at his face, but he caught it in his hand with a hiss. The monster in my mind backed away for a moment, allowing me to gasp in a breath.

A shrill screech cut through the night like a knife from behind us. “Mathious!” Gretchen stood there with her fists balled, Callum lunging forward, slinging Mathious away from me.

The two of them rolled across the deck of the ship. Callum landing a blow to Mathious’ jaw.

“Stop it now!” Gretch ran toward them, but I cut her off, watching as they tumbled off the upper part of the deck, some six feet with a thud, wrestling with each other.

“Gretch, wait.”

“He could kill him.”

“If Mathious wanted to kill us, we would be dead already, Gretch.”

He’d pissed me off and I wanted to punch him myself, but I understood he was terrified. She was hiding something from him and I’d yet to find out just how bad of a thing it was. “He’s worried Gretch.”

Callum flipped Mathious over onto his back and pinned him with his knees. “Calm down!” he screamed as Mathious flipped him off and stood. Callum jumped up and grabbed his arm, preventing him from charging up the stairs.

Gretchen and Mathious were locked in a hard stare. “You are my love, and this is *our* child. I will not sit by while you are both in danger.” He yelled up at her.

“I’m not some damsel.” Her head tilted toward me and back to him. “And you have no right to force yourself upon my friend. You told me you didn’t believe you were above us. That we’re all equals, but that was a lie!”

“My darling, no, it wasn’t a lie.” His voice cracked. He tried to take a step forward, but Callum held him.

“It was a lie!” Her voice was hard, cruel, almost. “I do not wish to see you anymore this night, go!” Her words cut deep. Mathious’ shoulders slumped, his fist balling as he yanked away from Callum, who moved to put himself between us.

“My darling, I’m sorry. Please—”

“I said no, now go!”

“Come on, give her some time,” Callum said, his hand on Mathious’ shoulder, leading him from the deck.

My heart ached for him. I should have been angry, but I’d never seen Gretch like this. Her words were cold and hard and there was no softness in her eyes. She was another person entirely.

Several minutes had gone by and finally, her chest slowed, her breathing calming before she looked at me. “He will not interfere any further tonight.” Slinging a pack around, she dug out a candle and placed it on the deck. It was like I lost the ability to breathe... did she just overreact on purpose to drive him below deck? “Gretch, what did you do?”

Her eyes were serious as she looked up at me. “I did what I must. Don’t worry, when I go below, he will be there ready to apologize for his ghastly behavior against you.”

My mouth fell open. *Who was this person? My sweet kind friend had just devastated her love to buy us time alone. What the hell was she planning?*

“Gretch, I don’t need an apology.”

Her head tilted toward me, and a grin slid across her teeth. “You kept him out.”

By the gods, she was right. I had not only kept him out, but I’d fought back against his mind assault.

“I guess you only ever needed a genuine reason to use your powers. Now come help me.”

I knelt beside her, the chains were at the center of her chalk drawn circle, and Immekus’ blood. “This spell is the easiest. It’s the other that will take some effort.”

She was right. The chains glowed as she spoke her spell above them, first green, then white, and finally red as each ingredient bound to them. She placed the cuffs back in the bag, careful not to touch them, and turned to me with a solemn gaze.

“Lisah, the next part of my plan is... harder.” She swallowed. “I’ll need you in a way I never have before.”

She pulled the diamond from the bag and laid it at the center of her circle, then bones and a snake.

“Ew Gretch! Is that alive?” I jumped up away from her as the green snake flipped and rolled in her hand, tightening around her wrist.

“It was all I could find aboard.”

“I need to understand what we’re doing here.” She pulled in a long breath, making me more nervous. “Gretch!”

“Mathious can never know. He would not consent.”

I bit my lip, kneeling beside her. Guilt ebbing in my chest. *We’d just torn him apart over consent.* “Tell me.”

“When Immekus found us, I noticed he used the scent of your magic. So, I believe if I remove my child’s, not only will he be undetectable, but Immekus would have no reason to seek him.”

“You want to take away the baby’s magic?” It was the worst thing someone could do to a person of magical blood. “Gretch, he will never fill the void that’s left behind. You can’t mean this?”

“Lisah, I was in that tavern. Neither you nor Mathious stood a chance against that creature.”

“But we have a plan!”

“And if it fails, what of my child, then? Who will protect him from that creature?”

“You’re forcing a god into a mortal life.”

She held up the diamond. “His power will be in this and if we defeat Immekus, then I will return it to him.”

“So, it can be reversed?”

“In theory, yes.”

My hands were trembling as I took the diamond from her. “What do I need to do?”

“I am going to need to channel your power. I’m not strong enough to do it myself in this state.” She pursed her lips, glancing at her stomach. “It’s going to hurt, Lisah.”

“Just get it over with.”

Laying in front of her with my head in her lap as instructed, she placed the diamond over my heart, beginning to chant above me in a language I didn’t understand. The winds and the surrounding sea responded, knocking over the lantern,

removing all light except for her magically lit candles. She gripped my arms as she continued, and then I felt it. Like a hook ripping up my center, drawing my power through my insides and into her palms. Her chants increased in speed, the diamond on my chest heating, the baby in her belly kicking behind my head. It was as if my inside were being pulled apart. My heart pounding in my ears, my bones aching deep inside.

She lifted the snake above me and used her nail to slice it open, its guts and blood raining down on me over the diamond. The baby rolled in her belly making my head bounce.

She grabbed me again, her hands trembling, her chants inaudible over the roar of thunder that surrounded us. Lightening split through the clouds and pain shot through my spine. "Hurry Gretch!" I screamed, as a massive wave came crashing over the side of the ship. I lifted my arm, creating a frozen dome above us just in time.

I heard the hatch door slam open followed by the sound of crewmen's boots hammering the deck as the crew hurried to their places.

"Gretch!"

"Almost there."

Her hands trembled, and the baby sent a shudder of kicks inside of her and I prayed he wasn't in pain. Gretch screamed, her body shaking beneath me, the diamond burning white hot and then turning cold as ice in seconds. Another bolt of lightning splintered through the skies and rain poured from the clouds my entire body seizing in pain before I blacked out.

She drew in ragged breaths, her eyes bloodshot as she reached for the diamond, examining it as I came too.

"It worked." Her voice was light, as if a thousand weights lifted from her heart. "He has no need of my child now." Her eyes falling on mine. "You, okay?"

"Yea, I'm alright. Let's get outta this rain." Helping each other to stand we both wobbled a bit. "You will be weak

tonight. Best if you find something to eat before bed.”

“You two going to stay out here in the rain?” Lorna called over the raging storm.

“No, we were just leaving.” I answered.

Arm in arm, we made our way towards the entry when Mathious stepped on deck, his eyes on the skies and then on Gretchen.

“Are you okay?”

She looked away from him, but his voice was suddenly in my mind, like a low rumble. *What has she done?*

Gretch pulled me through the door without looking back, Mathious’ words following me. *I’m sorry for what I did, Listitia.*

Chapter 12

We made our way through the empty corridor, Gretchen's hands trembling at her sides.
"You, ok?"

She looked over her shoulder, blood running from her nose.
"I'm a little shaky, but I'll be fine."

"You're bleeding, Gretch."

"It happens sometimes, it's nothing," she said, wiping it away with the back of her hand, her voice trembling as she spoke. "Let's get you to the kitchen, then I'll rest."

"Not a chance. You're going straight to bed." Mathious was still gone when we opened the door to her room, and I couldn't help but feel relieved after what we'd done. "I'll bring you back something to eat."

She looked terrible and didn't even attempt to argue as I tucked her into bed, setting a glass of water on her bedside table. It was the best I could do for now. Whatever this spell was, it had taken a toll on both of us. "I'll be back," I whispered, clicking the door closed behind me.

Stumbling, I made my way through the dining hall, pushing open the door to the kitchen, struggling to light a candle as waves assaulted our ship.

The kitchen was small, with a hearth for cooking and wooden shelves filled with potatoes, baked bread, wine, and cheese. *What the hell? I thought there was nothing to eat.* I snatched a loaf of bread, a hunk of cheese, and a bottle of wine from the shelf, making my way back to the table. I slammed them down, tearing a piece of bread off. *No food... He is letting everyone go hungry while he feasts, no doubt.* I rolled my eyes, wrapping my bread around a piece of cheese shoving it in my mouth. The ache that spread behind my eyes receded slightly as I gulped down my wine.

“Evening princess. I see you found our reserves,” Del said, sliding a lantern onto the table between us. Drenched from head to toe, deep scrapes covered his knuckles from the steering wheel seeping blood on the table.

“How can you call those reserves? My maid’s quarters held more food.”

“Not all can be as lucky as your maids.” He plucked a hunk of bread from my grasp, taking a bite. “Quite the storm. Came outta nowhere,” he said, his eye piercing mine.

“So, you’re an expert on the weather now?”

“Just an observation, princess.”

The way he said princess made me want to smack him with the wine bottle. Here he was, stuffing his mouth full of food while the children were working on deck in a storm. “How many kids are risking their lives while you fill your belly?”

His brows raised as he stood, snatching the bottle of wine. “Keep the food. I will consider it a part of your payment.”

My entire body stiffened at the mention of the gold he would never see. “It was our gold, you know, that paid for this ship!”

“Without *my* tournament, you had nothing, and the gold you owe will buy the food we need to reach the Isle of Light.”

I choked back a laugh. “The floating Isle? That doesn’t exist, you know that, right?”

“You do what you must and leave our plans to us. Ilia ain’t safe no more... or are you going to argue with me on that too?”

He wasn’t wrong, but The Isle of Light was a tale told to children. And here he was, taking advantage of kids over a fool’s journey. “And what will you do when you reach the Isle of Light?” I said, laughing.

“Such little faith.”

“The Light Bringers are a myth, Del. Everyone knows that.”

“And so were the gods and fae when I was a boy and now look. Ilia’s crawling with them.”

“It’s a fool’s errand.”

“Believe what you will.” He huffed.

“I believe you’re taking advantage of those kids.”

He rolled his eyes, stalking from the room with the wine. “Enjoy the bread,” he said, the door thudding behind him.

“Ugh.” I kicked the chair, my foot throbbing.

“My brother has that effect on women,” Lorna said, coming from the kitchen with another bottle of wine. “May I?”

“Of course.”

She pushed in, filling two small cups she’d carried over. “This bottle’s mine. I stole it from the Horse Lord.” She beamed.

It was pink and sweet like candy. I’d had nothing like it before. “Wow.”

“Right,” she grinned. Her hair was soaked, and water rolled from her hairline down her face and neck.

“Sorry about the storm,” I said.

Her brow arching. “You didn’t make the weather, did ya?”

“Well, no. I guess I’m just sorry you had to get wet.”

“It’s what I live for. The seas, the winds, and the challenge of picking the pockets of nobles.” She flashed me a grin. “No reason to feel sorry for me, or any of us.”

“Besides the children your brother’s extorting.”

Her smile dropped and I instantly wished I could take it back, but it was too late.

Her head tilted a bit, her eyes softening. “Del is not what you think.”

I bit back on the first comment that came to mind. I didn’t want to take it out on her. She’d done nothing to me.

“My mother died giving birth to me, you know. And our father was put to the sword three years later— for stealing food,” she said, shrugging her shoulders.

I had no words, nothing to say to what she’d stated, as plain as if she were discussing the weather. I swallowed the lump in my throat, working to find the right response, but she continued, seemingly unconcerned with what I thought.

“Del raised us, only a kid himself. He got us through it... all six of us.”

Sadness filled her eyes, making me shift into my seat. “I’m sorry for your loss.” My words felt, empty and useless. The same words I’d been told repeatedly about my father. The same words that did nothing to lessen my loss. But what was there to say when someone lost a parent?

Pain nagged at my heart as my father’s empty stare came into my mind. A dark cloud settled on my shoulders, weighing me forward over the table. My mind fled from the memory, grabbing for anything else to focus on.

“Is that how you learned to steal? From your brother?”

She threw back her wine. “Gods no. He would lock me in my room if he knew I was stealing. No, Del finds other ways to make gold for the family. He takes stealing seriously.”

So maybe he was a decent brother, but it didn’t change the fact that there were kids working on his ship being poorly fed. “I hear you, but it still doesn’t make taking advantage of kids right, Lorna.”

I stiffened, waiting for her defense, but she busted out laughing, nearly falling from her chair.

“You think he’s taking advantage of those kids? Ha! Del found those kids, orphans or worse, running from the noose. There isn’t a man on this ship who wouldn’t be sleeping under a gravestone if it wasn’t for my brother.”

Ellis banged through the door, hollering for Lorna to come above and help with the sails.

“Anyhow, see you tomorrow?” she said, biting off a piece of bread, and hopping to her feet.

“Yes, thanks again for the wine.”

Ellis gave me a goofy grin before closing the door behind them both.

Suddenly, my chair flipped from underneath me in a shuddering crash. I slid into the side of the boat and then back again, cracking my head into the table leg.

“Shit.” Things were worse than I’d realized.

“Lis!” Callum’s voice rang through the corridor. Scrambling, I got to my feet, rushing out the door. Water ran down his boots onto the floor, his chest heaving in large breaths. “Lis,” he said breathlessly, grabbing hold of my shoulders and helping me stay on my feet. His gaze enveloped me, his worry passing through me like a wave. “I’m not sure we will make it through this storm. Mathious want’s you up on deck.”



It had turned into the darkest night I’d ever seen. Not a single star gleamed to guide our way. Waves rolled and crashed against us like black walls of dread and the crewman tethered themselves to the ship as they worked to close the sails.

Callum pulled me to the rear of the ship and up the ladder where Del was clinging to the wheel, fighting to keep us alive. Mathious stood with outstretched arms deflecting the lighting that threatened the mast of the ship. The wind wrapped around me roaring like a stampede of wild stallions.

“He said you can help,” Del screamed over the wind.

“I’ve never attempted to manipulate the entire ocean before, Mathious!”

“Center yourself, Listitia. You’re the most powerful Water Fae I’ve ever seen. You can do this!” he yelled. His entire body glowing as he channeled lightening from the clouds above us.

I sucked in a long breath, widening my stance, as Callum’s hands steadied my waist. I could feel the ocean, the waters flowing through my mind, tugging and pulling at my core. They were angry. Something had unsettled them, and they did not wish to bend to my command.

A crash of water slid over the deck, soaking us all. My heart racing as I focused on the currents, trying to bring them under my control.

“Which way to Salencia?” Everything looked the same, blackness swallowing our ship as relentless waves poured inside from every angle.

Del broke away from the wheel, his muscled arm flexing, as he held it with one hand, pointing the way with the other. Ellis, Lorna and many others fought to work the lines as waves crashed over them again and again

I froze my boots on the deck floor so I could work, every muscle in my body screaming to stay upright as Callum rushed to aid Del at the wheel.

A massive wave taller than our ship came barreling toward us. The sky flickering to bright flashes of blue and white illuminating the black wall of death rising behind us. I couldn’t move us out of its way, it was coming to fast, so I opened a hole at its center and pushed our ship on top of it, riding it forward instead. We were perched at the height of the wave as it forced its way through the raging sea. Smaller waves threating us from all sides as wind tore across the deck flattening my drenched clothes against my body. The ocean screamed inside of me deeper than ever before. My magic bursting through my veins like liquid sound. It vibrated within my bones giving me the energy to push forward as the hours passed.

A massive bolt of lightning crashed into the ocean beside us lighting up the night sky. I gasped at the realization of what I

saw. The sand bar that connected the Shimmering Isle to Salencia through the sea was filled with thousands of Shadows making their way toward the island. Even though the flash only lasted seconds, Del looked like he'd seen a ghost. He'd seen death working toward our destination the same as I did.

“You see that, princess? I should charge ya more for this.”

Shit...

Water cyclones dropped from the clouds around us, twisting and turning through the water. Hundreds of lightning bolts exploding through the clouds, crashing down all around us.

Mathious grunted at the onslaught of energy bolts, throwing a massive silver shield over our ship absorbing the hits. His mouth opening to scream, his head dropping back as a beam of pure golden light burst from inside him into the sky above. All of us held on, the entire ship groaning against the rage of the sea, the explosion of light from Mathious blinding us all for a moment.

The cyclones dissipated and the clouds started to fade as the massive wave forced us through the night, allowing us to break free from the storm's edge.

The twinkle of stars and the light of the moon shone down on us as we came out of the storm, the sea quieting around us as we sailed forward on the momentum of the. My arms trembled and Callum swept me up, a welcome reprieve from the tired stance I'd held for three straight hours. I was stiff and sore, but we'd made it.

Mathious' hair was frazzled from the lightning he'd deflected, and his eyes were dark as he took me in. His voice was in my mind as Callum carried me to the ladder.

“This was no normal storm. What did she do?”

“It's not my place to say.” I cut him a glare before clinging to Callum's back as he climbed down the ladder to the lower deck. His eyes on mine as we got to the bottom.

“You are so like the sea, wild and dangerous... and yet beautiful beyond measure.”

I blushed, kissing him back. Both of us were soaked to the bone but being in his arms and listening to his words was a comfort that reached into my heart. Flurries of happiness and pride worked through my belly from his praise as he carried me to our room.

Chapter 13

Our ship cut through the green and blue mirror of water before us like a blade. The thin strip of marshes on our left had thinned the nearer we got to shore, and no Shadows were in sight. My stomach flipped as Salencia came into view with its seven towering volcanoes smoking at the rear of the island and the largest cove I'd ever seen waiting for us.

“Mornin’ princess. Or should I say afternoon?” Del’s grin swept across his lips as he leaned next to me. “That was awfully impressive last night. We owe ya one.”

“So, now you’re complimenting me?”

“Oh, come on, what have I ever done to make ya so cross with me?”

My eyebrow quivered in response. “How about betraying us?”

He sucked his teeth, nodding as he spoke. “It wasn’t betrayal, I just dint give ya all the details is all.”

I let out a long sigh. *It wasn’t a lie. Nothing like what I was keeping from him.*

“Alright,” I said, offering him my arm. It was odd. I’d loathed everything about him when I boarded this ship, but now I could see a softness in him that I hadn’t noticed before... Or maybe I hadn’t allowed myself to see.

