

A Lady of Darkness Novel

There was no
preparing for
her storm.

Lady of Embers

Melissa K. Roehrich

LADY OF EMBERS

LADY OF DARKNESS

BOOK FOUR

MELISSA K. ROEHRICH



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Also by Melissa K. Roehrich

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LADY OF DARKNESS SERIES

Lady of Darkness

Lady of Shadows

Lady of Ashes

Lady of Embers

Book 5- Coming Spring 2023!

Lady of Embers - 1st Edition

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A COUPLE THINGS

TRIGGER WARNINGS

Your mental health matters. This book contains violence and references to SA. For a full list of possible triggers, please visit my website at <https://www.melissakroehrich.com> under Book Extras.

PLAYLIST

Music is powerful. When I write I have music blasting in my earbuds, and many asked for a playlist. I adore when books come with playlists that follow along with the story. You feel everything more. It immerses you more. It brings everything to life. If you find this to be true for you too, here you go! Enjoy!

Spotify Link:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3TjT2jHU1knWNyA5Z6cc73?si=ebef1af26013402a>

If you don't have Spotify or you're reading the physical book, the full Playlist can also be found on my website: <https://www.melissakroehrich.com> under Book Extras!

For my boys, Wyatt, Isaac, and Logan-
Make your own fate, and never settle for anything less than
you deserve.

A Lady of Darkness Reference Guide

Having a little trouble remembering all the people, gods, and who fits where?
With this quick and easy reference guide, you'll have all the information
you need at your fingertips.

THE TWO BIG ONES

Scarlett Aditya: Scar-let Ah-deet-yah
Our heroine, Death's Maiden,
Fae Queen of the Western Courts

Sorin Aditya: Sore-in Ah-deet-yah
Your new book boyfriend,
Prince of the Fire Court,
King of the Western Courts,
formerly known as Ryker Renwell

BAYLORIN CHARACTERS

Callan Solgard: Cal-in Soul-guard
King of Windonelle

Cassius Redding: Cas-ee-us Red-ing
A member of the Assassin Fellowship,
Hand to Queen Scarlett,

Nuri Holloway: Noor-ee Hal-o-way
Death's Shadow, Night Child Contessa

Juliette: Jewel-ee-et
Death Incarnate, Witch, Oracle

Mikale Lairwood: Mi-kay-I Lär-wood
Dirty bastard, False King of Windonelle,
Maraan Lord

Veda Lairwood: Vā-duh Lär-wood
Mikale's sister, Conniving bitch

Tava Tyndell: Tā-vah Tin-del
Daughter of Lord Tyndell

Drake Tyndell: Dr-ache Tin-del
Son of Lord Tyndell

Lord Balam Tyndell: Lord Bay-lum Tin-del
Leads the Windonelle armies, Maraan Lord

Alaric: Ah-lār-ick
Assassin Lord, Maraan Prince

Sloan: Sl-own
One of Prince Callan's personal guards

Finn: Fin
One of Prince Callan's personal guards

PLACES

Baylorin: Bay-lore-in
Rydeon: Ride-ee-on
Solembra: Soul-em-bruh
Xylon Forest: Zy-lon For-est
Jonaraja Forest: Jon-uh-raj-uh Fore-est
Avonleya: Av-on-lay-uh
Aelyndee: Ā-lin-dee
Tykese River: Tie-key-s Riv-er

Windonelle: Win-dun-el
Toreall: Tore-ee-all
Threlarion: Thruh-lair-ee-on
Dresden Forest: Drez-den For-est
Shira Forest: Sheer-uh For-est
Maara: Mar-uh
Edria Sea: Ed-ree-uh See
Siofra: See-ō-fruh