“You ready for what’s coming when we pull into that cove?”

My mind flitted to the Shadows we saw crossing the thin strip of marshes the night before.

“Well, luckily, we arrived earlier than expected. It should give us some time to prepare for those demons,” I said.

Del chuckled, bumping my shoulder with his own. “That wasn’t luck. That was you. Besides, I meant the Salencian people. You know as well as I they threw out the gods years ago.”

“Lisah! Mathious needs you below!”

Gretch stood behind us, and relief washed over me at the sight of her. She looked much better than last night. The gentle breeze blew her lavender dress tight against her, revealing a belly I couldn’t imagine could get any bigger. Concern etched in her eyes and my stomach twisted into a knot. Del gave me a quick bow as I backed away. I’d always thought he was patronizing me, but now I understood... He had just been teasing me all along.

“We’re using your room,” she said, through struggling breaths as we rushed down the stairs. Callum stood at the door as we entered wearing a full suit of armor. Mathious leaned over the chained cuffs, adding what appeared to be another set of enchantments.

“I’m surprised you let her come get me,” I said, raising a brow at Mathious. He locked eyes with me, and I realized I’d hit a nerve.

“I go where I wish! I’m with child, I’m not dying.” Gretch bit back as she sat next to Mathious on the end of my bed with a groan.

“You sure?” I grinned.

“Lis,” Callum hissed, shaking his head at me.

Gretch sure had these boys on edge. I tried to stifle my laugh as I leaned on the bed next to them, taking in the newly burned symbols covering the cuffs. “What are those?”

“These symbols hold great power. They’ve been around for millennia.”

“Won’t Immekus sense you, using your power?” Callum asked him.

“Not this kind. It’s something he’s never seen before.”

“Are you sure? Because I swear, he had markings like that on his weapon.”

“Impossible.”

Mathious had always been cryptic about his origins but from time to time he would hint that there was much more to their kind than we knew, and it was moments like these I burned to know more. But I knew it wasn't the time to ask. My once free-spirited friend looked rough and tired as he turned to me with sad eyes.

“I need your mother's Orbuculum.”

My entire body went rigid at the mention of the object that cost my father his life. With my mother dead or missing and unable to follow us, it had been for nothing. My entire kingdom had been slaughtered because of my selfish choices. My chest grew tight, my throat swelling as my eyes filled with tears at the thought of what stealing that Orb had caused. Callum's hand squeezed my shoulder, sending warmth into me. He seemed to have a sense of what I was feeling. I swallowed hard as I moved across the room to grab my pack. Digging it out, I was careful not to touch it as I placed it on the bed between us all.

A small hum filled the surrounding room, emanating from the now gray orb. The center swirling as the light hit it, waking it from its sleep. “Why do you need it?”

“I need to know what he is planning, where he is,” Mathious said.

“Can you not see him, Gretch?” I asked.

“No, something about his power blinds me.”

Mathious leaned forward, strain set in his jaw. “Listitia, I cannot be the one to use it. It would draw him to us.”

After everything I'd lost to get this thing, he expected me to touch it, use it.

I looked between them all, my eyes wide. “I can't. I don't have the power of sight.”

Mathious lifted the now crystal-clear orb in his gloved hands. “I know it won’t be easy, but you have more power than you give yourself credit for.” His eyes seemed to brighten. “You proved that the other night.”

“But I’m not a seer!”

“Listitia, this is more than just a sight stone. This was my mother’s greatest possession, passed down from the very beginning of our line.”

“It wasn’t from our world?” My mouth fell open as I gaped at it. Callum came closer, his arm wrapping around my waist as he leaned in to get a better view. “Why would she give such a gift to my mother?”

He shrugged. “Your vile mother was also once my sister’s best friend. My mother doted on the girls. She liked that they shared similar powers to her own, and when my sister ran off with that High Fae... I think your mother took her place for a while.” He held it out towards me. “It’s priceless.”

The door thudded open, making me jump. Lanor stood with a red dress in her arms. “I’m sorry to disturb you. My brother said you needed something to wear.”

“Perhaps next time, a knock would be best,” Mathious said, pulling the sheet over the Orbuculum.

“You’re right. Sorry.” She set the dress on the table and hurried from the room.

“So how do I do it?”

“The same as every lesson I taught you. Look inside yourself and once you’ve found the deepest place, that soft, vulnerable part of you that is yours and yours alone, look beyond it to the place of silence. Then, let it flow through your mind, opening yourself to it.”

“Sure, no problem.” I reached for it with trembling hands, my eyes on Mathious. “How do I focus *on* him?”

“The Orbuculum is wiser than us all. It will show you what we need to know,” he said, setting it in my hands.

It was cold in my palms and a low vibration moved through my body before a wave of warmth rushed up my arms. The orb was suddenly a burning ember searing into my flesh, my body igniting inside like a flame. The pain was unbearable, and a scream ripped through my mind as I fought to hold on to it.

“Focus Listitia, go into your mind. It is the only way to escape the pain.” Mathious’ voice was only a whisper compared to my scream, but I did as he instructed. Gritting my teeth, I pushed away all thought and fell into the dark place inside my mind. My heart break, every ounce of pain over my father’s loss, my guilt, was all hiding there. It crashed over me like a blood-red monsoon filled with rage. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I pushed through the pain. Walking across the coals toward the silence. The farthest corner of my mind. A tunnel that never ended, reaching before me, growing longer with every step.

Then, nothing.

I was standing at the foot of a cave with a warm breeze passing over my face, a waterfall flowing to my left, surrounded by trees. A diamond shimmering in my palm.

“Fair lady. The king has sent me to retrieve you.”

“Callum?”

He stood between the trees dressed in silver armor with a blue and green cape. Wrinkles pulled at the corner of his eyes and forehead. Time had fallen upon him, but he was still the most beautiful man I’d ever seen. I reached for him. Then a voice like thunder filled the forest that only I seemed to hear.

“From the blood of a diamond, two destinies hold. Pure power in form. Two fates yet unknown. A bringer of death, a savior of light. Come by thine blood, come by thine life. Threatened by darkness, an evil untold.

The mistress of shadows. A winged warrior bold. ‘Tis the heir of thine bloodline. The savior of souls.”

I twisted around, trying to find the source, but it seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere all at once.

“I need to find the Shade! Can you help me?” I screamed at the sky. Other Callum’s eyes were wide as he approached, his hands out as if to calm a wild beast. “What’s wrong Callum?”

He squinted at me, his head leaning to the side. Then, like the wind, moving through the trees, neither male nor female, the voice curled through my mind again.

“*He must wear the stone.*” I looked down and saw the diamond glow like a beacon. Gretch’s child’s life force in my hand. Older Callum in front of me, lifting it from my open palms. An explosion of white light throwing me onto the forest floor, waking me with a gasp.

The familiar wooden floors of Del’s ship were rough below my elbows. Callum looked terrified as he leaned over me, but Mathious was grinning. My head pounded as I leaned forward.

“You, okay?” Callum said.

“What did you see?” Mathious asked.

“I didn’t see Immekus.” My gaze fell on Gretch. “We have to tell him.”

Her eyes went wide. Shaking her head. “No Lisah.”

“What’s going on?” Callum asked.

Mathious’ face was like stone as he turned to Gretch. I could see it in the way he moved. He knew something was wrong. Something big. His shoulders tensed, and the set of his eyes hardened on mine. “Tell me Listitia. If my love does not trust me, perhaps my student and friend will.”

Gretch sucked in a breath as if wounded, shaking her head at me.

“I’m sorry. I have to.”

“No. I will tell him.” She cut Callum a hard glare. “You two need to go.”

“Why?” he asked, a confused look spreading across his face, but I pulled him toward the door, grabbing the dress off the bed. “Come, let’s leave them.”

Callum had gone above leaving me to the whirlwind of memories flooding my mind as I dressed. The words I'd heard in the Orbuculum plaguing my thoughts. The only thing I understood was that Callum had to wear the diamond. The rest of it made no sense at all. *What was the point of a "seeing" stone if it spoke in riddles?* A memory of my mother burned to the front of my mind. "One must be cunning to use the stone, strong of mind. It wasn't made for fools with swords." I rolled my eyes at her words before heading above to look for Callum.

Stepping onto the upper deck, I saw him talking with Del, the shore close in sight, with a crowd of Salencian's growing around the docks. My stomach tightened. *Del would want his gold now—gold we didn't have. And from the looks of things, it didn't seem like the Salencian's were forming a welcome party either.*

Torches burned, and archers lined the cove. Armed warriors positioned themselves at the entrances, and a crowd of people whose rage seemed to carry across the waters met my ears.

Chapter 14

I'd disappointed my mother and father a thousand times. Been locked in my chambers for months for displeasing them and I'd never been nervous to face either of them. *So why the hell were my hands shaking?* "Del. I need to talk to you in private."

Callum looked confused, but he didn't question me. Instead, he moved on to Ellis, discussing the strategy for what we would do upon docking.

"Princess, just the person I was thinking of. I've something for ya below."

My stomach was in knots, sweat beading at my hairline, making my red gown stick to my back as I followed him to his room. He let me in and immediately I realized the room they had given me had been the best the ship offered. This room was small with peeling blue paint, a bed, and a small table piled high with dusty books with a mirror behind it. He didn't pause or hold the door for me. He let it swing shut, trusting me to catch it as he crossed the room, unlocking a cupboard on the wall.

"I have something to tell you and, before you respond, I want you to know it was not something I planned."

He stiffened where he stood, and my heart began racing. I walked next to him, the corner of the table catching my thigh painfully drawing my attention down. The top book was a children's tale, the only book not covered in an inch of dust titled *The Light Bringers*.

I'd never seen the story in writing anywhere and its white binding looked as if the gentlest touch would tear it. The edges were lined with golden leaves and its golden letters were peeling as if actual gold had been pressed on its cover.

"Where'd you get this?"

He held something wrapped in red velvet. His usual sly grin faltered for the briefest of a moment before it pulled back into place. “That old thing? It belonged to my mother. The oldest thing on this ship, I’m guessing.” His gaze drifted somewhere far away for a moment.

“I’ve never seen this story in writing. It’s from *before* the gods?”

“That tattered old thing?” He shifted from side to side, looking down at his feet for a moment. “She read it to me every night.” He sighed.

I couldn’t remember my mother ever spending a single moment with me. Not unless it was to badger me about our divine right to rule and my duty to continue our reign. “That sounds lovely.”

He sucked in a breath, lifting the book and setting in the cupboard, closing it with a click. “That woman had a heart worth more than its weight in gold.”

A long silence filled the room, and I’d expected him to go on, but he said nothing, rolling the velvet between his fingers for a moment.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Childbirth has claimed more lives than war, I’d wager,” he said.

He might not have been wrong? I’d seen my mother’s struggles and seen and heard the losses of so many others. Something inside me pinched tight as the words of my vision floated into my mind. “*By thine blood, by thine life.*” Those words were a dark promise. One that seemed to hint at both the most wonderful and terrible of things.

“Princess, I may not be the smartest man, but I’m sure you didn’t bring me down here to talk about my books.”

Why was this so hard? “Well, if we’re being accurate. *You* brought us down here.”

His brows raised, his head tilting at my pathetic attempt to avoid what I knew I’d no more time to avoid. I swallowed the

massive lump forming in my throat before speaking. My words were a rushed mess. “I don’t have the gold anymore.”

His arms sagged, but his smile never wavered. “I suspected as much when my sister showed me the jewels your maid bought.” He chuckled. “I hadn’t figured her pay was so great, even from a castle as rich as yours.”

“But you still brought us here?”

He pressed the velvet toward me. “Princess, when you see as many folks as I have. Royal ones and the worst of lots. You get ta know a thing or two about people.”

I took it into my hands, a pillow with something on top of it. I moved to flip back the velvet, but his hand covered my own, blocking me.

“Your Crystal Palace and the Shimmering Isles... they’ve been hurting a long while. Children, regular men and women struggling to get by. I’d lost hope in the kings and queens of our time— until I met you.”

“Me? I’m not a princess Del. I’m an outcast.”

He folded back the velvet, revealing a golden crown adorned with sapphires and diamonds. My mouth fell open and I lost my words in a whirlwind of questions. This was worth a hundred of these ships. It could buy food and horses enough for this whole crew a thousand times over.

“Indeed, you are *no* princess. You are a queen, with the heart and the power to protect the people. The first one I’ve seen in an age that I believe would speak *for* us regular folk.”

“I’ve been horrible to you.”

“You are also best friends with a maid and in love with a commoner and seem to have no interest in the crown, which is exactly why you should have it.”

He lifted it from the pillow and placed it on my head. I wanted to run, but I held to the spot, gripping the small pillow in my hands.

“Where did you...?”

“I found it in my mother’s things after she passed. None of us, including my father, know where it came from. I had to hide it to keep my father from selling it, actually.” He laughed.

“I can’t accept this from you. This is... *special*.”

His gaze was warm as he spoke his next words. “As are you. And when we pull into the docks, there will be no going back. I’m hoping this crown will get you safely to their king.”

“Safely?”

He walked back to the door, his hand on the nob. “Last time we tried to trade with these people, I lost an eye.”

Everything he told me swirled through my mind, landing back on one thing. “But the gold I owe you?”

“Pay me back by making a safe place for these kids once you’ve ascended your throne.” The door clicked closed behind him, leaving me alone.

I didn’t want power, I never had, but at that moment, I understood what power should be used for. It wasn’t for riches or some deluded thought of being more important than others. It was about protecting those who could not protect themselves. Creating a place where all could thrive without fear of hunger or pain. Duty wasn’t about sitting on a pedestal being served, it was about standing for those who could not stand for themselves.

The crown gleamed back at me from the mirror and for the first time, I saw it for what it truly was. A symbol of sacrifice. Of the weight one carries when putting all others before themselves. The care and service received at the hands of maids and servants there to aid you as the weight of the world crushes you down.

A sick feeling weighed in my stomach at my betrayal. Not to my mother or father, but to the people who lost their lives because I chose love over duty.

I straightened the crown and smoothed the red dress that lay over my hips, sucking in a long, measured breath, readying myself to face the Salencian people.

Chapter 15

Every able-bodied man was ready on deck with swords and bows aimed for the rock-lined cove that lay before us. Docks jutted into the sea filled with soldiers glaring at our approach. Callum stood with the men, his sword drawing pictures of death through the air as he talked them through strategies.

Mathious and Gretch finally resurfaced from below, both looking as if they had fought a war of another kind. Gretch's eyes were puffy and Mathious' bloodshot and glassy. I felt a twinge of guilt, but I'd had no choice. He had to know, and Callum needed to wear the diamond. If only I understood why. All I knew for sure was that in a matter of moments, I would step onto a dock full of soldiers who wanted nothing to do with me. Presenting myself as Queen of The Crystal Palace, a title I never wanted.

With the warm breeze caressing my skin and skies a brilliant shade of pink, I could almost forget what lay ahead. To dream for a moment of a time or place where me and Callum could find peace together, without threats looming over us.

Aches and bruises riddled my body, my stomach stabbing at my side as I leaned against the ship next to Gretch and Mathious. "You, okay?" I said, eyeing Gretch, trying to get a feel for what had gone on below. Mathious' arms instantly pulled around her shoulder, a kiss soft on her cheek.

"I'm fine. What did you think was going to happen?"

I eyed the god. My mentor and friend and until all of this started the calmest and wisest person I'd known. "I wasn't sure. I've never seen him so distressed until all of this."

"I am perfectly fine, Listitia. Keeping this one safe has aged me more than I'd like to admit. But I remain well in control of myself."

“Me!” Gretch gasped with a playful swat “I aged you?”

“Both of you,” he said, kneeling before her, kissing her belly.

I bit my bottom lip, my cheeks warming at the intimate moment. My heart lightened at the sight of them, giving me the courage to ask my next question.

“So, he knows then?”

Mathious stood towering over us both, a small sigh leaving his lips as his arm wrapped around her again. “I know.”

“Before we go ashore, I need the diamond, Gretch. The vision I was given... it made little sense, but what I understood is that Callum needs to wear it.”

Mathious straightened, a slight tilt to his head as the wind whipped his hair across his face. “I had been hoping you would have gleaned Immekus’ plan, but if this is the word of the Shivanya, then you will receive no resistance from me.”

“Shivanya?”

“Do not worry yourself over details, Listitia. Prepare for what comes,” he said, taking the diamond from Gretch and heading for Callum, who was in deep conversation with Del.

“Did he tell you his plan yet?” I asked.

“His primary plan includes ushering us off to the palace while he and Callum lure Immekus into the volcano.” She sighed. “He refused to allow me to place his magic into the stone. He also believes I’m going to rest with my feet up while he risks his life.”

“Gretch... You could give birth any day. I don’t disagree with him.”

Her lips pursed. “You both have power, all of you trained. I know this. And I will not risk my child, but my magic does not require me to get close, Lisah.”

“Maybe not, but I saw what it did to you before, you have to take it easy.”

“Everyone I love is at risk. I will take it *easy* when this danger has passed, not before.”

She strode back inside, leaving me without another word. So much had changed since we’d left the castle and I wasn’t sure if it was the constant fear of death or her pregnancy, but Gretch was holding nothing back lately and I couldn’t help but grin. She was fearless and I was proud of her.

Mathious strode over to me, his eyes bright as the sea air blew between us. “We will be docking within the next ten minutes. When we arrive, I will go straight for the volcano to begin my preparations. We won’t have long before Immekus arrives.”

“What about the demons? The people here?”

His brows raised for a moment and his hand rested softly on my shoulder. “If I do not contain the Shade, Gretchen will die, and you will be forced to his bed.”

His eyes were soft and his voice solemn, but his decision was set. I’d seen that look a thousand times. I nodded, letting out a sigh, my mind wandering into my past.

When we ran from my castle, the only concern in my mind had been rescuing Callum and seeing Gretch safe, but so much had changed. The creation of these demons, the fall of so many castles, losing my father. Even the people of my palace were dead because of me. It didn’t feel right for us to abandon these people now. “If we don’t help them, they will die.”

“If I don’t stop him, those things will be the least of their problems.”

“How is that even possible?”

His hands tightened on my forearms as he spoke. “He is not the first of his kind, Listitia. When a Shade consumes, he destroys the very soul. There’s nothing left. At least with these demons, the dead will get to move on to The Place of Resting.”

“Can we not fight them both? Save them all?”

“Oh Listitia, sometimes I forget how young you still are.” He sighed again. “If we can help them, we will, but I will have very little time to prepare for him. You’ll need to get Gretchen to safety. Alert their king and, if you wish it, defend them, but from what we’ve seen I cannot say if your magic will be effective.”

A sharp whistle sliced through the air as Mathious’ arm shot across my chest. His eyes locked on mine. He’d caught an arrow in his hand, stopping it an inch from my heart.

“Why would they open fire on us?” I asked. My surprise masked gratitude clear in my eyes as he answered me.

“These are a people who suffered at the hands of my mother and father, Listitia. I am not surprised. Best you go below.”

Callum ran to my side with a shield held high, covering me. The two men held each other’s arms for a moment. Callum’s face was drawn with strain as the two shared a look and a nod as he turned back to me.

“Take cover, princess!” Del yelled from the front of the ship as his men created a wall with their wooden shields.

Mathious threw a black hood over his head and disappeared into the crowded deck.

Callum walked me back to the wall, the shield covering our backs.

“You stay with me, don’t leave my side for any reason.”

Del’s voice rang out above the sea and screamed toward shore. “We have business with your king. “

Another round of arrows rained down over us, landing on the wooden floorboards.

“I’m not afraid Callum. I can help.”

His hands moved, holding my face, his nose touching mine as he spoke.

“You could have the power to tear apart the world, but it will still be my body that shields yours. Understand?”

“Callum.”

“You have not seen actual battle, Lis, or the darkness that lives in men. Promise me you’ll stay out of harms way.”

His eyes glossed over, his trembling fingertips pressing into my skin.

“I promise.”

His lips pressed to mine, every inch of me tingling and filling with warmth.

“When this is all over, I want nothing more than to stay with you, far from everything, and live out my years watching our children grow,” he said and then Del’s gruff voice shook us from our bubble.

“State your business,” a dark-skinned armored man yelled back in response.

“We have a royal passenger who seeks an audience with your king. Call off your men.”

Our sails came down as we coasted up to the docks. Still, no answer came from the man. Yet, his men took no more shots.

Callum pulled me with him through Del’s men, coming to a stop alongside the dock.

Del stood before the man, and we stayed concealed behind the wall of shields.

“We come bearing news. May we drop lines?”

His dark eyes roamed over the crew, landing back on Del. We were outnumbered, but Del’s men had a war-torn look about them. “You may dock, but you can’t stay long.” The man barked.

Del gave a half bow before bracing himself as our ship bounced against the side of the dock.

“I’m Del. This is my crew, and you are?”

“The name’s Warrick and these are my men,” he huffed.

“Well, Warrick, I need you to clear these docks. I’ve got special cargo here.”

Warrick cocked his head to the side, a sneer pulling up on his whiskered lips. “Yea, like what?”

Del backed out of the way with his arms extended, presenting me.

“May I present to you, the Queen of the Crystal Palace.”

Warrick’s eyebrows pinched together, and my stomach did a flip at the declaration of me as queen. Every inch of me wanted to flee from the title, but as I looked upon the faces of the men the memory of those demons tearing through people like freshly churned butter came to the forefront of my mind. So instead of fleeing, I gave him a smile as Del and Callum lifted me onto the dock. His eyes roamed over my face and hair and stopped on my ears as the rest of our crew joined me on the dock. Del gave instructions to those behind us, and I watched Mathious slip unseen through the crowd, heading for the forest.

“You’re one of the Fae? Those fake gods,” he sneered, gripping his sword handle.

Callum’s hand closed over Warrick’s, keeping his sword in its sheath. “It’s better for you if that stays where it is.”

“I am what you say, but I’ve come with a to help.”

Murmurs moved through the Salencian people, and then a voice screamed above the rest. “Go home! We don’t want your kind here!” Others joined in agreement. A wide smile revealed several missing teeth from Warrick as he and Callum stared each other down.

“Something terrible is coming. You all need to take cover in your king’s palace or the mountains, but you must hurry. They will be here by nightfall.” I said.

Warrick growled as he looked at me. “Something terrible already came.”

“Watch how you speak to her,” Callum growled.

“Warrick, the castles of Ilia have fallen. Demons of shadow are headed this way. I implore you, please escort me and mine to your king so I can warn him.”

“The fae brought demons!” A man screamed from behind. The crowd of warriors now mixed with civilians as well, shoving each other to get a better view of me.

“This is how you treat a queen?” Del growled. His men formed a line in front of me between the rest of Warrick’s soldiers.

“Seems there are lots of queens of The Crystal Palace around these parts,” Warrick said, spitting on the dock floor at my feet. A large hunk of dirt slammed into the side of my head. My eyes blurred from the sand, but it did not stop me from recognizing the sound of Callum’s blade being drawn.

My breath caught as Warrick’s head fell from his body at my feet before rolling into the sea. Screams and fighting broke out around us as I found myself swept back into the ship. “I’ve got you, princess,” Ellis said in my ear as he rushed me inside.

Everything was blurry, but I could see just enough to lock eyes with Ellis as he fumbled with a cloth and some water. “Here.”

Snatching it, mumbling a quick thanks, I wiped my face clear and spun to go back out, but he grabbed my arm. Gretch’s voice carrying down the hall. “Wait, Lisah, let Callum handle this.”

“Handle it? He just killed their leader!”

“These people are not like yours, they will hear him, even if they would not hear you. Give him time.

“These *people* will die if they don’t accept our help.”

“Hell, they might die with it,” Ellis joked.

I cut him a hard glare and rushed down the hall.

“Where are you going?”

“To change! If they won’t have me as a queen, they damn well will have me as a warrior.”

Chapter 16

I rummaged through three rooms with no luck in finding my armor before coming to a locked door. Kicking it open, I jumped as I rushed inside, surprised to find Lorna inside. Her eyes were wide as she took in my dirt-covered face. “They didn’t take a liking to ya, then?” A grin swept across her mouth as she slid blades into various straps on her body, fixing her bow to her back.

“Not exactly.” I laughed, walking over the threshold. “When we came aboard, where were my armors brought?”

Her eyes flitted to the ceiling, then back to me with her lip pinched between her teeth, sliding a bag from under her bed. “I took them,” she blushed. “I figured as a princess you could easily get more.”

“I understand,” I said, reaching for them.

She handed the bag to me and moved to the door, hesitating on her words.

“If we survive this... I wonder if I might visit you.” She twisted into the opening of the door, leaning awkwardly, her eyes on me from the corner. “It’s just... I’ve never had a female friend and my mother... I never...”

“Of course. I believe we have much to learn from one another.”

She let out her breath with a quick grin. The door clicking closed as she took off down the corridor.

Suited in my armor with a hooded cape pulled over me, I was relieved to find my sword and dagger in my own quarters where I left them.

The roar from above seemed to have quieted as I came upon Gretch and Ellis who stood at the entry to the ship’s uppermost deck. She held her tattered leather sack in her arms,

weighed down with who knows what, wearing a curious expression. “What’s going on?”

She beamed in my direction. “They are listening to him.”

My shoulders relaxed from the tension I hadn’t realized I’d been carrying. “Good! Stay here until I return for you.”

“Lisah, it’s best they don’t see you.”

“I don’t intend for them to.” I tugged down my hood and hid my sword beneath my cloak.

She nodded, but then let out a groan grasping the wall, Ellis taking hold of her elbows.

“You all right, miss?”

She swayed a bit in his arms, her face pulled tight before meeting our gaze. “I’m fine. I get pains from time to time but they pass quickly. Thank you, Ellis.” She straightened, making her way outside, and I had to fight the urge to force her into her room. Ellis cast me a worried glance as he followed at her heel.

“Keep her safe,” I whispered to him.

“Mathious already employed me in the task, princess,” he answered quietly.



Night was nearly upon us, and I could see Callum speaking with the Salencian people, so I slipped into the back of the crowd to hear better.

He stood tall in front of them, his voice deep and commanding in a way he’d never spoken to me before sending a thrill through my body.

“We need to be ready to push them back as they cross the marsh. If they make it to the main island everyone you love will die,” he warned, pacing between the warriors. His shoulders were tense, and the hilt of his sword was tight in his

grasp. None of them moved, intent on his every word. Pride swelled in my heart.

“Your women and children need to be moved to a safe location, either the farthest mountain or out to sea, where the Shadows can’t reach them.”

Heads were turning between them. The murmurs grew louder as they panicked over the loss of time to prepare. With the sun barely peeking over the ocean, time was running out. “How are we supposed to get to the outer beachside villages in time?” One man yelled.

Another agreed. “They are filled with families!”

I wanted to jump in. Tell them there was nothing more that could be done, but I held my tongue. Callum’s eyes were steady as he answered the men. “Send word to them. Choose your fastest riders. You five build fires at the entrance of the marsh. The rest of you follow me.”

Everyone leaped into action. Mothers and children, I had not noticed rushed toward the boats while others ran for the forest. Del and his men followed, and I couldn’t help but feel a bit surprised. *They had done what they had come to do. Nothing held them here. Why did they march to their death?*

Fires lit the night, and the sound of the tides was all we heard as everyone waited. I watched as Callum set up their archers near the burning barrels and prepared their pikeman and swordsman. It wasn’t much of an army, but it was better than nothing. He hadn’t noticed me yet thankfully. It was better if he thought I was safe on the ship.

A snap from the marshes made everyone jump. Callum’s arm raising, commanding them to wait. But I knew they’d come, the very breeze seemed to still around us. Whatever these demons were... nature itself seemed to hold its breath in their presence.

Then, with squinted eyes, I saw the first of them. Like black smoke flowing across the low water, they slithered toward the first men. Fear shot up my spine like ice as I realized Callum was with them. He stood ready, his sword poised to fight. The

men turned between each other as the smoke curled through the mangroves and twisted grasses getting closer.

I ripped my cape from my body, screams ricocheting through the night. Callum's sword bursting into flames as a rain of arrows blanketing the shallow waters. Every man's blade and arrow burst alive with fire. Gods, I hope it would be enough. Running to the closest flame barrel, I drenched my sword, slicing it through the open flame, my sword bursting into flame just in time. The Shadows black smoke pulled into dark figures. Their soulless eyes and jagged white teeth chilling me to my core as they filled the beach between us and the marsh.

Another rain of fire arrows landed on the Shadow's. Strange shrieks pierced my ears, but they did not stop. The burning arrows fell through them as they changed back to their smoke-like form, forcing their way through the lines of men.

Callum fought to keep the soldiers in formation, but fear forced them apart, the lines lost as the Shadows reformed, launching themselves on the men. Their long-clawed fingers opened the men's soft leather armor with ease before moving to their next victims. Callum sliced through one, its body falling apart only to pull itself back together on the sand, its black blood pooling around it before seeping back inside itself.

Three of them feasted on a man by my side, their long tongues licking the blood from his wounds. Lunging for them, I sliced the head from the nearest one's shoulders, its hand dropping the man's heart to the ground. The others coming for me. I slashed at them, connecting with one before it could turn to smoke, its black blood splattering the sand. The other forced itself on me, taking me to the ground. Its teeth sliding up my throat, stopping at my ear. Its long-clawed finger stabbed into my armor, unable to reach me through the thick silver.

Feet trampled around me as I struggled against it. Screams echoed in the night, and black Shadow demons filled the surrounding sands, bodies falling like red rain around me.

“Stop!” I screamed, but it was no use.

It slammed its claws into my armor again, trying to open my chest. I grabbed its clawed hand in mine and yanked my dagger from my side, burying it into its skull as its body turned to smoke above me.

Rolling to my feet at a run, I looked back to see it pull itself back together. Hundreds of men littered the ground, blood soaking the sand. My heart raced as I ran through the scattering men and soulless eyes of the Shadows as they feasted on their prey.

My heart was pounding in my ears as I searched for Callum. *Where was he? Damn it!*

Shadows knocked the barrel of fire to the ground and flame spread through the dry grass, lighting the night a blaze and setting the water a orange glow.

It was chaos, and the Shadows would break free from the beach before long. Everyone was running except a small group of men that stood with Callum and Del on the front line. They were surrounded back to back, their burning blades slicing through the Shadows at the entrance to the marsh. My entire body went numb as I took in the swarm they held back. Ten thousand at least drew nearer and I knew we were going to die here before Mathious had time to return.

All around me people fell, torn apart, the screams slicing through my mind like a knife.

I ran to Del and Callum, throwing my sword to the ground, pulling a wall of water from the ocean around us forcing fifty shadows into the sea.

“It’s sure good to see you, princess!” Del yelled over the roar of the water.

Shadows hurried past us toward the screaming soldiers, heading for the village that lay up the hill.

“Lis! Callum’s voice broke as we locked eyes. “You had to stay on the ship!”

“And watch you die? Not a chance!”

“We gotta stop these things from getting in or none of us will see tomorrow!” Del screamed. I could see the pain in his eyes as he looked away from the torn corpses of his crew. *Damnit, why had he stayed?* I drew in a breath, steadying myself. The memory of one of the many lessons with Mathious coming into my mind. *“It’s one of the hardest things I will teach you, Listitia. To look inward and focus when all hell was breaking loose.”* A lesson that was only mastered with time he’d said. He was more right than I’d known. It seemed impossible to block out the carnage that was happening around me, but I had no choice. They needed me. Now, more than ever before. I closed my eyes and drowned out all the sounds until I felt my power.

My eyes flicked open, taking in the scene anew, the path to the marsh lying before me. It was narrow, and it was the only thing connecting Salencia to The Shimmering Isle. My mind flitted to the men from earlier and the people who lived on the beaches. A lump rose in my throat. “I know what I have to do!” I screamed. “I’m going to drop the water wall and when I do, I need you both to run like hell up the hill. Don’t look back and don’t stop, understand?”

“Lis?”

“You must!” My voice broke, Del’s expression falling. He grabbed Callum and turned to me.

“I’ve got him, princess. I’ll get him there.”

“The hell you will.” Callum shoved him off. They wrestled for a moment, my voice shrieking. “Damnit, You must. I am your queen; it is my command. Go now!”

I dropped the water, Callum’s eyes filling with tears. “No!”

Del yanked him and Callum fought to get back to my side. I forced the sea up between us into a wall of ice that ran as high as the stars, running the length of the beach and trapping the feasting shadows inside with me as the surviving soldiers ran for it.

“Go now!” I screamed through the ice wall.

Callum commanded all the men to retreat to the hills leaving me on the beach alone.

With the soldiers running to safety, I turned to the sea, facing her. Shadows stopped before me, taking me in. The space before me turning black as they continued to pour in around me. They were slithering smoke twisting in the darkness, glinting in the light of the flames that littered the beach. The charred flesh of the fallen men smoked, choking me as the wind blew in my face.

I had failed to save my people, to save them and would not do it again. The thought of more innocents dying because I'd been afraid of my birthright tore at my heart. Losing some to save them all was the only chance we had. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I called to the sea, drawing it to me. Shadows frantically pushed themselves against the wall of ice, trying to flee, somehow sensing the danger that was coming.

A dark clawed hand wrapped around my throat, another around my leg and wrists, their claws digging into my body in the places not protected by my armor. Long tongues pulled through the blood that ran freely from my wounds, but I held my position. Thick ice curled around my legs, forcing me deep into the sand and holding me steady. My mind focused on the sea, drowning out the screams, the cries, and the gurgling moans of the Shadows at my neck. My armor the only thing keeping their claws from tearing open my chest.

Then I felt the sea receive my call, her tides shifted, rolling in at my feet and rising to my knees, then my waist. The Shadows claws loosened on my body and pulled away as the waters rushed in behind me, blocked by the wall of ice at my back.

Over my shoulder, through the crystal-clear ice, I could see people reaching the tops of the hill. The ships in the docks rose with the seas as the crewman rushed about to loosen the ropes. I could feel it now, the sea and all her might flowing in me and around me as one.

The marshes before me were still full of demons, struggling to back away from the rising sea. The ice wall behind me was

trembling from the weight of the water and it became harder to hold. But still It wasn't enough.

As soon as I released the sea, they would come again. A cry broke through my lips at the weight of the sea, my arms trembling, the ice wall behind me cracking down the center.

“I'm so sorry.”

I twisted myself up into a cyclone of water, drawing the sea ever higher, the wall of ice crashing behind me, water rushing over the beaches as far as the eye could see. I raised it higher still till the very sea itself groaned at my demand, swallowing the marshes whole. The Shadows disappearing into the depths of the sea.

The very world trembled as I fought against the will of the ocean and the draw of the stars. I forced it to my desires, rewriting the very flow of the tides. Black water slammed into the ships where the docks had once lay forcing them out to sea. The docks nothing more than a memory.

I'd rewritten the very shape of the island, but still, I did not stop calling it to myself. I could see everything the sea touched as if I were one with it and I felt the marshes. They still breathed much too close to our shores. Tremors shook through my body as I forced more water up from within the core of the world until I felt the last of the marshes go under.

I moved through the water at the top of the cyclone, dropping myself at the top of the hill.

My boots slogged deep into the muck where the sea had touched its uppermost point. Turning to look behind me. The sea did not recede. It remained as I had commanded it. I had rewritten the very currents and they would never be the same again.

My body trembled, my knees landing in the muck, my hands keeping me from falling face first into the grass as boots thundered towards me.

“What have you done?” Callum was there pulling me to my feet.

“I've stopped them.”

He looked around, the sea raging, angry with its new home.
“I see.”

“I’m tired,” I whispered. Falling into his arms.

“I’m going to get you out of here,”

He pulled me into his brawny arms, holding me on my feet as white smoke poured around us from the extinguished fires. “Lisah, we need to get you back to the ship before it’s too late.”