A Lady of Darkness Reference Guide

FAE CHARACTERS

Talwyn Semiria: Tal-win Si-meer-ee-uh
Fae Queen of the Eastern Courts

Eliné Semiria: Ell-ee-nay Si-meer-ee-uh
Former Queen of the Western Courts

Henna Semiria: Hen-uh Si-meer-ee-uh
Former Queen of the Eastern Courts

FIRE COURT

Cyrus: Sigh-russ
Second-in-Command of the Fire Court

Rayner: Rā-nir
Third-in-Command of the Fire Court

Eliza: Ee-lie-za
General of the Fire Court

Beatrix: Bee-a-trix
Fire Court Healer

WATER COURT

Briar Drayce: Br-eye-er Dr-ace
Prince of the Water Court

Sawyer Drayce: Soy-ur Dr-ace
Second-in-Command of the Water Court

Neve: Nch-vā
Third-in-Command of the Water Court

Nakoa: Nuh-kō-ah
Commander of Water Court armies

EARTH COURT

Azrael Luan: Az-ree-ehl Lou-on
Prince of the Earth Court

WIND COURT

Ashtine: Ash-tin
Princess of the Wind Court

OTHER CHARACTERS OF NOTE

Deimas: Day-i-mas
Former King of Mortal Lands

Esmeray: Ez-mer-ā
Former Queen of Mortal Lands

Hazel Hecate: Hay-zi Hch-ka-tay
High Witch, Cassius's mother

Rosalyn: Roz-uh-lyn
Former Night Child Contessa

Stellan Renatus: Stel-on Ren-ah-tus
Shifter Alpha

Arianna Renatus: Are-ee-on-uh Ren-ah-tus
Shifter Beta

Auberon: Aw-bur-on
Rosalyn's Second, Night Child

Tarek: Tār-ik
Talwyn's twin flame, Fae

A Lady of Darkness Reference Guide

THE GODS

Anala: Ah-nall-ah
Goddess of Sun/Day/Fire

Saylah: Say-luh
Goddess of Shadows/Night

Celeste: Sell-esst
Goddess of the Moon/Sky

Sefarina: Sef-uh-ree-nuh
Goddess of Wind

Silas: Sigh-lus
God of Earth/Land/Forests

Anahita: Ah-nuh-hee-tuh
Goddess of Sea/Water/Ice

Reselda: Ruh-zel-duh
Goddess of Healing/Health

Falein: Fae-leen
Goddess of Wisdom/Cleverness

Arius: Ar-ee-us
God of Death/Darkness/Endings

Serafina: Sair-uh-fee-nuh
Goddess of Dreams/Stars

Temural: Tem-oor-all
God of the Wild/Untamed/Adventure

Sargon: Sar-gone
God of War/Protection/Courage

Achaz: Ä-kaz
God of Beginnings

THE SPIRIT ANIMALS

Amaré: Ah-mär-ä
Phoenix, bonded to Sorin

Shirina: Shi-ree-nuh
Panther, bonded to Scarlett

Maliq: Mal-eek
Wolf, Bonded to Talwyn

Nasima: Naw-seem-uh
Silver Hawk, bonded to Ashtine

Rinji: Rin-gee
Red Stag, bonded to Azrael

Abrax: Uh-brax
Water horse, bonded to Briar

Celene: Suh-leen
White Fox

Paja: Paw-juh
Golden Owl, previously bonded to Eliné

Ejder: Edge-der
Dragon

Kilo: Kee-low
White Python

Altaria: All-tar-ee-uh
Black eagle

Ranvir: Ran-ver
Dragon

???



THE DAY THE WAR BEGAN

Her shadow dragon continued to circle high in the sky. It had been hours since she'd unleashed hell on the Fellowship, and her white flames were still burning brightly. She wondered how long they would continue to burn. The Fellowship itself was nothing but ashes. Had been for quite some time. Everything and everyone inside of it went up in flames. They'd all been dead anyway. She'd made sure of that as she'd made her way through its halls. Yet her white flames continued to rage, as if they were an extension of her own wrath. When she was out of range, would they go out? Or would they continue to burn and smolder? She hoped for the latter. She hoped they never went out. That they would be a constant reminder to Alaric that she was ten, twenty, thirty steps ahead of him.

That it would be a constant reminder that she was coming for him.

Him and all his Maraan Lords and his seraphs.

And Tarek.

And Talwyn.

Her lip curled back at the thought of Talwyn, and memories surged up.

Sorin trying to fight his way to her. A bolt of energy hitting his chest. Him staggering before dropping to his knees. His golden eyes finding hers, slowly dimming.

I would still choose to stay in the darkness.

“Scarlett,” Cassius said cautiously, a hand coming to rest on her back. “Breathe, Seastar.”

She pushed the memories back down, forcing herself to focus on her task. Getting her and Cassius—her soulmate, her Guardian, and her Hand-to-the-Queen—out of here.

Alaric had long since flown off to the castle, his black, feathered wings a stain against the brilliant blue sky. Now she just had to wait. She’d left Reselda’s key for him. Knew he would eagerly scoop it up and rush to shift it with the rest of the keys. It was why she had made sure Talwyn had figured out how to shift them first. She wouldn’t have left it if she wasn’t certain this plan would go into effect immediately. She’d dealt him a hard hit by burning his Fellowship to the ground. He’d be blinded by rage, eager to strike back.

So eager he wouldn’t heed her warning that she was already so far under his skin, there was no hope of getting her out. Hazel, the High Witch, would remind him of her words when the time came. Maybe she already had. Scarlett really had no way of knowing for sure when he would shift the Avonleyan keys. She simply knew her former master well enough to know it would be within the day.

She could see the Edria Sea off in the distance. The sun was beginning to drop. She’d already used too much of her power by continuing to circle above the carnage she’d wrought. She was pushing her limits. Between the white flames to bring down the Fellowship and maintaining her shadow dragon they were currently riding, she was going to have just enough of her Avonleyan gifts to Travel them out of here.

She took one last look at the still-burning remains of the Fellowship. The place where she had grown up in all the ways that mattered with Cassius and Nuri and Juliette. The place she had learned to fight and manipulate and kill. The place she had loved and hated with equal passion. Then she steered her shadow dragon towards the sea. Once they reached it, she would Travel them to the others who were all on ships sailing west to Avonleya. They’d left a week ago when Talwyn had let Alaric and the seraphs into the Fae Courts. Prince Azrael had

warned them it was coming the day after the events of the throne room. Of course, she didn't remember any of that given that she was unconscious at the time. But Princess Ashtine had come the day before the invasion was to occur, giving them ample time to get everyone out. The ships had been readied for weeks by that point. A small number of ships from both the Fire and Water Courts had been ready to set sail at a moment's notice. They'd loaded the children onto the ships, along with the Fire and Water Inner Courts. They'd all set sail, only Scarlett and Cassius staying behind. They'd been hiding out in the Witch lands, waiting for the perfect time to put their plan into action.