A crowd of villagers carrying torches and swords rushed toward us. Wails and cries echoed from them. Del ran ahead of them to meet us.

“You need to go, now!”

“Why?”

They shared a look together, Del looking at his feet. Callum holding me in his gaze. “Lis, they believe you murdered their people. It isn’t safe here.”

“How can they think that? I saved them!”

“Ye, we know that, but these are common folk. To them, all they saw was you drowning their villages.”

The rage from the crowd was growing louder as they hit the top side of the hill, Del still working to catch his breath. My legs were firmly on the ground now, and I put my hand on Del’s shoulder. “Thank you.” My eyes took in the injuries covering his body. “You didn’t have to stay.”

“Somewhere along the way, you worked your way in here, princess,” he said, pointing to his heart. “I couldn’t leave you to face this alone.”

Callum reached for him, holding his shoulder. “Thank you.”

“Now, its best we get you to safety,” Callum said.

“For their safety,” Del chuckled.

I had just saved them all. How could they not understand?
“No, I want to explain myself to them.”

Callum pulled me gently toward him, the people's rage clear on their faces as they neared.

"Murderer!"

"No, you don't understand!" I yelled.

I rushed forward, Del grabbing hold of me as the crowd formed in front of us, screaming for my head. *How could they not see that I'd saved them?* Their eyes were like black rage, their burning torches shaking at me with a fury and hatred I'd never seen before. "Please, you need to listen to me!" Callum's hand came to my own with a gentle pull.

"Come on, we need to go."

Del nodded in agreement, his eyes going wide, throwing himself in front of me with a grunt as a spear stabbed through his chest from the back.

"Del!"

His last breath no more than a whisper. "Run."

The crowd lunged forward. I screamed trying to lift him up, but he was too heavy.

Callum grabbed me and threw me over his shoulder, running for the ship with the shouts of the mob at our backs.

"We must go back. We have to help him!"

"He's gone Lis!"

Chapter 17

“**W**hat do you mean, you left him?” Lorna shrieked. Gretch and Ellis looked at each other with horror in their eyes. Young crew members gasped in disbelief at the news as Callum tried to explain, but Lorna was not having it. Her leathers were covered in blood as she shoved Callum aside, stopping an inch from my face, her eyes blazing. “You did this.” Her arm motioned around the ship to the sea. “You did all of this. How many died for your throne?”

It was like being kicked in my stomach. “I didn’t do this for a throne, Lorna. I did this to save them.” Grabbing her. “You all had to leave.”

“You got that right.” Lorna barked, shoving me aside, Ellis on her heels as she climbed up on the rail of the ship diving into the sea.

“Where are you going?”

“Well, we can’t leave him, can we?” Ellis answered, leaping overboard, swimming for shore with her.

I rushed to the side, watching as they swam. “We have to help them.” I begged. But Callum circled me in his arms. I tried to push him off but was too weak.

“They can pass safely, you cannot. They need to grieve, and for them, that starts with bringing back his body.”

“This is my fault, all of it.” Callum’s hand was soft in my hair as I buried my face in his neck. *If I had married Thadious, maybe none of this would have happened.* A sob burst from my chest at what the other choice would have meant.

“It isn’t your fault,” Gretch said. “The blame lies with Immekus and Ravina, not you.”

I could see she meant it, her eyes were filled with pity, but the children and young men’s faces told another story. They

wore a look of a loss that would live with them forever. They were alone now, with no one to look out for them and it was my fault.

Looking over them, I knew I owed them more than I could give. My heart ached as I spoke above the sound of waves and wind. "It's true. Del died saving my life." My eyes went blurry as I continued. Every one of them stared at me, waiting for more. "I know I didn't know him long. Not like all of you, but in the time, I came to see what an honorable man he was. He was good." My voice broke. "And he cared so much for all of you. I am so sorry." A sob broke through my apology, but I forced it away. "I promise you, I will do everything in my power to keep the realm safe."

A young man I'd seen before with Ellis stepped forward. "We know it's not your fault, it's just hard to lose him. But you're safe here with us." The others all nodded, with murmurs of agreement behind him.

"Thank you."

"Lorna will take some time, but she'll come around, don't worry," he said.

"We need to bring the ship back to the coast." Callum said, pointing to a place in the distance where the water and shore met at equal heights. "Can you get us there?"

With a flick of my wrist, I set the ship in motion for the shore before joining Gretch.

She looked so sad, her hair flowing in the wind as she watched the shore close in.

"Let's get you cleaned up."

I wanted to argue, but I didn't have the energy. I let her wipe my face and arms. The bucket turned blood red from the gashes that fought to heal across my body from the claws of the Shadows.

"What were they like?"

The soulless empty eyes were the first thing on my mind, then I remembered the sensation of their clammy taloned

hands grabbing hold of me making a shiver run through my body. “Nothing like I’ve ever seen.”

“I feared as much.” She put down the towel and pulled her pack into her lap, pulling a stained brown leather book out. “This is my mother’s grimoire.”

She flipped it open, thumbing through the thick cracking pages.

“You took this from Raza?”

Her eyes were stone cold. “It’s mine as much as hers,”

“What are you looking for?”

“This book speaks of many things, some light and some dark. I believe I saw these creatures once before. When I was little, and my mother was working her spells. She’d left this open on a table.”

“I thought your coven specialized in herbal magic, Gretch.”

Her eyes seemed to sparkle as she grinned up at me. “Our magic is born of this planet, Lisah. It moves in both the light and the dark, as does our magic.” Stopping on a page, her finger trailed a set of written words that moved vertically. “Here, this is a potion that can both stop and start a man’s heart depending on how much is given.” She flipped toward the back. “And these, from here on, are spells my mother’s created herself with her sisters.”

“Sisters?”

“Not literal. Four covens, all with their own specialty, once ruled this realm and the humans that occupied it long before Sha and Dune. My mother, Lamaria, Jaqueline, and Ravina were next in line as High Priestesses.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“What would it have changed? I’m your handmaid, nothing more. My future as High Priestess was lost long before either of us was born.” She flipped open a page scrawled in black chalk, empty eyes staring back at us. “This gave me nightmares when I saw it and when she caught me looking,

she slammed it shut. She called them Creatures of the Endless.”

Gretch let out a wince, grabbing at her side, cutting me a sharp glare for noticing so I looked away quickly.

“Endless what?”

“Sorrow.” She turned to the next page, taking a slow breath. Images of blood vials, bone, and herbs were drawn on the page with instructions in a language I didn’t know.

“These creatures, at least the ones here, are souls. Trapped between here and the Place of Resting,” she said.

“I don’t understand how she trapped them?”

“Ravina’s coven had an incredible gift. If a mother could not conceive, they could bring on her pregnancy, even quicken it. They could heal the dying... *and* raise the dead.”

I raised my brows as I spoke. “Raise the dead?”

“That was forbidden, of course. The ones brought back were mere shadows of themselves.”

“So why does your mother’s book contain a spell for another coven’s power?”

“That, I don’t know. But if I’m reading this correctly, this should reverse the condition.”

“Reverse death? As in, saving the Shadows?”

“I believe she raised them from the victims of the war.” Her finger traced the page. “It says here if it’s taken in time, and the body is intact.” She sucked in her breath, grabbing her side, her words strained. “It requires something... impossible.”

I wanted to ask her if she was ok and make her go rest, but I knew where that would lead. “So, the more she kills, the larger her army will grow.”

“This requires the blood of a Light Bringer, Lisah.”

“Oh, come on... they don’t even exist.” *Fantastic, the one hope we had was wasted on old witch tales.* “Does it say how we kill them?”

Her eyes left the book and locked onto mine. “Killing the witch that created them... and any connection to her lineage.”

She closed the grimoire and put it back in her bag as the ship slid next to shore. No one was in sight, the light of the sun touching the sides of the swaying trees as it rose.

“So nothing about how to defeat Immekus?”

She let out a long sigh. “He is not of our realm... there was nothing on him. I’ve been searching every page of this book for days. I only came upon these hours ago.”

She hunched over with a groan, falling into my arms. “Gretch, what’s the matter?”

Her breaths were heavy as she looked up at me. “I think the baby will come soon.”

“Now?” Sweat broke across my brow instantly. Her quick laugh followed.

“Not now, but I think in a day’s time, maybe. I swear, if his head were any lower, it would be between my knees.” She laughed, standing again then letting out a wince falling back into my arms, droplets of blood speckling the ground below her gown.

“Shit, Gretch, what do I do!”

She grabbed her side, her breath catching as she forced out her words. “Help me stand.”

“No! You need to lie down.”

“I will, as soon as we can. Say nothing to Mathious yet. I don’t want to worry him.”

“You can’t ask me that, this is his baby too and something is wrong.”

“We will tell him once we’re safe. Blood is a natural part of childbirth, as is pain, and being my first we should have plenty of time.”

She seemed to have caught her breath, standing straight, her eyes cut across the grass to where Mathious was making his

way toward us from the nearby village. He was helping Lorna and Ellis carry the lifeless body of Del

“Hide my blood, please.”

“Don’t ask me to do that.”

“Do it now. He can’t know, not yet. He can’t lose focus.”

Everything in me screamed that this was wrong, but the desperation in her voice was impossible to ignore. I pulled the blood from the ground and flicked it into the sea, leaving no trace of it. “If you bleed more, I won’t be able to hide it once he’s here.”

“I know,” she said with a sigh. “Oh gods, look.”

They were back, Del’s limp body in their arms. Gretch and I shared a look before moving wide, allowing them onboard.

They had removed the weapon, leaving a gaping hole between his ribs. Lorna’s face was blotchy and wet. Ellis looked ashen, his usual smile gone as they carried Del below without giving me a second look.

I wanted to follow, but Mathious took my hand, pulling me back. “Let them mourn.”

Callum looked just as sad as the others as he watched the door close behind them.

“Were you successful?” Gretch asked.

“I was able to set the trap. If all goes according to plan, you will have nothing to do other than await my return.”

Gretch’s eyes were burning into the side of his face, but Mathious dared not look at her. Instead, he faced Callum. “Any luck on reaching their king?”

“We were a little busy here,” Callum said, looking over the mass destruction that lay before us.

Broken docks floated in the sea, and bodies were strewn all over the grass.

Mathious looked at me and I felt his empathy caress my mind. “*You did what was necessary.*”

I knew it was true. But it still hurt. And the people of Salencia did not see it that way either.

“Get behind me, Lisah.” Callum thrust himself in front of me, his sword drawn as three men in leather armor rushed forward from the village. Mathious stepped in front as well, gently pulling Gretch behind him.

“What do you want?” Callum demanded of them. Their hands raised. “We came to escort you to the palace, but we have to hurry.”

“What do you want with her?”

A tall dark-skinned man, much like all the Salencian’s we’d seen, stopped before us in the grass. Black blood still splattered his leathers as he looked directly at me. “I saw everything. You saved us.”

“Your people tried to kill her,” Callum growled.

The man’s head bowed as he spoke. “I know. Forgive them. They don’t understand the evil they were saved from. Nor the choice she had to make.”

“But you do?” Mathious asked.

“I was with you, at the mouth of the marsh, as thousands of those creatures poured in. I watched as some of the strongest men were split wide, their hearts torn from their chests. Again and again, as if nothing satisfied their hunger.”

I came around them, Callum’s hand trying to pull me back, but I ignored him. “What’s your name?”

“Samuel, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, Samuel,” I said, taking his hand in my own. “Thank you for seeing what I saw. For coming here despite the danger, it may place you in.”

“We owe you our lives. It’s the least I can do.”

“Best we move along then,” Mathious said, hopping onto the grass lifting Gretch across.

Samuel and Callum helped me across the gap next.

Gretch leaned into Mathious with a grimace on her face again.

“You alright?” Mathious asked, only to receive a fake smile and nod from her he stupidly believed, but I knew better.

“It’s best if we take the long path. I don’t want you to be seen by the others,” Samuel said.

“We will walk the shortest path. No one will see us,” Mathious said. His eyes were now on me. Glamour us Listitia.”

“What?” You know I can’t.”

“After what you’ve done here... I have no doubts. Glamour us now.”

I could see droplets of blood below Gretch again. Her foot pushed through the dirt, trying to hide it. *Shit, she needed to get to the palace as soon as possible.* I pulled up the best vision I could, that of commoners accompanying the soldiers to the palace. It felt easier than the times I’d tried before, but I was still worried.

“If you falter, I will maintain it.”

“Is now really the time for a lesson?” Callum snapped at him.

“Absolutely.” Mathious grinned, sauntering into the light of the rising sun that shimmered across the grass.

Chapter 18

It worked perfectly. No one so much as looked our way as we made our way through the market square. Callum's fingers squeezed mine as we passed through the gates to the palace that were adorned with stone statues of Sha and Dune. Mathious paid them no notice, but I couldn't imagine he felt nothing passing under his dead parent's statues with their raised weapons.

It felt odd seeking shelter in a palace after running from my own, preparing to beg a king I'd never met to take me and my maid under his protection. But Gretch needed a safe place to birth her child and a healer at her bedside, so I had no choice.

I could see her leaning into Mathious' side more with each step, the bloodied droplets behind her becoming more prominent. She needed this, and I needed a place safe from the pitchforks of angry villagers. *Perhaps the king may back my actions and explain to the people why I had to do what I did?* A small hope burned inside at the thought, but I was afraid to let it burn too brightly.

Two guards dressed in blue and green capes opened the gates for us at Samuel's request.

"Welcome to the Sandstone Palace," Samuel said, leading us through into a massive hall. Shimmering glass filled the room, and I recognized its style right away. Twisted and spiraled glass, tables and candles, the type only found when lightning strikes sand. It was the most beautiful display of natural art I'd ever seen.

"This way," Samuel urged.

There were no maids rushing about, or guards. No children. This palace was silent, a drastic difference from what I had been used to.

"Is it always so quiet?"

Samuel looked over his shoulder as we moved through the corridor, nervously casting a glance at Mathious.

“Answer her truthfully. I do not condone my parent’s actions here.”

He let out a sigh. His voice was unsteady as he began. “After the king’s wife was... taken by the god against her will, she bore a child.”

Gretch and I both stopped in our tracks, and I was sure we were thinking the same thing. *How many women had Dune raped? Even Mathious’ brother had done the same to Ravina and others.*

Mathious let out a low whistle, his fingers fluttering at his sides for a moment nervously.

“My family sees the people of this world as nothing more than possessions. Things to be used as they see fit.” His eyes locked on Gretchen’s. “I, on the other hand, see its people as the most wondrous and beautiful things in all creation.”

“You’re not like them,” she said.

We started moving again as Samuel continued the story. “Um — So after the birth... Sha killed our queen and the child.”

“That’s terrible! It was not your queen’s fault.” I said.

“Aye, indeed, it was not.”

No wonder Salencia had sworn off the gods. “The king has no other children?” I asked.

“One. A daughter. She died from the sweats recently. Since then, the king’s dismissed most of his staff.”

“Horrible news,” Gretch said as we came to a heavy door.

“This is it,” Samuel said, looking back at us as he opened it wide, announcing me to his king.

“My king. May I present, Listitia, Queen of The Crystal Palace.” His voice echoing into the vast expanse of the golden hall before us.

Vines of copper twisted and curled around the windows and a view of the blue-green sea broke past the balcony to our right. The king was at the farthest end of the throne room, a shimmering sheen of golden light casting across the room, blocking him from our view as we made our way toward him.

Mathious' hand shot out in front of us all. "Wait."

Callum's sword unsheathed in an instant.

"What?" Gretch squeaked as he pushed her behind him and walked into the golden light, his body piercing it revealing the king on his throne and a silver-haired woman standing at his side. A woman I thought I'd never see again.

"Queen, is it now Listitia?"

"Mother!" A grin slid across her lips as she took us all in. Her eyes falling on Samuel.

"Leave." Her tone was bitter.

He looked confused. Looking between her and the king, but the king's head hung down as if he were sleeping.

"Go," Mathious said to him.

He moved toward the door, but he stopped, frozen in place.

"Not that way." My mother said.

Samuel turned and without a word walked onto the balcony, leaping from the ledge faster than any of us had time to process. Gasps of shock echoed between us.

"Why? He's did nothing to you!"

"Always worried about those below you, Listitia. I was told to go unseen. *I*, unlike *you*, know how to do what is required."

"What have you done to their king, Alora?" Mathious demanded.

"Oh, he's fine. He's merely revisiting a memory from his past." She slapped his shoulder, squeezing it as she sat back on his lap.

I couldn't breathe, and every step I took closer was drawing the walls in on me. Tighter and tighter until all I could see was

her.

“You needn’t worry. I am only here to talk, daughter.”

“What does he want?” Mathious snapped.

She tilted her head to the side, leaning forward. “Immekus would like you to join him. *With* the maid or without. And, for reasons I cannot begin to understand, he would like my daughter’s hand.”

“And what does this mean for you, mother? I expect there is something you stand to gain?”

She stood, her voice seething. “Stupid girl. Still, you know nothing. I’d hoped your newfound freedom may have taught you something.” Walking down the steps, her silver and blue dress shimmered in the golden reflection of the hall. “When there is a greater power before you, you align yourself with it. Only fools throw themselves on their swords for a cause that cannot be won.”

“What good is being aligned with him when Ravina’s demons are destroying the world?” Callum spat out.

I had never seen him speak against my parents, but he did not cower from her now. His question was one I was sure we were all thinking about.

“Immekus has gone to speak with the witch about her creations. That is all you need to know for now.”

She spoke of him as if she’d always been his advocate. As if my father never was. Her devotion to this false god dripped from her every word.

“I can’t believe you joined with him after so many have died because of him,” I snapped.

“I cannot believe you’ve sullied yourself with this filth. You should be happy he will take you in such a condition.”

Callum’s sword glinted past me, stopping at her throat. “I suggest you watch your tongue. We are no longer in the Crystal Palace, Alora.”

“I suggest you remember you are nothing more than a Stain.” she hissed.

His eyes bulged, a scream ripping between his gritted teeth as he fought to keep his sword at her throat before dropping to his knees.

“Stop it, mother!”

“Alora,” Mathious’ voice held a warning that did not go unnoticed.