It was a plan that had been altered since the events of that throne room. She and Sorin had come up with the original plan when she had finally figured out how to voice her suspicions and jumbled ideas after speaking with the Sorceress in the prison beneath the Black Halls. It had taken her weeks to sort through it all, to unravel the riddles and meld them with her own thoughts. Then they had brought that plan to the others, asking for their help. They'd made changes and adjusted varying aspects as the others had pointed out flaws or better alternatives.

Until it was perfect.

Until the timing would be perfect.

Then the Maraans had put everything into motion earlier than she'd wanted by trying to come after Tava Tyndell and Windonelle's Crown Prince, Callan Solgard.

How everything had played out in that throne room? None of that had gone to plan. Not the deaths of Callan's parents and his personal guards, Sloan and Finn. Not Talwyn showing up as a godsdamn wolf and aiding Tarek. Not Nuri having sworn loyalty to Alaric by blood vow and becoming the Contessa, having killed Rosalyn to take her place. Not having only six keys to trick Alaric into taking instead of all seven. Not watching her king and husband and twin flame fall to his knees in front of her, hearing his strangled words down their bond...

She felt Cassius shift behind her, drawing her from her thoughts yet again, and she leaned back into his chest.

“Are you going to need to draw from me?” he asked.

She shook her head, her eyes falling closed as she tried to figure out where exactly in the Edria Sea the rest of their family was. “I will be fine, Cass,” she murmured.

But closing her eyes caused images to flash in her memory again. New nightmares had replaced old ones. Instead of an old office and hearing Juliette say ‘I love you,’ she saw him fighting his way to her. Him swearing there would be no more goodbyes. Him staggering before dropping to his knees.

I would still choose to stay in the darkness.

They were just coasting over the docks when her shadows started to wane.

“We need to go,” Cassius warned. “Now, Scarlett.”

“I know. I know,” she gritted out, searching again in her soul. She banished the memories once more, trying to focus—

They dropped sharply, Cassius’s arm snagging her around the waist and pulling her tightly against him as he cursed. She felt her shadows reach for him, beginning to draw on his reserves as her magic sensed the danger she was about to be in.

Then she felt it. Felt home. Could see where they needed to go.

She moved to Travel them, but something was wrong. They didn’t go anywhere.

Well, that wasn’t true. They dropped another ten feet from the sky, the shadows beneath them beginning to flicker in and out of existence.

“Scarlett...”

“I don’t know what’s wrong, Cass,” she said, tugging on his magic more to try and get them the hell out of here, but still nothing. “I can’t Travel. Can you?”

“Not without knowing where to go. You know that,” he retorted sharply.

“Travel us back to Baylorin then. Or to the Witch Kingdoms. Somewhere we can regroup before we find ourselves swimming in the Edria Sea,” she shot back.

She felt the tug at her navel that always accompanied Traveling, but that was all she felt. They still didn’t go anywhere.

“These past weeks of you drawing from me have taken too much,” Cassius said. “We’re stuck.”

“We’re not stuck. We’ll figure this out,” she snapped as they plummeted down another few feet.

They were definitely stuck.

She could supposedly breathe under water. That was what Briar, Prince of the Water Court, had told her, but Cassius? She glanced back to where the Windonelle capital was a speck on the horizon now.

They were so fucked.

She gritted her teeth against the strain on her gifts. She would be able to keep them in the air for another few minutes at most. She still had her Fae gifts, the fire and water and ice. She could maybe make them a boat of ice to keep them on top of the water, but when those power reserves became depleted too, she had no idea what would happen.

Figuring it was going to be her best option, she was rallying her magic and getting ready to plunge deep into her reserves when a roar pierced the air.

A roar she recognized.

“Cassius,” she breathed.

“What? What is that?” he demanded. She felt him shifting, looking around behind her. He was still clutching her to his front.

The roar came again, and she sighed in relief. “It is Ranvir, Cass.”

“Ranvir? As in *the* Ranvir?”

“As in your father’s bonded spirit animal. Yes,” she answered, the huge black dragon coming into view. Its scales glistened almost iridescently in the setting sun, black leathery wings flapping powerfully as he drew closer.

“That is an actual dragon,” Cassius said in awe.

“Yes, but I think a shadow dragon is much more impressive, don’t you?” Scarlett asked, just as her shadows flickered again and they dropped closer to the waves below.

“An actual dragon is not going to suddenly disappear from beneath me,” Cassius pointed out.

Scarlett rolled her eyes as Ranvir dropped low, swooping to glide under them. She let her shadows go, and they dropped smoothly onto Ranvir’s back.

“So he has that going for him,” she drawled, stretching her legs out and getting comfortable as Ranvir climbed higher into the sky. “But other than that small detail, you have to admit a shadow dragon is more impressive.”

Ranvir let out a huff, smoke furling from his snout. He seemed to peer back over his shoulder at them.

“And apparently he’s a very sensitive dragon,” Scarlett quipped, flopping onto her back. “My shadow dragon doesn’t have such an issue.”

A low growl rumbled from the dragon beneath her, and she grinned, patting his scaly hide.

Cassius spun so his feet stretched in the opposite direction from hers, slowly lying down. His head was beside hers, and he turned to look at her. “How are you holding up, Seastar?” he asked, Ranvir flying them west.

She brought her hands to her stomach, interlacing her fingers. She was exhausted. She could feel the hollow wells of her Avonleyan magic, and not having her shadows at her fingertips was an ache in her soul. She needed her Source.

That ache in her soul throbbed, and she winced as though she’d been physically struck. She lifted her left hand above

her, pulling back the glamour she'd placed on it.

A glamour she'd found in the Sorceress's spell book.

A glamour that hid Marks even from beings who could see through Fae glammers.

A black Mark swirled along the back of her left hand, down her thumb and first three fingers. Only her little finger remained unmarked. The small panic she'd felt clawing up her spine receded at seeing the Mark stark against her skin. Not faded in the slightest as it had been three weeks ago.

Still, it didn't matter that she could see this Mark. She needed to lay eyes on *him* again. Needed to hear his voice. Needed to touch him. Make sure he was real and safe and still on this side of the Veil. Without those constant reminders, she found herself close to slipping back into the hysteria she'd felt that day. Hysteria that still managed to grab hold of her at the most inconvenient times.

It had been a long week.

"I can only focus on the next thing right now, Cass," she said quietly, watching the sky darken above them. "I can't think about anything more than what is right in front of me. If I do, I..."

"You're going to be okay, Seastar," Cassius said when she didn't continue.

"I will be okay when they are dead."

"And until then?"

She didn't say anything right away, letting the exhaustion begin to pull her under into the depths of sleep.

"Until then, they can live knowing I am coming for them. They can look over their shoulders and become so paranoid they think they are going mad. They can go as mad as I did when all hope was lost. They can peer into the shadows and wonder if I am lurking there to end their miserable existence. They can wish I would just get it over with. Until then, they can live in fear of my darkness."

PART ONE

WHEN ASHES MELD WITH
SHADOWS

CHAPTER I

CYRUS

The Day the Stars Went Out- Three Weeks Ago

“**W**hat the fuck?” Cyrus demanded when they appeared from the air in Cassius’s rooms where he and Eliza were waiting for them.

Cyrus’s gaze went from Cassius, who was holding a screaming Scarlett, thrashing violently in his arms, to Rayner kneeling beside the Prince of Fire, who was as still as death on the floor before them. The Ash Rider met Cyrus’s golden eyes. Pain and grief and sorrow stared back at him.

And he knew in that moment what was going to happen.

“Get her to the beach. Now,” Cyrus ordered.

“I can’t Travel again so quickly,” Cassius panted, trying to keep a hold of Scarlett. “I haven’t—” He grunted at her elbow breaking free and slamming into his gut. “I haven’t used the power enough, and she is drawing from me. I have nothing left,” he finished, wrestling with her to try to get her back under control.

But there would be no controlling her. There would be no stopping what was to come.

No one knew that better than him.

Cyrus turned to Briar. “A portal, Drayce. Now,” he said, moving forward to help with the mess of darkness and shadows and ashes before him. Cassius was pale, and Cyrus could tell he needed blood; but even that would have to wait

until they got Scarlett some place she could implode and not take out everyone around her.

“The mortals?” the Water Prince asked, a water portal opening behind him.

Cyrus glanced at the Crown Prince of Windonelle who was holding a child. His other arm was wrapped around Tava Tyndell, and her brother, Drake, stood next to her.

“If we do not get her out of here, there will be nothing left of the mortals to worry about.” He had to yell to be heard over Scarlett’s piercing screams. “Bring him, Rayner,” he added, looking back at the Ash Rider, who still knelt beside their prince and king. His best friend. Eliza had fallen to her knees at his side, silent tears tracking down the general’s face.

Cyrus helped Cassius haul Scarlett through the portal. “Let me take her, Cass. She is drawing from you. You are weakening,” he said as they stepped onto sand, his boots sinking in.

Cassius nodded, letting Cyrus snake his arms around Scarlett, drawing her into his chest.

“Scarlett.” He wasn’t nearly loud enough for her to hear him, but he couldn’t speak around the thickness in his throat. He knew what she was experiencing. He knew she wouldn’t hear him anyway. Not with the hysteria, the pain, the utter agony she was currently feeling.

That would not let up anytime soon.

He did not remember much of the initial days and weeks after Thia was taken from him. He could not say what he did, what he said. The others told him he’d raged, destroyed things with flames. He was told he’d go from being quiet and still, seemingly unable to hear them, to bellowing in pain and fury while torching anything in sight. Apparently he’d thrown down more than once with all of them, oftentimes without warning.

Cyrus didn’t remember anything aside from the agony and pain and unrelenting grief.

“Sorin!”

That was all she screamed. Over and over and over. Gasps came between each scream as she managed to drag air into her lungs.