“Hmm? It was not I who drew first if I recall,” she said, releasing Callum from whatever pain she’d been inflicting within his mind.” “Times change. It is time for the realm to fall under one ruler. And you, my undeserving daughter, get to be its queen and I, Queen Mother.”

“So that arrogant fool plans to rule over all ten kingdoms alone?” Mathious scoffed.

“Not alone. He wishes to have you at his side,”

“What of the people, once my dear cousin gets his way?” Mathious asked.

She strode down the stairs, passing us and stepping onto the balcony as if it were just another day. As if hundreds of thousands of people weren’t losing their lives. “That I do not know.” She turned back, her arms resting behind her on the railing. “He spoke of clearing the realm of filth. You can speak to him when he returns. I’ve been instructed to have rooms ready for you.”

“We’re not staying here!” I hissed.

A gasp pulled our eyes behind us to Gretch, who was doubled over. Blood ran down her legs, pooling on the floor, followed by a gush of green fluid. Her knees trembled as she fell towards the ground, only to be caught by Mathious, who had moved so fast none of us had seen him.

“Looks as if you’ll be needing that room after all. I’ll have one made ready and send for the midwife.” Her eyes flicked to Mathious. “He will be back in the morning, and he will want an answer.” With that, she left us there.



Mathious' voice shook the hall. "You will send the best healers Alora!"

Gretch went limp in his arms and Callum rushed over to help.

"Alora!" Mathious' voice carried through the walls as he frantically wiped Gretch's hair from her eyes. It felt like an eternity had passed, but three maids and a healer finally came through the door.

Everything was a blur as we followed them up the stairs to the room. Wide windows let in bright light, with a clear view of the crashing waves against the rocky shore below. The aquamarine and gold sheets were tossed to the floor as the maids cleared a space for Gretch. Another pulled off her dress leaving her in nothing more than her white under gown that was soaked in blood.

"Help him!" Gretch's voice shook as tears rushed down her cheeks.

"They will help you both." Mathious' eyes were hard on the maids and healers. His command sent a threat through the air that I felt like ice settling in my mind. The healer's face turned ashen, fear rippling from her. Callum stepped between Mathious and her, his eyes warm, his words controlled and kind.

"Miss, this is my sister, and she is very dear to us. Please do everything you can."

She remained focused on his kind eyes a moment before her shoulder relaxed, and she gave him a brief nod. Her confidence returned to her brown eyes before looking to the maids commanding hot water and towels.

Mathious was seated at Gretchen's side, the two of them staring into each other as if the rest of the room had disappeared. His hands trembled on hers and she seemed to be

working to calm him. I could see the strain as she fought to hide the pain of her contractions from him.

“Gretch, if it hurts you don’t need to hide it from him. We’re here to support you.” I said, cutting Mathious a stern look as his eyes met mine, guilt filling the shadows of his face.

“My darling,” he whispered, kissing her forehead before resting his on hers. “You needn’t hide from me, nor protect me.”

Labor had gone on for hours, the sheets soaked with blood. *How much blood was normal? I’d never seen so much from any living person...* Dread filled me at the thought of losing her.

“I see the head, miss, just a little more.”

Gretch’s screams reached into my very core but no matter the pain, she’d refused Mathious’ plea to ease her pain through her mind. Worried she would miss the moment if she were in a magical stupor.

Another gush of green fluid burst from her covering the bed and running onto the floor. “That was the rest of the birthing sack, miss. I’ll need you to push hard on this next contraction. It’s important we get the babe out quickly now.”

Callum swayed beside me, kneeling on the ground.

“You, okay?”

“Yea, I just need a moment.”

A quick smirk fluttered across Mathious’ face, followed by an eye roll before focusing back on Gretch. Callum rolled back onto his rear, one maid rushing over to him with a damp cloth. No one seemed to pay attention to the pinched brows of the midwife as she worked to stretch Gretch to free the baby. He seemed to be stuck, Over and over, she tried to push him free, but he wouldn’t move. I left Callum on the floor and took up Gretch’s other hand as the midwife worked, but still nothing.

She fell back into Mathious’ arms, her breaths fast and ragged. “I can’t do it,” she cried.

“Yes, you can!” I said, but I was doubting it myself. I’d seen this before with my mother many times and it had resulted in stillborns.

The midwife wiped her brow, her worried eyes looking at Mathious. “I’ll need to cut her. The color of the child is poor, and her blood loss is too great.”

All of us stiffened, it was what we had all been fearing. That maybe Gretch really couldn’t do it.

“Cut her how?” Mathious’ eyes were in slits as he spoke.

“Something I discovered myself, it’s not used widely, but if it works, both should survive.”

The only type of cut I had seen was when one of our maid’s stomach had been sliced wide to remove a baby of a Fae Lord and she had not survived.

The midwife pulled a thin blade from her leather pouch, slicing Gretch below her dress where we couldn’t see. Mathious eyes seemed to burn toward the fearless midwife as she worked. Then a gasp from Gretch was followed by the hurried movements of the maids as they thrust a silent gray baby into a warm blanket.

It was as if the entire room held its breath, waiting for the cry. The midwife patted and rubbed the baby’s back as she held his head down. His arms were limp at his sides as she worked, the maids casting worried looks between each other.

“Is he alright?” Gretch asked.

No one responded. The midwife wiped the babe’s nose and mouth clear with her fingers, but still nothing. Her features were stricken as she looked up at us where we sat frozen on the bed.

“He took too much fluid into his lungs. I’m so sorry.”

Gretch sat forward, Mathious and I rushing to hold her up. “What do you mean?”

The maids leaned in, wiping the baby with warm damp towels, clearing the blood from him and wrapping him in a blanket setting his lifeless body in Gretch’s arms.

“I’m so sorry miss, there is nothing more we can do.”

Mathious looked at them both before jumping to his feet. “He is a god! He can’t die like this!”

But the baby wasn’t a god anymore, and we all knew it. Gretch had taken those powers from him at sea.

“A god cannot die—we do not die, not as you mortals do. He can’t.” His eyes filled with tears before he grabbed a hold of the midwife. “Fix this!”

“I can’t. I’m so sorry.”

Callum rushed between them, but Mathious had already released her, his head bowing.

Gretch held the small baby, jiggling him gently. “Please, no.” Her voice broke before she screamed out, the sound of her cry shrill, making my heart break.

Mathious dropped to his knees, looking at her from across the room. “He was a god.” His words trailed off as they locked eyes on each other.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t know,” Gretch said.

Callum kneeled at his side, holding him. “He’s gone.”

“Please help my baby.” Gretch begged the midwife, who looked away. “I’m sorry,” she said to Mathious who looked back at her with tear-filled eyes.

“My darling,” he said, rising with Callum’s help, joining her bedside, his arms circling her.

“The afterbirth still needs to come, miss. Please let the father hold the child a moment.”

“No.”

She shoved Mathious as he reached for the baby. My heart was in my throat watching them, but the Midwife’s worry seemed to ripple up from her through the room. Gretch wasn’t out of the woods yet. I could see it in her eyes.

“Let me take him, please. I’ll give him back, I promise.” I said and, to my surprise, handed him to me.

He was so small, with dark hair that curled at the top of his head. His little fingers were gray, and his face was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. *Oh, gods.* Tears rolled down my cheeks. *If this were me and Callum's child, I would die to lose him like this.*

The very light from the sun had darkened, casting a shadow over us all. The small babe's hand pressed gently between my fingertips. Shifting him against my body, I scooted over on the bed, ready to hand him back, but something pulled inside of me. Connecting him to me, I could feel it. The fluid in his lungs called to me to release them.

I drew it from him slowly working it from him, the greenish-yellow fluid pulling from his nose and mouth suspended in the air like a stream until the last of it came forth, his little mouth opened wide. A feeling I couldn't explain drawing my lips to his, pushing my breath into him, rubbing his back and breathing into him again until his cry broke at my lips. Color flooded into his fingers and cheeks, with a cry that shook the very room. His hand gripping tightly around my pinky as I stared into his little eyes.

"Lisah!" Gretch's voice cut me from the trance I was in as she leaned beside me, her arms covering mine. "You saved him!"

I handed him back to her gently, watching the light return to her eyes. The three of them looking happier than I had ever seen them.

I backed away into Callum's arms, the midwife stopping in front of us whispering quietly. "It's best if she rests now. She lost far too much blood," she said, drawing me and Callum to the door. "We've readied the room across the hall for you both, and a hot bath."

"Thank you so much," I said, hugging her.

She left and the maids showed us to our room. Mathious and Gretch not even noticing our departure.

Chapter 19

We followed the maids to our new room through the dark sandstone hall only a few doors down.

“They will move next to you as soon as she is able.” The maid said as she opened the.

“The room she’s in is good,” Callum said with a shrug. The maid’s head snapped toward him, stopping in the crack of the open door.

“That is a birthing room,” she said. “A maid’s quarters. Not suitable for royal guests.”

“Looked fine to me.”

The maid flashed us a grin as she opened the door wide. “We haven’t had visitors in so long. It was a joy to remove the coverings from the late princess’ furniture.” She beamed as she waved us in.

Mine and Callum’s breath caught at what we saw. Straight ahead of us were three massive steepled arches looking out to a balcony that was lined with twisting copper vines. The view of the ocean and rising moons filled the entire back of the room. Steam poured from a large round sandstone bath decorated with twisted copper weavings adorned with turquoise gems.

“This is incredible,” I said as we moved into the room, my eyes drawn to the many long-hanging candle holders that were placed in each corner.

The sandstone walls were intricately engraved, and the floor was incredible.

“What flooring is this?” I pointed to the teal, stone that covered its entirety. “That is Chrysocolla stone set-in copper sandstone. It was the princess’ favorite.”

“Beautiful.”

Tarnished copper vines twisted together up the pillars, creating a dome coming to the highest point of the fifteen-foot ceilings with a tear dropped shaped blue and green chandelier, setting the room aglow. The sheer curtains fluttered in the winds coming off the ocean, the salted sea breeze kissing our lips, the temperature absolutely perfect.

Callum looked like he couldn't find words and I didn't blame him. My palace had been beautiful, but this was unlike anything I'd ever imagined. The attention to detail, the care that had gone into every inch of this room, was unimaginable. "Are all the rooms like this?" I asked, catching her before she slipped away.

"The rooms on the northern side are all beautiful, but none like this. The king loved his daughter very much."

That was obvious. He had spared no expense, here.

"Best you get to your bath before it cools," she said as she clicked the door closed.

Callum stood at the table of food motionless, his back to me, all of our bags laying at his feet. Now more than ever I wished I knew what was going through his mind. After everything we had been through, here we were, back in a palace with my mother lurking through the halls, marrying me away for her own gain.

I slid my arms around his middle, his hands covering mine instantly before turning toward me

"Is it wrong that I feel relieved to be here?"

"No Lisah, this is where you belong." His hand came to my cheek, caressing my lips with his thumb.

"With you by my side." I insisted, with a hard stare. "Alone, it all means nothing." His thumb stopped on my bottom lip, his eyes burning into my soul as I spoke. "After traveling with you, seeing the people, Del and his crew. Things are worse than I ever knew. People are starving, being exploited and If I want to change it, help any of them... as a queen I would have the power to do so."

“I know.” He smiled as he leaned across the table, grabbing a craft filled with red wine and pouring some for us both.

He’d always known what took me so long to learn. That my position was never about myself, but what I could do for those around me. It was why he’d been willing to watch me marry another man. He’d seen the horrors of the world I’d been shielded from. Despite my mother’s harsh words and lack of love, they had given me everything.

“When we were out there, I feared I might not get you to safety,” he said, pulling me to him. “That, maybe I would lose you to this world.”

“I was afraid of losing you too.” I whispered.

“You’ll never lose me, neither time nor death could ever bring an end to my love for you.”

“I know,” I whispered.

“When this is over, I want to make you my wife.”

“I want that too.” I held up the ring on my finger.

His smile pulled wide, the dimple at the corner of his mouth making my heart flutter. His hand searched into his pocket, pulling out a gold ring set with the most beautiful opal.

“How did you get that?”

“I won it from Del.” He lifted my hand in his own, rubbing it with his thumb. “May I?”

“You already gave me a ring.”

“But you never actually said yes.”

“Yes, I did.”

“You said yes to something else.” His eyes smoldered, a smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth. “You deserved something better. Do you like it?”

“It’s perfect!” I said, straightening my fingers as he slid it on.

“As are you.”

“What about my title, and Immekus?”

“Let us worry about that tomorrow.”

He was right. We had been through so much to get to this moment, to be in each other’s arms without needing to hide. To get his sister to safety for the birth of her child. And here we were, all together, safe. A table laden with food and drink and a bath still steaming across the room. I bit down on my bottom lip, looking up through my lashes at my future husband.

“First things first,” he said, his hand sliding open the latch at my shoulder armor and then the other, lifting it above my head and letting it fall to the floor at our feet. He knelt before me, sliding my leathers off my ankles, pulling my boots from me. His eyes on mine, looking up from the floor before spreading my legs wide burying his face between my thighs.

Leaning my palms back on the table, a low groan rumbled in my throat as he pulled me into his mouth and slid his tongue between my folds, the feel of pleasure waking a need deep inside me.

My fingers trailed the thick armor on his shoulder until I found the release at his neck. My mind fought to stay focused on the task but when his hands grabbed my ass, pulling me hard against his mouth and moving his tongue inside me, my legs trembled below me. The table dug into my back as I worked the last latch and his armor fell to the floor with a clang. His eyes shooting to mine before a smirk played on his lips.

A low knock sounded on the door making us both jump, Callum helping me pull back on my pants just in time.

Mathious entered, holding the baby wrapped in a blanket, followed by Gretch. I was relieved to see her walking, even if it was gingerly.

She eased into a chair and Mathious handed her the baby before snatching a bread roll from our table.

“It’s important we discuss what tomorrow will bring,” he said.

“How many of those do you need?” Gretch grinned. His smile flashed wide across his face before taking a bite. The baby, grunting in her arms as she glowed with happiness.

“He’s beautiful Gretch, does he have a name yet?” I asked.

“We did finally decide on one.” She glanced at Mathious. “As a sign of respect to the man who got us into the palace, and into the hands of the midwife, and to the ones who ferried us safely across the waters, we have decided on Samuel Dellis Mathiouson.”

Callum laughed. “That’s a mouthful.”

“It’s perfect,” I said, fighting the tears that threatened to come.

“So, what’s the plan? We have waited long enough to hear it,” Callum said.

Mathious pulled a tray of food toward himself while the rest of us did the same.

“I cannot tell you everything, only that there are six realms of existence and places in between each of them, one’s where we have no access to our abilities. I’ve opened a doorway to this place. An in-between of sorts, and that is where I plan to trap him.”

“How the hell are you going to get him in there?” Callum asked.

Gretch reached into the bag hanging at her side, trying to pull the cuffs from it.

“Let me,” I said, taking the baby from her arms. His eyes were a golden brown, just like Callum’s. “He is true perfection.” His little hand gripped around my finger.

“First, we get him into these,” she said as she placed the cuffs on the table and the remaining gems. “My darling plans to disguise the cuffs as golden bracelets and offer them as a gift.”

“How will your magic hold when all of us lost access the last time?” I remembered far too well, the feeling of helplessness. Being trapped between their powers as Immekus

pulled, drawing Mathious to him, watching Mathious struggle for control.

“Because my cousin desires one thing above all others... acceptance. My parents renounced him as part of our family for most of his life when they believed him powerless and when his powers emerged. He expected to be embraced, but they shunned him instead.”

“So your plan is to kiss his ass and offer him a gift?” Callum said.

“What if that doesn’t work?” I asked.

“Let me protect your magic, my love. If it’s within the gem, with the cover of my spells, only you will access it,” Gretch pleaded.

“And if I’m fatally wounded, where you cannot reach me? How will I watch my son grow?”

“How is it that my sister’s magic could even do that in the first place?” Callum asked.

“My magic is more than just inside of me. It is connected to the very essence of this realm.

It is not so easily wiped away. Did you listen to none of mother’s lectures?”

He shifted about in his chair, snagging a hunk of meat from his plate. “Was no point. I never got my power.”

“Do we really have no other plan? Just the hope that yours works?” I asked.

“Listitia, what more is there to be done against a creature like my cousin? He dines on magic as if it were a sweet wine, and with each glass, he grows stronger. His kind were called World Enders. Born every thousand years, they are an anomaly that doesn’t just wield magic, they *are* magic, and they must feed on it to survive.

“But he doesn’t want to end things. He said he wants to rule,” I pressed.

“Now perhaps, but it won’t be long before his hunger grows. It’s his nature. To consume all that surrounds him, no matter his twisted ideas.”

“Why didn’t they kill him straight away?” Callum asked.

“Because of me. I thought if I trained him, cared for him, he would be different. His own father walked away from him and never looked back. I was a fool.”

“You never told me any of this before.” *I couldn’t believe it. I had spent so much time with him and never once did he speak of his family’s origins. Now he was dumping this on us the night before we walked into the snake pit with a creature responsible for ending worlds.*

“It was forbidden to speak of. My family’s secrets were something my parents cherished above all else.”

“The plan seems simple enough,” Callum said as Gretch and Mathious rose, walking back to the door.

“The baby needs to rest,” she said with a smile.

“We will talk again in the morning but be prepared.” Mathious said, as he opened the door for Gretch and the baby.



“Well, at least now we know the plan, I said.”

“It’s more of a one man show if you ask me.”

“Better than no plan?” I said with a shrug.

“I have a plan too...before we all die tomorrow,” Callum said with a laugh, rushing forward undoing my pants and lifting me over his shoulder.

A squeal leaving my lips as he hurried forward, slapping my ass, plopping me into the bath.

“It’s still warm,” I said, grinning up at him.

“Gods, they were trying to boil us.” His grin pulled into his dimple’s.

Laughter burst between his lips, followed by my own, both of us glassy-eyed and pink-cheeked while he fumbled around with his belt before stepping in behind me. His hand slid over my stomach while his other pulled a wash towel from the side, caressing my body with it.

The only sound was the trickle of water and the beat of his heart behind my head. Every inch of me relaxing under his touch. The swell of warm water around me soothed away the months of stress and pain. A sense of peace floated through my mind as we stole this moment for ourselves. The most perfect moment we had ever had. No one chasing or looking to catch us together. No secrets surrounding us, no people to impress. Just him and I alone in a warm bath surrounded by beauty and food and shimmering lights and I never wanted it to end.

He washed my body, pausing at my breasts, and the towel fell into the water, sinking to the bottom covered by the floating flower petals and light that danced across its surface.

Massaging me deeper, moving to my belly and dipping between my thighs, his kiss met my brow before I turned to meet his lips.

He hardened behind me, pulling my thighs wide, his fingers moving inside me. Gods, I wanted him. I’d forgotten the feel of him over these long nights of travel.

Flipping around, I straddled him and his eyes gleamed as I leaned forward before his mouth pulled my nipple deep, sucking me and making my body tense. My insides quivered before sliding down onto his cock, a moan sliding through his lips, his head leaning back onto the bath.

Rolling against him, the water rocked back and forth in the tub until I was lost in the feel of him, chasing the pleasure that was building. I moved faster, both our breaths ragged, his hips surging up against me, my squeals echoing through the room before bursting around him, my body trembling as pleasure

washed over me, but he kept pumping inside with a growl that set my body on fire again.

“You are the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen,” he growled, pulling me from the tub and tossing me over his shoulder, carrying me to the bed. He laid me down on my stomach before spreading me wide from behind. The sound of his desire making me blush.

His hand guided his shaft inside again. A yelp broke my lips at the size of him reaching my wall filling all of me, my eyes rolling and my mind lost. His hand moved to my breast, gripping me, his teeth biting into my neck with a groan before I came again, followed by his roar of release. He traced from my thigh to my breasts before he pulled free from me, flipping me over beneath him.

This was everything. This moment, here and now. Tears rolled from the corners of my eyes as he cradled me in his arms, pulling me up to the pillows and wrapping the blanket over us.

All I could do was stare as I caught my breath, pleasure still rolling through my body as he kissed my breasts, neck, chin, and nose. His eyes met mine and without a word from him, I knew no one in all the world would ever love me as much as he did. It warmed me from head to toe, and I wanted nothing more than to stay in this room forever.

“I could watch you forever, paramour,” Callum said before kissing my head.

“I’m not your paramour.” I teased. “I’m your soon-to-be wife.” I toyed with the small ring on my finger.

“True, but my love... you will forever be my paramour.”

His lips pressed to mine before he shot up from the bed and went to the table of food, returning with a plate lavished with delicacy. Each piece of fruit he insisted on feeding me bite by bite before bringing me wine, taking our time before we moved to the clothes laid out for us.

Finally able to pull ourselves from bed, we sat, dried, and dressed on the balcony, the waters crashing against the rock-

lined shore below as we sipped wine.

“The babies beautiful, isn’t he?” I said, biting my lip, casting my eyes at him.

“Yes indeed. He will make a fine warrior.”

“I’d like to have one of each.” I grinned at him.

“We can have as many as you want.”

“What will we call our girl?”

He pinched his chin between his fingers, leaning forward at my question. I don’t think he’d ever thought that far ahead.

“Whatever you want.”

“No, I want to know. What would *you* choose?”

He thought for so long I almost regretted putting him on the spot, but then he sat up straight, a smile on his lips as he spoke. “Neema.”

It was a name I’d never heard, nor heard him say. My nose scrunched, trying to place its origin.

“You don’t like it?” He asked, his head tilted.

“It’s just not one I’ve heard.”

“It was my baby sister’s... before Gretchen. She died when she was three days old, my mother had been so ill. I held her every day, placed her at my mother’s breast to feed.” His voice cracked a bit. “She was the most beautiful babe I’d ever seen and when we lost her I...”

His eyes went glassy, and he wiped them before turning away from me. My hand brushed his back. “I think it’s perfect.”

He pulled me into his lap, and we sat for what seemed like an eternity. Part of me pretended this was our own palace and he and I were king and queen, free to live out our days in peace with our children.

My peace was disrupted with the memory of Immekus’ cool, hard touch on my thigh and his promise that I would be his. The thought sliced through my happiness like a knife and I

was certain Callum hadn't forgotten either. His eyes shadowed over his wine, looking out to sea, the promise of what tomorrow would bring hanging like a cloud over our heads.

Chapter 20

I woke to rolling thunder and the sound of Callum polishing our armors.

“I hope this isn’t a sign of how the day will go,” I said, eyeing the storm outside as he sat next to me, planting a kiss on my head.

“Whatever it brings, we will face it together.”

A light rap sounded at the door before it flew open. My mother walked inside without pause.

“Good, you’re awake.” Her eyes scanned the room before stopping at the end of the bed. “Well, isn’t this quite the room?” Her stare stopped on Callum. “You’d take *that* over this?”

“You know nothing of love, mother. Why are you here?”

“I’ve come for what is mine.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know exactly what I speak of— I want my Orbuculum, I’m not leaving without it.”

So that was it, after everything that had passed between us, father’s death... it was that damned Orb she craved.

“If I’m to be queen and you queen mother, what do you need it for?”

“We both know what choice you’ll make. You will damn us both to misery. If I can look into my Orb at least I might save myself.”

I rolled my eyes at her. “If you want it, you can have the damned thing. I saw nothing but nonsense when I looked inside.”

“Weak of mind as you are, it never shows nonsense.”

I rushed across the room, yanking my bag from the floor, searching through the contents.

“All I’ve done is work to save you from your own foolish decisions, prevent you from living the life I had before I was chosen by Sha.”

She stormed towards me; her hand outstretched. Callum watched in silence from behind while I searched both bags. “What was so horrible about your life, mother? You were waited on and fawned over?”

“Before I was *this*, I was starving on the street, watching my mother and sisters starve so mind your thankless tongue—give me what’s mine.”

Starving on the streets? She had mentioned nothing like that in all my life. My hand slid to the bottom of the last of our packs to find nothing but a dirty tunic. The Orbuculum was gone. “Don’t stand there and try to make it seem like anything you did was for me.”

I looked up at her and her eyes were wild as she shook her hand at me. Desperation lingered on her features. “I showed your father what would come of this.” She motioned between me and Callum. “Even he could not ignore my warning.”

Nothing she said made sense, just another deluded attempt to sway me to bend to her desire and secure her a place in a palace. My hand slid from side to side within the pack, and there was no mistaking it. “It’s gone,” I said, looking up at her, my mouth slack.

Callum stood straight, joining me at my side and placing himself between us ever so slightly.

“What do you mean it’s gone?” Her eyes went to slits.

There was only one person who could have done this, and she was long gone by now. Lorna was the only one with access and motive, not to mention a history of thievery.

“Someone has stolen it mother, I’m sorry.”

Her hand swung for my face, but Callum caught her wrist. “Don’t.” he growled.

She yanked her arm from him with a huff. “You probably sold it. You deserve what’s in store for you.”

She rushed from the room, the door slamming behind her, and a maid’s head poked inside a moment later.

“He has arrived, and he has summoned you all to the throne room,” she said before closing the door quietly.

“Can you believe her?”

“I’m not surprised by anything that woman does.”

Chapter 21

The King was still slumped on his throne, the crown plucked from his head resting on Immekus'. Its gold and sapphires were a stark contrast to his new attire. He had already deemed himself king, it was obvious in every aspect. His clothing was that of kings, but where he had gotten them? Surely not here, as the thick black fur at his neck was much too heavy for Salencian weather. He wore a long, nearly floor-length black and silver embroidered robe with wide cuffs at his wrists. Silver and blue buttons lined his middle from his waist to his neck with a silken black tunic underneath. A drastic change from when we had met him in the Tavern.

The throne room had been changed as well, a massive table set at the center now, filled with plates full of food. My mother was seated to the left of the head of the table and a multitude of wines lined its center.

A bassinet for the baby was rolled to the side and a tall backed chair sat the head of the table. Gifts were set upon a smaller table and more than ten maids scurried about, filling another table at the far wall with desserts, all working to keep their attention away from their true king, who stared at the floor, drool running down his chin.

“Welcome. I am pleased you were all able to join me. I believe the birth of the young one calls for celebration.”

Mathious beamed at him from across the hall, the rest of us following close behind. The room was beautifully prepared, and smiles and laughter came from every maid I looked upon, but the undercurrent of dread rising around us set an icy chill through the otherwise hot room. The warm breeze pulled in through the wide-open terrace doors, barely keeping the chill from setting my skin into bumps.

“You must bring the young lad here.”

Gretch froze, Mathious pulling the baby from her arms, not allowing her hesitation to be noticed. Her jaw tightened as he walked over to Immekus.

“Thank you for the hospitality, cousin, my love was well cared for last night.”

“Of course, nothing but the best for my family.”

His smile swept from ear to ear as he looked at Samuel, taking him into his arms. My heart was in my throat and fire seemed to burn from Gretch’s eyes into the back of Mathious’ head.

“Oh, what a wondrous little thing you are. We will betroth him to my firstborn daughter, of course. One of our children will rule in every palace Ilia has.”

My mother stood, her lips tight at Immekus’ mention of heirs. “Come, please join us.”

We all looked between each other, Callum’s hand tight on mine and all I could think of was how close the baby was to death, so I pulled Callum with me toward the table. Mathious’ face seemed to relax. All going to plan for him, it would seem, but clearly not Gretch’s because her eyes were like daggers.

“Wonderful work. He looks quite stout!” Immekus said as he lay the baby gently in the bassinet.

I felt a grip release from my chest at the sight of the baby being safely out of his arms and Gretch was at his side straight away, showing no fear of the Shade as she stood between them.

Immekus waved for the maids to move the bassinet to where Gretch was supposed to sit, and I was placed next to my mother. Even stranger, an empty place next to me was left for Callum.

It was odd watching Mathious and Immekus throughout the meal, which most of us picked at. They laughed and joked, and I could see love in Mathious’ eyes. I was certain of it as he spoke to his cousin. Perhaps even a shadow of pain for what was to come, or maybe I was just imagining that because of what I knew. Immekus hung on Mathious’ every word, both

gods finishing two more plates of food while the rest of us sipped wine in silence. Callum's hand gently squeezed my thigh under the table trying to comfort me but it was useless.

My mother was stiff and uneasy next to Immekus and only took a bite when Immekus looked her way, offering him a slight smile before returning her gaze to her wine glass.

How was he so oblivious to the feelings of those around him? He was beaming with excitement, rushing maids over with gifts, ordering them to unwrap them for the baby.

They were mostly baby clothes and small trinkets and toys. A silk dress for Gretch and the final one was heavy, wrapped in blue silk.

"You didn't think I would leave you out, did you?" Immekus grinned as the maid flipped open the lace, revealing a midnight purple and black robe. "Which palace would you two like? This one is much too hot if you ask me."

Mathious held it out. It was absolute perfection, and I could see it fit Mathious' tastes perfectly. "I must discourage the one in the Shade Lands. That witch has turned it into a graveyard."

"How did it go with her? Will she call off the Shadows?" I asked. It was the first time I'd spoken the entire dinner and his eyes landed on me like a beast on his prey. I wished I could take it back, but it was too late.

He rose and came around the table, his hand curling over the back of my chair as he leaned by my ear. Callum stiffened beside me but didn't move.

"It seems the witch is still cross over that little wailing monster. But worry not, I will see to it we do not rule over a kingdom of graves. I simply need more time with the witch."

"Why do you not cast them away?" Gretch hissed across the table, Mathious taking her forearm in his hand on top of the table.

Immekus' eyes stopped on hers and it was as if all the rest of us disappeared. He spoke only to her, his voice slow and measured, as the words formed in his mouth as if they made him sick to speak. "It would seem the magic of the witch

reaches deeper than I can grasp — for now... but you knew this already, didn't you?" He stood straight and cut Mathious a look. "Feisty," he said with a grin. "Bring my bride her gift. She will be pleased, I'm sure of it."

He changed moods and subjects faster than I could keep pace with him and I had to shove Callum down at hearing me called Immekus' bride.

"Into the throne room? Are you certain?" The maid said, looking nervously at the other one by her side.

His features darkened as if the candles illuminating the room had been extinguished. The maid dropped to the floor, writhing. His eyes lit as he watched her a moment before they fell on the other, who rushed from the room without a word. He clapped his hands together and smiled. "There." Rubbing them together as he came back to the head of the table, the woman's cries going quiet.

Both doors thrust open, and a stable hand brought in Nyla. Without thinking, I jumped from my chair and rushed to her side. She looked perfect and she knickered as I came to her.

"Are you pleased, then?"

I had forgotten everyone for a moment. "I can't believe this. She looks well." I ran my hand down her side and over her flank. She had been cared for in my absence, perhaps better than I had cared for her. "Where was she?"

"That greedy little Horse Lord who thought he was going to marry you had her, terribly insecure man... he would not let you keep your plaything." His eyes slipped to Callum. "But I will. I'm clearly the better man."

"Plaything?" Callum said as he stood. I rushed to him, but he blocked me, moving me behind him. "We are betrothed. She's not marrying you."

Mathious stood now too, leaning across the table trying to pull Immekus gaze back on himself. "This is clearly all very new to us. It's best we allow time for it all to settle in, right cousin?"

“Listitia will do what is best for her family, won’t you?” My mother’s voice cut through the room, everyone’s heads snapping in her direction.

“You don’t get to speak for me! I have lived a lifetime under your thumb, no more than a vessel for your conquests, but no more mother, my choices are my own.”

“How could you be so stupid? You were raised better than this.” She turned to Immekus, forgetting me in an instant. “I would be honored to be your queen, provide you with heirs, follow your every command.”

“Alora, hold your tongue,” Mathious growled, but Immekus moved toward her, lifting her snowy white hair onto the back of his hand, his nose sliding up her long neck, breathing her in. The breeze blew her hair from his hand as his eyes fell on mine.

“She was not good to you, then?”

“What? She was...”

“So, it is not only me, then. Parents are horrid things. We will do better.” His hand gripped her arms, his mouth coming to her lips, but his eyes remained on mine as their tongues twisted around each other before he breathed in.

A blue and white light pulled from her mouth into his, and his fingers gripped her tightly as she struggled against him. All of us were uncertain of what we were witnessing. Her body shuddered against his grasp, his hand stopping at her jaw. “A lovely claret indeed, but your daughter is much sweeter.”

My mother’s eyes were wide, her mouth open as she sucked for air that didn’t seem to come before dropping to her knees. Her skin shriveled and sucked into wrinkles, her body decaying, parts of her falling to the floor.

Maids let out shrieks and fled the room. Nyla became spooked and knocked the trainer to the ground. All of us were in shock as my mother’s skin sucked in around her bones, blackening and turning to rotten flesh. A shriek of pain escaped her mouth as her legs turned to dust, dropping her face first into her own rot before nothing remained but a pile

of ash. Immekus called for a maid to clean it, but none remained, causing him to laugh hysterically. “Well, we will just have to ignore it for now. What of my gift? You get your mare, and your bull,” he cackled.

She was gone. I looked to Callum, who was also gaping at what he’d just witnessed.

The baby was firmly in Gretch’s arms while Immekus looked to me with what seemed like pride beaming from him. *He thought I would feel the same? How did I feel?* My food turned in my stomach as I looked at him, but Mathious sent a wave of calm over me. I knew he needed me to appease Immekus because he had yet to give his gift. “Thank you.”

“Cousin, I too have a gift,” Mathious said, pulling what looked like a red velvet box from under the table, but I knew better. It was no more than a tattered wooden crate holding the cuffs.

Callum’s fingers slipped through mine as Immekus opened the box, pulling from it two shining cuffs dusted with sapphires and emeralds.” Fit for a King.”

Mathious moved to place them on Immekus, but he shifted, twisting around and snatching one from Mathious, thrusting it onto Mathious’ wrist. The glamour faltered, revealing the rusted cuffs. “You haven’t been forthcoming with your intentions,” Immekus said.

“Get the baby out of here,” Mathious called to Gretch, who was already headed for the door rushing by me and Nyla with Callum at our backs. But before we could exit, the room swirled around us, Mathious magic pulling us with him into the green of trees, then spinning in a sky followed by purple and gold around us before we slammed into the dirt in front of a volcano. Mathious and Immekus rolled and flailed, fighting for the cuffs. One snapped on each of their arms now.

Callum lunged for them, but Gretch grabbed him. “You must come with me quickly.”

We both followed her into the trees, as she ripped her book from her bag and handed the baby to Callum, pulling the

turquoise gem out. “I must hide your power, Lisah, or he will take it.”

“How do I use it once it’s in there?”

The trees around us bent, the sky around us turning a shade of orange, then black, then back to gray as the rain trickled off the leaves of the trees above us. Then the ground below us trembled and I wasn’t sure if it was from the storm or Mathious.

“You will be the only one who can use it, and it does more than this. I prepared this against my love’s wishes. It is a key for the cuffs. Only your blood can access it, yours and Mathious’ alone.”

“So, I bleed on it?” A nose pushed into the back of my head. Turning, Nyla licked me in greeting. She had been pulled here with us, too. “It’s okay, girl.” I patted her as Gretch explained everything.

“Grasp it tightly and your power will flow into you.” She had it secured in twine and on a necklace ready for me. “Are you ready?”

“Do it!”

Lightning lit the sky, and the rain poured down on us, my shoes sinking into the muck. Damn it, I should have worn my boots for this.

“Give me your hand,”

I reached for her, and she sliced into me, my blood pouring all over it. The baby whimpered in Callum’s arms as the rain increased. Gretch muttering her enchantment over the stone before she reached for my chest, her palm like ice and then growing into a blazing sun, my arms and legs and fingers going cold until it left me. My magic drew into it, setting it into a bright glow before calming.

“It’s done.” She took the baby from Callum, and we rushed back, only to find the men gone.

“You two take the baby away from here and I will go in after them.”

“And do what? Cut him with your sword?” Gretch barked at him.

“What will you do, sister, with a baby in your arms?”