Cyrus forced Scarlett to the sand as he lowered himself down so he could wrap his legs around hers to keep her from kicking at them. He cradled her thrashing body tightly to him. It had taken both Sorin and Rayner to restrain him when Thia had died. He knew if her power reserves had been even slightly full, this would not be possible. She had to be completely drained for him to be overpowering her this easily.

Her face was pressed to his chest, her tears soaking through his tunic and into his skin. He pressed a hand to the back of her head, threading his fingers into her hair, holding her there. He looked over at Eliza as another portal opened and Briar stepped through with Hazel. Cyrus hadn't realized the Water Prince had left.

The High Witch looked at her son first before her gaze moved to the queen, then to the king, her eyes going wide with shock as she dropped to Sorin's side. White light flared, but a minute later, when violet eyes met his, Cyrus knew what she was going to say.

There was nothing she could do.

She was saying something to Rayner, and the Ash Rider was nodding in understanding, but Cyrus couldn't hear anything over Scarlett's unrelenting cries.

"Scarlett," Cyrus murmured, bringing his mouth close to her ear. "Darling." He swallowed thickly. "Scarlett, you are not alone. Hear me. Please. You are not alone. You are not alone."

Her screams became sobs, and then she couldn't breathe. She was gasping for breath.

"Breathe, Scarlett," Cyrus said, his own tears spilling down his face. "You are not alone. There are still stars worth fighting for."

Her answer was another scream, before she lurched away from him so suddenly he wasn't prepared for it. She heaved

into the sand beside them, and Cyrus gathered her hair back as she retched and retched and retched. Cassius was there, wiping her mouth in between bouts of hurling, and then she was crawling across the sand to Sorin's body.

And Cyrus let her go. Because he did not get to say goodbye to Thia, and he would have given anything to do so. He wouldn't take this from her. Maybe the mania that was coming for her at this loss wouldn't be as intense as what he'd experienced if she got this chance.

He knew that was wishful thinking.

He turned to Rayner. "We need to make sure the chateau is prepared. I will stay there with her." He glanced at her Guardian. "Cassius and I will stay there with her. Take Hazel. Put up the same wards he had her put up for me."

Rayner nodded, moving to speak with Hazel, and Cyrus's eyes went back to the queen. She was bowed over Sorin's still body, fists curled into his tunic, and her brow pressed to his chest where charred flesh was visible beneath the hole that had been burned into the fabric.

"You promised," Scarlett was sobbing. "You promised there would be no goodbyes. You promised there would always be a you and me. You promised."

Then she was screaming those words over and over. "You promised! No goodbyes! Always be a you and me!"

They stood around her— Eliza, Cyrus, Cassius, Rayner. The Water Prince. The High Witch.

They stood and watched the Queen of the Western Courts break completely.

"She will not survive this," Cassius said quietly. Cyrus barely heard him over Scarlett's renewed screaming.

"You promised!"

"She can," Cyrus insisted. "I did. She's stronger than I could ever hope to be."

"No goodbyes!"

“It is not that she cannot,” Cassius said. “It is that she *will* not.”

“Always be a you and me!”

“She wouldn’t...” Eliza trailed off, swiping fingers across her cheeks, wiping away tears. “She will not do that.”

“She will,” Cassius said. “We can try to stop her, but she will find a way to follow him to the After.”

“You promised!”

“She will want to. Gods, I know she will want to die,” Cyrus said, familiar agony crawling up from the depths of his soul. Agony he lived with every day. Heartache that had become a part of who he was. “That is why we will stay with her.”

“No goodbyes!”

Cassius shook his head, a hand carving through his brown hair. “She will find a way to follow him,” he repeated, swaying on his feet.

Cyrus gripped his arm. “You need to rest.”

“I cannot leave her right now.”

“Always be a you and me!”

“Just sit,” Cyrus said. “I will give you blood in a bit. Can you wait? I know that’s a lot to ask of you right now, but—”

“Yes,” Cassius cut him off. “I can wait.” Briar helped him lower to the sand as he said, “Go to her.”

“You promised!”

Her head was tipped back now, and she was screaming her wrath to the night sky above them. The waves of the sea were crashing violently against the shore, the icy spray misting across his face, dampening his clothes. Cyrus didn’t know if Scarlett was simply so weak that the most she could do was create turbulent waves, or if Briar was working against her power.

He knelt beside her again, pulling her into him once more. “He promised, Cyrus,” she sobbed. “He promised he would never leave me alone in the darkness.”

“I know, Darling,” he murmured into her hair, clutching her tightly. “You are not alone.”

“He promised.”

That became her new chant. Over and over. And all he could do was say, “I know. I know.”

He wanted to ask what the hell had happened. He wanted to hear every detail of what had occurred after Rayner had shown up with Briar and Luan. Luan had given Cassius the fastest lesson possible on Traveling, and thank Anala he was half-Avonleyan or that would have never worked. But how had *this* happened? Where was Scarlett’s Semiria ring? Where was the Earth Prince now? Talwyn and Ashtine? How had Sorin fallen? What were the mortals doing back here?

What the actual fuck had happened?

He didn’t know how long they all sat there. Several minutes maybe? No one moving. No one speaking. Only Scarlett’s cries of despair filling the night. She eventually fell still and silent in his arms, and he didn’t know if she’d finally passed out from utter exhaustion or if something far worse was about to happen.

Rayner moved to his side, crouching down beside him. His voice was low, barely audible. “The High Witch says he has not fully crossed the Veil. His heart beats but is...” His eyes cut to Sorin’s still form, his jaw clenching. “He will not come back like Cassius did.”

“What happened?” Cyrus asked, looking over his shoulder to where Cassius sat, his tired gaze fixed on Scarlett. He really needed to get the commander some blood.

Rayner glanced at the unmoving queen cradled in Cyrus’s arms before he said, “A lot happened.”

“What happened to...him?” he clarified, finding himself unable to say his friend’s name.

“Talwyn.”

Cyrus had barely heard Rayner say the name, but he tensed, his hold on Scarlett tightening as she went rigid in his arms.

“Scarlett...” he ventured cautiously.

Her eyes slowly opened, pale blue irises instantly going to her twin flame before her.

Somehow shadows began coiling around her, and Cyrus didn't understand it because she had nothing left. She should not be able to access any of her magic.

Until he glanced at Cassius and found him grimacing as she pulled the dregs of his own unknown gifts from his very being.

“Scarlett. Stop,” Cyrus said in a low command. “You are hurting Cass. You are— Stop, Scarlett.”

“I am going to kill her.” And her voice. Holy gods. Her voice was cold and eerie and oddly monotone. It was what he imagined a true wraith would speak like. He'd joked with Cassius that the Wraiths of Death weren't nearly as wicked as they were made out to be.

Seeing and hearing her speak now, he took it all back. She was darkness incarnate.

“I am going to kill her. It will not be quick. It will be long and painful and slow. I am going to kill them all, but her death will make the Pits of Torment feel like a reprieve when I am done with her.”

“Okay,” Cyrus breathed when she fell quiet once more. “I will help you do that, Darling, but I need you to stop drawing from Cassius right now. I need you to stop. I need you to—”

A snarl pierced the night before movement in the shadows had them all tensing.

All of them other than Scarlett.

She just continued to stare at her husband.

Silver eyes glowed in the darkness, and a moment later, a panther as black as the night they stood in emerged. No one dared to move as the feline slunk towards Scarlett who was still drawing from Cassius. The commander was breathing through his teeth, Hazel kneeling beside him with white light flaring under her hands, trying to ease the strain he was feeling.

Shirina, the spirit animal of the goddess Saylah, came to a stop in front of the queen. The panther's nose was nearly touching hers.

"I am done with you," Scarlett said to the feline. "I am done with all of you. The gods can fuck off. The Lord of Night can go to hell. And if the Fates try to direct my path again, I will burn the entirety of the worlds and stars to nothing."

Shirina only bowed her head for a long moment.

And then she pounced.

Massive paws landed on the queen's shoulders, knocking her to the ground onto her back. A scream of rage left Scarlett, shadows lashing out and Cassius grunting in pain as she pulled and pulled from him. But her rage was quickly cut off as Shirina reared over her. Her maw opened, and a shadowy mist flowed from the panther into Scarlett's parted lips and down her throat.

And then there was nothing but silence as the queen's eyes closed, and she became as still as her twin flame beside her.

Fire and shadows, side-by-side.

And while Cyrus stared at them, Rayner and Eliza moving to his side, all he could do was wonder about the ashes and darkness that would be left behind in their wake at the end of all of this.

CHAPTER 2

SCARLETT

She knew where she was. She didn't need to open her eyes to know where Shirina had sent her when she'd breathed the essence of Saylah, goddess of night and shadows, into her soul. She could feel the too soft grass beneath her. She could smell the darkness of the night surrounding her. She expected to hear the cry of an eagle.

It never came.

"Scarlett."

She didn't open her eyes at the sound of his voice either.

The Lord of Night.

He could go to hell just like she'd told the panther.

On second thought, no. That's where she was. She didn't want company here.

Hell. Eternal damnation. The Pits of Torment. Didn't really matter what it was called. That had to be where she was. Because a world without him? That was her own personal purgatory of suffering.

So she didn't open her eyes when the beautiful man from her dreams and the mirror gate said her name again. She just laid there. Numb and lost in the nightmare she couldn't wake up from. A nightmare she'd never wake up from.

At least here she'd stopped screaming.

Maybe you couldn't scream in the Pits. Maybe that was part of the torment. You could only scream in your mind. No

outlet. No way to give voice to the never-ending anguish and soul-shredding pain. Could only let it drive you even more mad until you were nothing.

She was nothing anymore anyway.

“Scarlett.”

His voice was sharper. Harsher. Urgent.

“Scarlett, please. Hope is not lost.”

Hope.

There was no hope in hell.

The air stirred beside her, and there were hands on her face.

“Scarlett, please,” he begged. “Arius has not yet claimed his soul, but if you do not open your godsdamn eyes it will be too late.”

“You speak as if he has not crossed the Veil,” she croaked out, her voice raspy and hoarse from the screaming.

“He has, but only just. He has not crossed fully to the After. There is still time.”

Scarlett slowly opened her eyes to find silver ones peering down at her, full of concern and panic.

“I know it hurts, Starfire, but you need to get up. You need to call him back. He cannot find you if you stop calling for him.”