“I will make sure my child has a father, that’s what.”

She stormed into the darkness ahead, a limp in her stride but with no hesitation.

“I’m going,” I said to Callum.

“No, *we’re* going.”

We nodded and followed Gretch into the blackness, my heart pounding in my.

Chapter 22

Thunder shook the walls of the cave as we ran, our feet slapping on the wet stone, spraying water behind us as we searched. My breath was so loud I was certain it would give us away. Callum followed behind, helping Gretch and the baby to keep up as we followed the chambers deeper into the Volcano.

With each turn, it became harder for Gretch to keep up, but she refused to be left behind. Having strapped the baby to herself, she was now hands-free, clinging to Callum as we rounded yet another turn.

. “We have to go deeper. Come on!” I called back to them.

It’s not enough, Listitia. We have to sink the entire island. Mathious’ voice filled my mind.

Lightning flashed from behind, illuminating the cave walls for the briefest of a second revealing a tunnel that bore deep into the volcano’s core. “There! We have to lure him there!”

“How do you know they aren’t already down there?” I asked.

“I don’t, but I recognize the etching around the wall. That is a protection rune.”

“How do you know?” Callum demanded.

Gretch turned over a silver charm that had been hidden under her dress with the same marking. “Because I know.”

Ice raced up my spine at the sound of laughter filling the cave around us, followed by a scream, not one of pain or fear, but pure frenzy.

“What the hell was that?” Callum said the whites of his eyes all I could make out as we moved through the shadow and into the arched doorway.

“Mathious wants me to sink the island.”

“He what!”

“He told me, in my mind, he doesn’t think he can do it.”

“That’s because my foolish lover didn’t let his family help him.”

She grimaced, leaning into Callum’s side, forcing herself forward to my side. Her blood pooled around my bare foot as she caught her breath at our sides.

“Gretch, you’re bleeding. You and the baby need to stay here.”

“Without me, you’ll all die!” She leaned back against the cavern wall, wiping her hand across her forehead. “If you all die, I don’t want to live.”

Her words hit me hard, if they died, I wouldn’t want to live either.

“Too bad you’re staying back, Gretch, you’ll just need to let us handle it.”

“No, she’s coming, Callum. Besides, in case you didn’t notice, it’s only the witch’s magic that seems to trouble Immekus,”

“He took your powers the same as theirs back in the tavern?” Callum said.

“Yes, he did. But he seems to struggle against spells, probably because its magic reaches deep into the fabric of this world. They are not like manipulating the elements or calling on the wind or rocks. Spells and curses run deeper.”

“How are you going to cast a spell that fast?”

“With your help, Lisah. You need to make him think you’ve come to his aid, anything to get near him, distract him, and once you do—” She turned to Callum grimly—My dear sweet brother, I need you to cut him wide open and force this into his chest.”

She held out the black gemstone, the same one she had wanted to protect Mathious’ magic in.

“You mean to trap his magic?”

“That is the plan.”

“Won’t he just draw from it as I do?”

“I have spelled this differently, but you must take your time. I will need every second if I am to bind him to this world.”

Another vibration ran through the rocks under our feet, the air full of static crackling around us.

“It’s the only chance we have,” Gretch screamed over the buzz of energy.

The Island, sink the island Listitia. I can’t hold him much longer. Mathious’ voice rang through my mind.

“We have to hurry, Gretch. Maybe you should leave the baby out here?”

She scoffed at me, straightening against the wall, adjusting his body against her, “He stays with me. Besides, Immekus won’t even know me, and Callum are here.”

“There’s no sense in arguing with her, Lis. Let’s get this over with.”

They were counting on my being able to glamour them while Mathious had already given up hope. My stomach churned as I pushed open the stone door and stepped inside.

A stairway wound down before us, lit by the statically charged air, that snapped viciously around us. I pulled them under my protection, my heart in my throat as I walked down the stairs, turning the last corner revealing a long hall carved out inside of the volcano. Hot lava ran at the sides, lighting the room in an orange glow. The air popped and hissed around me as I made my way toward the feeling of power, but I saw nothing. Purple and silver wisps curled in the air and blue lightning sizzled and popped as I stopped at the doorway. It was fifteen feet high, and runes were carved around it from top to bottom. The room should have been hot, but it wasn’t, a feeling of cold settling around me. I could feel them both. The ice of Immekus’ power and the electricity of Mathious’, but no one was there.

Gretch pulled her book from her pack and went to work muttering her enchantments and pulling dirt and rock towards her into a pile, slicing open her palm and soaking the mud. Callum stood at her side with his sword drawn, the black jewel in his hand, the diamond around his neck.

Mathious voice cut through my mind again, this time painfully. *Leave, now!*

They were here alright. *I won't leave you here. Let me help.* I said back through the mental connection.

Everything in the room melted around us, the pillars sinking into the stone floor. A buzz filled the air and light burst into the hall, then it went black, followed by a burst of color, purples, blues, and magenta swirling around us like dust on the winds, clinging to two struggling figures. Black night took over again, the room now filled with the dust of twinkling stars. My stomach flipped and spun, and I vomited on the floor. Gretch let out a shriek, and the baby wailed, Callum grunted as the entire cavern seemed to flip upside down. Yet we remained on the ground.

Everything that had once been up, was now down. Lava ran down the walls like tears and Mathious and Immekus wrestled on the ground. The cavern trembled and smoke curled in through the cracks in the walls.

The stone below my feet turned to ice and steam poured from around the room as it met lava, the air was thick with the icy chill of the god's powers. I ran for them and slammed into Mathious, catching him off guard and knocking him to the ground.

"I came for you."

Immekus' laughter trilled through the room as he took me in before him. "Did you now?"

He yanked me to him, burying his face into my neck, his tongue sliding to my ear, then sucking it between his lips. "Delectable." His hand squeezed my rear before he pushed me behind him. "Best you stay close, then. My dear cousin is quick to turn on his family."

Mathious stayed on the ground and leaned back on his hands, patches of purple and blue forming under his skin all over his body.

“I told you to leave, not join this monster!”

“Monster, am I now?” Immekus stretched the words out oddly as he walked toward Mathious, kicking him hard in the face. “We were like brothers.” His voice was eerily calm as he watched Mathious wipe the blood from his chin.

“Go get those for me, Pet,” Immekus said, pointing to the cuffs. It couldn’t be this easy. He hadn’t even questioned my change of allegiance. Lifting them from the floor, they felt heavier than I’d remembered, thick, cold, like his magic had poisoned them. *How had he gotten them off?* Gretch worked her spell, still concealed by my glamour, the wail of the baby only being heard by me.

He took them from me and slung them over his shoulder. “Good girl.”

The surrounding air buzzed and crackled, Mathious words in my mind again. “Sink it now, Listitia.” I shook my head, the slightest of a fraction in protest, before feeling my head yanked back.

Immekus pulled me flush to his body, his hand curled around my throat like ice. He pulled a wooden stick from his pocket, engraved with runes like the ones around the door that glowed red. The hum of magic came off them so loud it hurt my ears before it transformed into a short blade with a backward serrated hook on it.

“How?”

“How does it change? This weapon is of my making. It can be whatever I wish it to be.” He cast a hard stare to Mathious. “Now come and put these on like a good boy.”

Shit... whatever the hell Gretch was doing, she’d better hurry the hell up.

“Best we return to reality now, hm,” he said. The cavern flipped again, and Gretch let out a retch from behind me. Immekus’ arms held me tight as we righted ourselves. The

lava flowed around the room again and torches burst alive at the flick of his wrist.

“I didn’t know you could do magic like that?”

“Oh, I have no limits, Pet. Soon you’ll learn this.” A grin twisted on his lips. The hook of his blade pierced my neck, making a bead of blood roll down onto my collarbone, licking it from me.

“Enough,” Mathious stood, his eyes gazing just past me and I knew my glamour was faltering.

“Let her go.”

“She’s all I have left. I think I’ll keep her a while.”

“*Move!*” Mathious’ voice exploded through my mind. I jerked away from Immekus, as the bolt of lightning exploded from Mathious’ palms, slamming him in the chest, knocking him back into the far wall with a deafening thud. His body lay still, all of our eyes wide, my glamour lost from the intensity of power that had grazed by me.

Mathious rushed past me, his attention lingering on me as he passed long enough to know I was alright. He kneeled by Gretch and mound of bloodied mud shed pulled into the shape of a man. “Is it ready?” he asked her?

“Poppits take time.”

“How long does it take to cast a damn spell?” Callum said, his fingers squeezing the hilt of his sword.

“They take longer because they last longer,” Gretch said, casting Callum a glare.

“How long do we have?” I asked, looking at the motionless pair of legs crumpled at the back of the cavern.

“Not long. You need to leave.”

Gretch’s eyes were like daggers. “Only way I’ll leave this cavern is with your hand in mine. Got it?”

He hugged her hard, kissing the baby’s head. “Fine, but whatever this is, I can’t be sure it will work. He is far stronger

than he ever was.” He cut me a grim look.

“Listitia, if this doesn’t work, you know what must be done.”

“I can’t do that.”

The others looked at us with confused looks.

“I looked into his mind. He meant everything he said. His intentions were true... but when I looked deeper into the depths of his mind, there was a hunger there that was so powerful it nearly consumed me. No matter my cousin’s intentions, he cannot defy his nature. He will destroy everything — including us.”

Callum squeezed my fingers in his hand, a comfort I needed desperately knowing what Mathious was asking of me. *Kill all the people of Salencia to save the rest of Ilia.* The worst of it was that I wasn’t sure if I could get Gretch, the baby, and Callum to safety.

I squeezed him back, my fingers trembling around his as we watched Mathious take the cuffs from the floor and head toward. *What would it feel like to kill someone I loved for something they might do, knowing it was not their intention.* He loved him. I could see it in the way he held back in their fight, the way he pleaded for him to come with him through the door. My friend was sacrificing for the good of those around him. The same as Callum had in the past and Gretch too and my heart broke for him.

Chapter 23

The cuffs clicked into place and Mathious rolled Immekus onto his back, pulling him up over his shoulder and carrying him toward the doorway. “None of you may enter here. If I am successful, I will return. But if I don’t, you leave and you raise my boy, you give him a happy life,” he said as he stood at the top of the steps before the portal.

“If you don’t come out, I’ll come in,” Gretch said.

She was unbending, and I could see the stress it was causing him.

“My darling, beyond this doorway is the In-Between and beyond that, the Realm of Creation. If you were to enter, you would find no air to breathe,” he said, walking back down to meet her.

His hand was on her jaw, his hooded stare locked on her trembling lips as tears streamed down her cheeks.

“This was your plan all along? “Her words caught as she twisted from his touch. “There must be another way.”

“Oh, my stubborn beauty, I wish I knew of one.”

He kissed her head. Then the baby’s and gave me and Callum a nod. A lump rose in my throat.

“No!” Gretch screeched, slapping his hand away, punching his chest. “No.” She pulled a blade from her pocket and slashed into Immekus’ leg, palming his blood over the poppet.

“What are you doing?” Mathious yelled, backing away.

“I won’t lose you! Not now. I lived my entire life waiting to be with you.”

He reached for her, but she yanked away, slicing his palm with her blade, Immekus grunting in Mathious’ arms.

“I have to go. He’s waking up. I’m so sorry.” Mathious turned and took a step, but Gretch followed, smearing Mathious’ blood on the lock of the cuffs tearing them from Immekus, and throwing them across the room.

His eyes flew open, his head offering a slight tilt as he took in the scene

“Callum now!” Gretch screamed as he twisted from Mathious’ arms. Immekus pulled the wooden stick from his robes, transforming it into a long silver and blue sword that he drove through Mathious’ shoulder.

“Looks like Momma wants me to stay.”

Mathious leaned into the sword, stepping face to face with Immekus.

“You cannot stay, you will do things even you cannot understand.”

“I am going to save this wretched rock from its own ugliness.” He said.

Gretch lunged for him, smashing the poppit into his neck. He grabbed her throat and Callum ran for them, and I threw my dagger at him as hard as I could forcing him to block it with his palm. He dropped Gretch and Mathious pulled her away. Callum driving his sword into Immekus’ chest and pulling it free with a squelch. I ran up the stairs driving my blade into Immekus’ side. All of us struggling as Callum fought to shove the black jewel into his chest.

I leaped onto his back, choking him, and Callum shoved the gem deep inside, the blue glint of Immekus’ blade shining across Callum’s eyes as fast as lightning. Callum’s eyes went wide, stopping on mine as a struggled grunt left his lips, the diamond at his neck glowing bright.

“Paramour.”

“Callum!” I lunged for him but Immekus flipped me over his shoulder and onto the steps, my body breaking over each stair until I came to a stop at the bottom. Gretchen’s scream piercing the night as Callum dropped to his knees.

“I guess you will need a new toy, Pet.”

He leaned to pick up the king’s crown from the stone floor, but Mathious slammed into him.

The fight between Mathious, Gretch, and Immekus a blur as I watched Callum fall to the ground, the light lost from his eyes.

It was as if the Volcano itself was screaming as I rose. Mathious and Immekus were frozen in battle. Gretch, kneeling, her palm on the ground chanting, but I heard nothing. Only the scream of steam that filled the vast hall around us as I drew it to me from the depths of the volcano.

Steam circled around me, building until I saw nothing else. Then with all my rage I forced it at him like scalding rain, melting his skin from his face where he stood. Mathious hit him with another bolt of lightning, but it wasn’t enough. Immekus roared into the cavern around us shaking the walls and ground below our feet.

“Hurry the hell up, Gretch! Whatever the hell you’re doing, do it now!”

“I’m trying!”

Immekus pulled at hole in his chest, trying to tear the stone from it.

“The hell you will! I screamed at him.

I’ll die before he walks free from this cave. I ran for him, rage pouring through my voice as I sank my blade through his stomach, forcing him back onto the stone floor. Mathious leaped onto him, holding him down.

My knees were on his chest, his eyes wild as he looked up at me. I drew more steam from the volcano forcing it down his throat.

“Die!”

Gretch yanked me off him. “Get away from him!”

Gretch pulled the blade through her palm again, slamming her hand to the stone, her other one on Immekus’ ankle.

“I bind you to this stone. I bind you by the blood of the witches, and the blood of a god. From this day forth you shall see no light, hear no song.”

The cavern floor shook below us. Gray dust particles raised from the stone floor and began clinging to all of them.

“What is this!” Immekus yelled as he looked between Gretch and Mathious.

Her eyes were only on mine. “Find a way, Lisah!” she said before the dust settled on them, turning them to stone right in front of me.

The deepest silence I’d ever known followed. Nothing breathed as the dust settled around them. The very rocks had reached up to claim Immekus, creating what looked to be a throne. But I knew what it really was, a prison for a monster.

Gretch’s face was locked in fear, Mathious’ eyes on her and the baby. Callum’s body lay at the bottom of the steps to my side.

“No. Please gods no.” His arms were heavy as I slid into them, wrapping them around me. “Please, no... not you. Please, Callum.” I banged on his chest, my voice shaking. “Please wake up. I can’t do this without you.” My words broke as I begged into his bloodied chest. “I can’t lose all of you. Wake up!”

I shook him, pulling him into my arms. “Damnit, you’re stronger than this.” He slumped against me, the weight of him too much to bear, forcing me to lay him down again.

I don’t know how many hours passed, days maybe. The torches had long since burned out, the only light in the room a small glow from the diamond upon his neck. But I couldn’t leave, I couldn’t move. I just lay in his arms, replaying every moment we ever had, wanting to join him in The Place of Resting.

The feel of his armor under my thumb, the way it clanged every time I moved, reminded me of how it sounded when it hit the floor of my chambers almost a year ago.

“We were supposed to marry, damn you. Have children together. I don’t want this life without you, Callum.”

Tears and pain seemed to seep from a never-ending well inside me. I’d known nothing of pain. I could see that now. The memory of the king on his throne forced to relive his daughter’s last moments flashed in my mind, and I understood his sorrow. His empty halls and the shadows on his walls. The pain, the only thing keeping me close to Callum now. This was why the king had clung to it. I had done everything I was supposed to do to stop that monster, and I had nothing left.

I could stay here a thousand years, in the canopy of his arms, and long after he was dust, I could remain in this moment because if I left, he would be gone. They were all gone.

A million memories of our life moved through my mind like a vision that I never wanted to leave. I could stay within that dream forever, my tears falling harder and harder. Until sleep took me.

Mathious stood, bathed in warm light, walking across a pink sandy beach, and stopped in front of me. “How are you holding up out there?”

He felt whole in my arms as I held him. “He’s gone,” I cried into his chest.

“We all go to the Place of Resting eventually, Listitia, even immortals.”

“I want to go now.”

“That does not sound like the girl I trained.”

“That girl died.”

“You did not die. You have more to do. Immekus is trapped here, but there will come a time others may try to wake him. That cannot happen.”

“Ugh, even my dreams nag me now.” I turned away, walking down the beach. His hand grabbed my arm, turning me towards him.

“Lisitia, I’m not a dream. Gretchen and I are safe within the stone. I’ve created an escape within our minds, a place we call home. She is with the babe now, singing to him.”

You’re awake in there? All of you?”

“Yes...I have trapped him in a mental prison but he still poses a threat. You must protect this place. No one can know it’s here until you’ve found a way to destroy him.”

I woke, my body screaming from stiffness and hunger. It was the first time I felt anything other than my grief in days. They were still in there... and Immekus was still a threat. I’d be damned if I lost everything for him to prevail. I rolled under Callum’s arm. His touch had grown cold and his body had stiffened around me. For days, I’d thought about what it would be like to remove my necklace. Leave my fae powers in the dirt and lay in his arms until our bodies turned to dust together. That was the only peace I could hope for, finding him on the other side. But now I understood what it meant to be deserving of such love. It meant putting the lives of others before my own.

Mathious had been clear. The realm was not safe.

Stiff and sore, I pulled myself up, tears rolling freely. I finally looked around the dark cavern. This place could never be found.

I pulled him from the cavern and made him a grave between the Volcano and the small river running the length of it. A stone was the only thing that marked his place. His name carved into its surface and the words ‘forever’.