He pulled a dagger from his boot, slicing it across his palm before reaching for her hand. She didn't feel the gash along her own skin as he once again mixed their blood in her palm. He began tracing a Mark on his forearm, above a Mark that matched her own. The Mark that he had given her to awaken her Avonleyan magic.

The Mark he drew was a circle with two interlocking circles inside it. Scarlett watched him, not really seeing or caring what he was doing. When he reached for her arm, her eyes fell closed again.

How soon does a person go mad when their soul is shattered into nothing? Would it truly only take mere hours? Had it even been an hour? For some reason she'd thought it would take longer. Silly really when she thought about it. Without a soul, could a person really even be considered sane?

"Stay with me, Starfire," he said, his finger gliding along her arm.

"How do you know that name?"

His movement paused for a fraction of a second before he continued drawing on her flesh. "I will tell you the answer to that when I can tell you my name."

"I don't really care," she sighed as he withdrew his finger. "It doesn't matter anymore anyway."

"Scarlett Aditya, open your eyes."

The sound of his surname made her entire body jerk. Her eyes flew wide, and she lurched for the Lord of Night. To do what, she wasn't quite sure. Hit him? Scream at him? Anything to release the torrent of emotions crashing over the scattered remains of her soul and slowly drowning her.

He caught her wrists, bringing his face right in front of hers, their brows nearly touching. "Listen to me, Scarlett. Focus and listen." He paused for a moment, holding her stare. When she didn't look away, he continued. "He can come back. He has not fully crossed, but you must call him home."

"I don't understand," she whispered.

"I know you don't, and I cannot explain everything. There is not time. We waste seconds at this very moment. When you wake, Altaria will be there. He has a vial tied to his leg. Drink it. It will activate this Mark," he said, releasing one wrist to run his fingers along the new Mark on her skin. "When you have done so, use the Source Mark."

"The Source Mark?" she balked, shaking her head. "I cannot draw from him. That would—"

But he was shaking his head too. "The Source Mark works both ways, Scarlett. As he could give to you, you can give to

him. Call him home.”

“And then?”

He ran a hand over her hair, cupping the back of her head. He brought his brow to hers as he said, “Then remember, Starfire, that hope is for the dreamers.”



Scarlett’s eyes flew open. Cassius and Cyrus were leaning over her, concern and terror filling golden eyes and a chocolate brown one. Cassius still had his eye patch over his injured eye that would never heal. She moved to push herself up, but Cassius’s hands were on her shoulders.

“Easy, Seastar. Take it easy,” he murmured. “Just take a moment to—”

But she was pushing his hands from her body, trying to see around him, looking to the sky where no stars were visible among the night. If she could just see a glimpse of dark movement. Just to know it had been real. To know that it hadn’t been a dream...

“Scarlett,” Cyrus was saying, trying to pull her back down. “I know you are not okay. I know none of this is okay, but—”

He barked a curse when she caught him in the chest with her fist, scrambling away from them before either male realized what had happened.

“How does she have that kind of strength right now?” Cassius muttered.

“I don’t think she realizes what she’s doing at the moment,” Cyrus replied. “I scarcely remember a thing the hours and days after Thia died.”

Scarlett flinched at the word.

Died.

No.

No, no, no.

It wasn't an option. If he was going to the After, she was going with him. If whatever the Lord of Night was doing failed, she would follow her twin flame across the Veil. He wasn't leaving her here alone. He wasn't leaving her in the darkness. He had made a promise, and godsdamnit, he was going to keep it. Always be a you and me. That's what he had said. Always.

She was on her feet, scanning the sky, straining to hear anything. The others were murmuring behind her. She didn't know what they were saying. She didn't care. Her only focus was the sky. And when the cry of an eagle reached her ears, a sob escaped her lips.

Altaria was soaring straight for her and diving fast, as though he was going after prey. She lifted her arm for him, and a second later, talons were curling around it. One of the fire Fae had lit a few small fires in the surrounding sand; and in the flickering light of the flames, she could see a vial tied to the eagle's leg, just as the Lord of Night had said it would be.

"Scarlett...?" Cyrus started.

But she said nothing. She could focus on nothing else. Only this. This one thing. This one possible star.

Her fingers began trembling when she saw her twin flame Mark beginning to fade from her skin. Panic snaked along her being because if that Mark was fading, he was already gone. She was too late. He was gone, and she was still here. A you and a me. Separate. Apart. A world without him in it.

She was trying to untie the vial from the eagle's leg, but her fingers wouldn't work right; and her legs were going to give out; and she was going to vomit because a you and a me.

A you.

And a me.

Then hands were brushing hers gently aside. Dark fingers were working the knot, and icy blue eyes void of their usual

twinkle met hers when he closed her fist around the tiny glass container.

“Bring him back, Sunshine,” Briar said. How he knew what she was trying to do, she didn’t care.

“She cannot bring him back,” Hazel cut in. Even the High Witch’s usually stern voice was softer, kinder. Just as blunt, but full of pity. “His heart stopped. Moments ago. While she slept.”

He has not crossed fully to the After. There is still time.

She pulled the cork from the vial, drinking down what she immediately recognized as blood.