I stayed until the sun rose and set three times until a soft nose nudged the back of my head. Nyla’s blue eyes looked into mine, her head bumping me gently. Rising on shaking knees, I ran my hand down her flank.

“She’s a beautiful animal, Lis,” The memory of Callum’s words broke me.

Yes, she was. I stroked her nose and leaned my head against hers. “I’m okay girl.” I patted her side. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

Nothing had changed in the cavern. The faces of my friends were still locked in their last moments. I pulled the chains from the floor and Immekus' wooden stake, a twinkle catching the gleam of my torch. *The king's crown*. I picked it up and walked to the stairwell, drawing on my power, reaching deep into the mountain below the volcano until I found it. Water deep within the core, I raised it filling the tunnels below, the water mixed with the lava, steam pouring out and around me as I filled the hall until the very last step before sliding the stone door closed, sealing it from within with the heat of the lava.

“Goodbye, I will find a way, I promise you.”

Chapter 24

I rode Nyla through the market square at full speed, not slowing enough for them to recognize the woman who murdered their people. I came to the castle gates with the king's crown in my hand, the maid recognizing me straight.

“You look injured! Where are the others?”

I couldn't say they were gone. Instead, I shook my head. She seemed to understand and let me pass.

“He woke some hours after you all left. We told him how you and your friends saved Salencia from the Shadow Demons.”

“Thank you.”

The hall looked much the same as when I entered it, but the table had been cleared. The king sat on his throne, but his robes were changed. Nothing else looked different. He was still lost in his sorrows, forced to go on for the lives of those around him.

Dark rings circled his eyes, and he sipped wine as I stopped before him.

“May I present to you, Queen Listitia of the Crystal Palace, my king,” the maid said with a bow.

“Welcome. I've heard many tales of what has happened. I have some praising you, and a vast group of others calling for your head. Which story am I to believe?”

“I only came to return this to you and to warn you.”

He noticed the crown in my hands and waved me forward.

“He took it from you. I thought you'd want it back.”

A slight hesitation was in his hands as he reached for it and I wondered if he was hoping he may never have to wear it again. But his watch was not over and mine had just begun.

“The man who did this to you...”

“Man?”

“More than a man. A monster. The God Killer. He is still a danger to all. My companions and I subdued him, trapped him within the Volcano, deep within the hollow, but if anyone was to go there, free him —”

“That monster made me watch my daughter’s death repeatedly. I’m in your debt. “

“What I ask is simple. Close any trade routes. Ilia isn’t safe and neither is the volcano. Forbid your people from entering the woods, make them fear what lies within the Hollow.”

His fingers interlocked as he studied me, my body still caked in blood and ash, my lips cracked and swollen. “I will do this, but first you will be tended to by my healer and provided clean clothing and supplies, but I warn you, after that, do not leave the forest because once I decree you an enemy I cannot protect you from the people.”

“I understand. One last request, may I use your balcony?”

His brows pulled together in confusion. There was no higher point on the Island, and it was perfect for what I needed to do.

“Of course.”

It was strange to feel the sun on my skin after so long in the dark. Somehow it felt brighter up here, the kiss of sea air on my skin only working to bring back memories of my time on Del’s ship. Another friend lost. I wondered where Lorna was now, a smile I didn’t know I still was capable of pulled at the corner of my mouth imagining the gold she’d get from selling the Orb. It had no other use to a human and gold had been what they needed. She would keep them safe, where I had failed.

I gripped the gem in my palm, drawing my power from it, static crackling in the surrounding air, a buzz rising over the sound of the waves crashing below. Colorful spiderwebs of light that only I could see spread from my mind into the sky, flowing out farther and farther until they found the perimeter

of Mathious' protective border. It was strong, even with him trapped in stone. It would prevent anything from entering, from seeing the island, and make it nearly impossible for the people to leave, but one thing it had not done was make the people of Ilia forget about Salencia's existence. There were others with power, others who could pass through if they desired to, and I couldn't risk it.

I reached deep, finding my pain, and then deeper still, the love I held in my most sacred place and I drew from it, pretending the people of Salencia were my family.

The surrounding air started popping and the copper woven vines of the terrace glowed, the wind picking up around me. My mental glamour intertwined with Mathious' barrier, melding with it.

Now, any who looked upon it would see a ruined and deserted island and a memory of a story. A story that told of the island being overcome by a volcano, nothing beyond the barrier but a desolate and unlivable island. I forced my fear into it, every terror I'd ever felt. They would see nothing, but desolation and a feeling of terror would overcome them the closer they came. Only one who knew true terror and emptiness could pass this. The sizzling and crackling settled around me, and I knew it was done. Within a few years' time, the story of this island's decimation would be common knowledge.

Chapter 25

A thousand years had passed, each king holding true to the agreement I had made that day. They taught the people of Salencia a story of an evil enchantress who lived in the forest. A witch who killed thousands of innocents. Forbidden, the Hollow was made, and they left me in my darkness. I read Gretch's book front-to-back time and time again, but nothing existed within it to destroy the Shade. The sound of the trees was the only company I had. Nothing seemed to grow by the Hollow, no flowers or trees. It was as if Immekus' vile magic seeped through the rock below like poison. Mathious' voice in my mind from time to time questioning if I had found anything, but I had not. I never told him the time that had passed when he told me time moved differently for them, that the babe was still as new as the day I'd seen him last.

That had been several years ago, though. Now, I spent my days lying next to Callum and Nyla's' graves, the only place that remained green, talking to them as if they were here. Watching and waiting, protecting the Hollow from anyone that might want to disturb it.

Callum's sword lay across his grave, rust eating at its hilt the same as the breath of time was eating away at his memory. "I miss you," I said, leaning forward, kissing its hilt.

Mathious' voice breaking through my mind.

You must come. The baby is faltering, his body weakening.

I jumped to my feet, my heart racing. It had been so long since I'd heard another voice.

"Mathious?"

Without his power, and with Immekus gaining strength, I can no longer maintain us all. You must wake him.

How can he gain strength? What do you mean, wake the baby? "The crystal. Gretchen says you must place it round his neck.

What the hell was I going to do with him after that?

Hurry, his heart is slowing.

I tore through the caverns as fast as my legs would carry me, using my blood and gem to enter, emptying the cavern of lava.

The bottom of my shoes smoked as I walked across the cavern floor. They were preserved perfectly uet rest of the hall was badly damaged.

I placed the diamond on his tiny chest, but nothing happened.

"It's not working," I screamed.

Then, as if they had heard me from within, it glowed brightly, the air crackling around us as the baby let out a cry. His stone skin turned a soft brown and his pink lips trembled as he cried in his stone mother's arms. I pried him free as carefully as possible and held him, tears flooding from my eyes, something I had forgotten was possible. For so long, I felt nothing. There had been no meaning to the beauty of the flowers or the streams that ran through the forest. But, somehow, hearing his cry brought color into the world again.

I have him. He's safe, I said in my mind. A feeling of gratitude washed over me, and I knew they'd heard.

What the hell was I going to do for this child? I had no home. The only thing holding me to life was my fae magic. I had not eaten in years. I was weak and lost. I didn't remember how to care for myself, let alone a child.

The golden-brown eyes of the baby in my arms, his little finger around mine shattered me, there with no witnesses to see it as I fell to my knees. He had his uncle's eyes. I kissed his little face, feeling his little mouth rutting and turning against my cheek.

I knew where to go. I had seen them playing in the Blackwater stream only ten nights ago.

The sun was setting as I reached the stream, terrified I might have been too late, but there they were. A small group of children playing in the waters, the oldest a little girl, nine, maybe sitting on a rock watching as the others played.

I pushed out a sense of calm from my mind, the air buzzing alive with the power of my magic. The children smiled as I approached.

“Hi little one, what’s your name?”

“Harriot, what’s yours?”

“Do not worry yourself with that. Do you have a mother?” She looked at her feet, pushing a stone with her toe. “Who cares for you?”

“We stay in the fishery, our caregiver is Galena.”

“Does she have room for one more?”

Her big, sweet eyes lit up as she looked at the baby in my arms.

“She’ll take him.”

“She sounds very kind.”

“Oh, she is the best.”

She lit up when she spoke of her. She meant it. “Can you take him for me?”

“Ok, but um. What’s his name?”

“Samuel. He’s very special,” I said, passing him to her. His little finger wrapped around hers in an instant and a giggle left her precious mouth.

“Yes, he is.”

I handed her the diamond. I didn’t know if he needed it or not, but it was his. His power lived within it and it belonged with him, not me. “And this is his. It belongs to him. It’s very special. It cannot be sold or taken from him. Can you keep it safe?”

“I promise.”

The sun dipped below the trees and the boy across the stream called for Harriet to go.

The sound of her calming voice as she spoke to the baby made me certain I'd done the right thing as they disappeared into the city.

Chapter 26

I crossed my ankles above my head on the side of the Volcano, Callum's gravestone the pillow at the nape of my neck as I lay counting the clouds in the sky.

It had been thirty-five years since the last time I'd heard Mathious' voice. Since the face of innocence shook me from the darkness that swallowed me. Since that day, I'd started eating again and made myself a small shack just behind Nyla and Callum's graves. Most days I spent wrapping stones in twine made from the palm trees and sneaking to the beaches for shells.

My life was a simple one. Guard the Hollow, talk to those I'd lost, and plant flowers. This duty was what I had been born for all along.

The sun peaked around the top of the Volcano squinting my eyes. Midday must have been high tide because it always pushed a small waterfall through the top of the Volcano.

Standing at the foot of the cave, the warm breeze passing over my face, the waterfall flowing to my left, a feeling of gratitude washed over me. A voice neither male nor female pushed through my mind, one I'd heard before. *"Your watch has ended. Your sacrifice recognized."*

Every hair on my body stood on end. A low hum filled the surrounding air.

Impossible. That was the same voice from the Orb I'd heard all those years ago, but how?

Bushes snapped at my back, a voice calling to me.

"Fair lady. The king has sent me to retrieve you."

The air was sucked from my lungs when I turned, my voice lost to me. It couldn't be. This couldn't be real. Had I passed into the Place of Resting and not noticed? He stood between the trees dressed in silver armor with a blue and green cape.

Wrinkles pulled at the corner of his eyes and forehead.
“Callum?”

“I’m sorry, Miss, I’m not who you seek, but it’s important you come with me.” His eyes were wide as he approached, his hands out in front of him.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He squinted at me, his head cocking to the side. “My name is Sam, Miss. I mean you no harm.”

This wasn’t possible. He was identical in every way. He took my hand in his. The feel of his skin on mine sent a rush of static through my body. He jumped back, grabbing at his tunic collar before everything around me went black.



I woke with my head in his lap, a wet cloth in his hand, set upon my forehead. It was like a dream, but I was awake. I knew because of the root that jabbed into my hip.

“Ow.”

“Are you alright, Miss? I tried to help. You just fell on the ground.”

I shifted, freeing my back from the pain of the root, the world still spinning around me. “I’m alright, it’s just... I thought you were someone I knew.”

“Like you knew me all your life?” he said, wiping the cloth across my brow. “I feel like I’ve always known you. How can that be?”

“I — it’s a miracle,” I said, a tear rolling from the corner of my eye.

“I was told you were evil, a monster responsible for the sickness.”

I sat up straight. “What sickness?”

“You don’t know?”

My brows raised. “No?”

“A sickness has poisoned much of our crops. The king’s ordered us to bring you, to have you hanged.”

“I thought you said no harm was to come to me?”

His hands raised at his sides. “Forgive me. I was told to bring you for questioning. None of the others would enter... but I know our king. I have witnessed no questioning that hasn’t ended in hangings.”

“Do you mean to bring me to be hanged then, for something I’ve not done?” We sat staring at each other; the breeze moving between us. “What’s your surname, soldier?”

“Blackwater, Miss. Are you certain we haven’t met?” His hand pulled into the top of his tunic, clutched around a necklace. The tip of a diamond shimmered at the top of his grip.

“I don’t believe we have.” I stood, and he followed suit. “So, take me to this king of yours.”

He drew his sword and stabbed it into the dirt. “I think I better get to know you first, before I go walking you to your death. If you don’t mind spending a bit of time with me.”

Every logical thought in my head said to run, leave him, but I couldn’t. It was as if I was rooted to the spot, every fiber of me being pulling me toward Sam.

We spent the next three weeks laying by the river talking about his life... me sharing what I could of mine. For the first time in ages, my heartbeat again. Waiting for his return each day as if nothing else mattered.

He told the king he couldn’t find me, but eventually that would no longer work, and they’d search the forest for me, of this I was certain.

My heart thundered as he came over the hill, a basket in his hands.

“I have good news. The crops have regrown.”

Relief flushed through my body. Maybe when I finally had to face this new king, with the threat passed, I may keep my head.

He stumbled about, fighting with a wool blanket, spreading it across the grass, a loaf of bread falling off the top of the basket.

“Shit,” he said, twisting around trying to grab the fallen bread.

“Let me help.” I laughed, pulling the basket from his arms and setting it down. He sat, dusting the bread off.

“I’d wager it’s still alright.”

“It’s fine.”

“I thought you might enjoy something different for a change?”

“What have you brought?”

He pulled plates wrapped in cloth, folding them back to reveal meat and greens and little pie slices. Next, a bottle of red wine. My eyes must have betrayed me because he grinned wide, dimples pulling at the corners of his mouth, melting my heart.

“So, you have seen wine before?”

“Yes.” I snatched it from him. “This is my favorite actually.” I drank straight from the bottle and its flavor burst in my mouth, a tingle spreading through my cheeks. “Oh, gods, this is good.”

Before I knew it, the moons were above us, the stars twinkling from above. “Maybe you should go?” I whispered.

“Is that what you want?”

It wasn’t. It was the farthest thing from what I wanted. “No, but do you really want to stay here with me in my shack?”

“I’d stay anywhere to be with you,” he said, pulling me into his arms. Our eyes were on each other, both begging the other for permission. A need drawing us together. His hands moved

to my face before I could even think, his soft lips coming to mine.

It was like falling, my heart bursting to life as he held me in his arms, the beat of his heart pressed against my back before he lay me down. Lost in each other's touch, we held each other till the sun came up.

Epilogue

Five Years Later

Pain cramped in my back, sweat covered my forehead. “Water, Sam, please.”

“The midwife said you shouldn’t drink until after the baby’s come,”

“Screw the midwife. She wouldn’t come. I need water!”

He rushed wildly around the room, gathering blankets and towels, and finally my water.

“You know it’s the king’s order. I am just thankful he let us marry, my love.”

His lips pressed to mine before handing me a glass. It was warm but wet, and I was too parched to care.

“Ah, check for the head.”

Pain seared up my center like I was being split in half from my bottom up.

“Not yet, keep breathing, everything’s going normally,”

I shot up, gripping the sheets, my scream pouring out the windows of the small home Sam built for us after they dismissed him from the Guard for marrying me.

I breathed in, then the next contraction had already begun again. Water gushing between my legs all over the bed.

“What color is it?”

“Color?”

“Yes, yes, what color Sam?”

“It’s clear. Everything is going well, you’re doing beautifully.”

“What would you know about giving birth damnit?” I barked. He jumped a little, but then smiled, supporting me at my side, holding my leg.

“I saw many of them growing up in the children’s home.”

Clear... clear was good.

The next contraction was worse than the last. I was blind with pain, the pressure so intense I couldn’t bear it. I didn’t care if there had been a head or not. I pushed Sam, rushing to the bottom of the bed as I pushed again.

“I see him, I see the baby.”

Another contraction ripped me in half, and I pushed down with all my might until I felt the baby pop free, the rest sliding from me with ease, the pain evaporating in that instant.

“Oh, my!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, nothing. She looks perfect.”

“She?”

He brought her to me wrapped in a blanket, placing her in my arms. Her bright aqua eyes were a perfect match of my own, her skin a light pink and her ears were without points, only the slightest rounding at the top hinting to her heritage.

“She is the most beautiful baby I’ve ever seen,” he said, kissing us both. “What will we name her?”

“Neema,” I whispered.

He looked at us both, his eyes full of tears. “It’s perfect.”

She was perfect. My heart burst with love, deeper than anything I had ever known. My understanding was stronger than ever before about what it meant, keeping the world safe, and making it a better place.

My lips kissed her sweet nose. “I love you, Neema Blackwater. I promise, I will always honor my duty as your

mother and guardian of the hollow. I swear to you, I will keep you safe, and the world you live in, no matter the cost.”

The End

I hope you enjoyed Listitia's story. It was a standalone prequel to the Kingdom of Shadows Series. Please consider checking out the rest of the series featuring Neema.

To stay up to date on new releases and special bookish offers sign up for my newsletter at: www.zivahrose.com

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Kingdom of Shadows: The Crimson Eye New Adult Fantasy Romance - Slow Burn

[Kingdom of Shadows](#)

Imagine living the first half of your life as an outcast only to learn you're descended from the most powerful bloodline ever to walk the planet...

Captured by a brooding prince and catapulted into a long-forgotten world, twenty-year-old Neema must face the secrets of her true origins in this steamy new adult dark fantasy romance. Brimming with fae, dragons, and witches, it's perfect for fans of *The Bridge Kingdom*, *A Deal with the Elf King*, and *The Jasmine Throne*.

It takes one night for Neema's world to implode. When a long-forgotten kingdom violently attacks Neema's home, she is ripped away from her family and taken captive by the dark prince Draken. But Draken is more interested in Neema's origins than he is in his brother's grasp for power. Unbeknownst to Neema, she is the descendant of three powerful bloodlines, with untold ancient powers.

Thrust into a realm where her wildest dreams and darkest nightmares become reality, Neema must learn to use her newfound powers. But when Draken's brother aligns himself with an evil sorceress who harnesses soul-devouring shadows, Draken and Neema must work together to stop her from destroying their realm, but can their forbidden love stop darkness itself?

The Crimson Eye is the first book in the Kingdom of Shadows trilogy, a new adult dark fantasy series with a steamy slow-burn enemy-to-lovers romance, ancient magic, and an evil sorceress hell-bent on revenge

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