Blood that tasted dark and cold, of night and death, of wildness and the unknown.

There is still time.

Those four words were the only thing she focused on. Anything else, and she’d slip into the nothingness once more. She’d give in to the hysteria raking at her, slithering through her veins, sinking in deep.

The new Mark flared slightly, and Cassius stepped forward, taking her forearm in his hand.

“How did you get this?” he murmured, his thumb brushing along the Mark.

She felt it then. He’d fed. His power reserves were brimming with something fierce and intense and *hot*. She glanced at Cyrus, a slice on his forearm still visible confirming her suspicion.

She’d never been able to sense the power of another magic-wielder before. But she could feel all of them. The flames of Cyrus and Eliza. Rayner’s strange ashes and smoke. Briar’s water and ice that matched her own. The High Witch’s healing gifts.

She met Cassius’s gaze, unable to figure out what kind of power she was feeling from him, but she wasn’t focused enough to even try to work out that puzzle. Whatever Cass saw in her eyes, though, had him taking a step back. Cyrus

apparently saw it too, because he was rushing forward, flames swirling from his palm and reaching towards her.

But she was already moving. She was not entirely sure what this Mark did that the Lord of Night had given her, but it was night itself that pooled in her hand. Not her shadows, but pure darkness, absorbing the light of Cyrus's flames.

"Scarlett!" Cassius cried, his eye going wide in disbelief.

Her gaze flicked back to him, and her shadows did appear then. They leapt from her to her Guardian, latching on and sinking in deep to his freshly filled magic wells. He grunted, falling to a knee, hands hitting the sand to hold himself up, as she pulled deeply, seeking out every last ounce of his magic.

"Scarlett! Stop!" Cyrus was shouting, dropping down beside Cassius as if he could somehow shield him.

Hands were reaching for her. Eliza. Rayner. Her shadows held them back.

Water and ice tried to restrain her. The darkness absorbed it all.

Her own power wells were filling, gorging on Cassius's gifts, and she moved to Sorin's side. Dropping to her knees, she reached for a dagger in her boot, but it wasn't there. All of her weapons were gone. She saw Eliza shift in her periphery, moving to try and block all of her weapons piled in the sand.

A wicked sneer formed on her lips as she met the Fae general's grey eyes, and Eliza seemed to shrink back from her. They'd tried to prepare for her wrath. For the whirlwind of rage and grief that was working to encompass her.

There was no preparing for her storm.

If she could stop this, if she could keep him on this side of the Veil, no one was going to stop her. Not the Fire General. Not her family. Not the gods. And certainly not the fucking Fates.

She reached for a knife Sorin had sheathed at his thigh. Rotating his arm, she found the Source Mark. She ran the blade across the Mark before cutting her palm. And then, like

the night she gave him this Mark, she poured her magic into him. Every last bit of embers. Every drop of water and ice. Every shadow. Every white flame. All of the dark and cold *thing* that had come from the Lord of Night. All of her healing gifts as an Avonleyan. She gave it all to Sorin. Every piece that was left of her shattered soul.

“You promised me, Sorin Aditya,” she rasped between breaths. “There would be no more goodbyes. There would always be a you and me. You promised. I cannot live in a world without you. I will not do it. Come back.” Her voice broke on the last words, tears slipping down her face from the draining of her power and strain on her heart. “Come back to me. You promised.”

Someone tried to pull her away, but she threw them back with her shadows that were still drawing from Cassius.

“Scarlett. Enough.” That was Cyrus’s voice in her ear, full of anguish and panic, but steady and firm. “Scarlett, stop. He cannot come back. And I know that pain. I know—gods, I *know* what you are feeling right now—but you are killing Cassius by trying to change this. You are *killing* him, Scarlett. Do you hear me? Please hear me.” He was begging, pleading with her.

“He promised, Cyrus,” she gritted out, power still pouring from her and into her twin flame.

“I know, Scarlett. I know he did.”

“No more goodbyes.”

“There will be another one if you do not stop.”

His hands were on her face, trying to force her gaze to his, but her eyes were fixed on Sorin’s chest. This had to work. He had said it wasn’t too late. That there was still time. He had said to have hope. He had said...

“That is not possible,” came a gasp from the High Witch.

And she saw it then. She saw the smallest movement of Sorin’s chest.

Hazel was dropping down on Sorin's other side, white light flaring from her hands as Cyrus's hands slipped from her cheeks.

"His heart beats, yes?" Scarlett panted, continuing to pour power into him. She didn't dare stop until she knew for sure.

"It does. It should not, but it does," she replied.

"You can heal the wound now? You can...heal him," she managed between labored breaths, her gaze shifting to the High Witch. "Tell me that, Hazel. Tell me that he will live."

Violet eyes met hers. "His heartbeat grows stronger with each passing second. I do not know what deal you made with Arius in your dreams or what cost is to be paid, but he will live, young queen. Your twin flame will live."

And that was all she needed to hear.

She collapsed beside the one star she was unwilling to live without, nestling into his side, and slipped back into her blessed darkness.

CHAPTER 3

CYRUS

“What just happened?” Cyrus demanded as he looked upon his king and queen unconscious before him.

Again.

He still knelt from where he’d crawled to Scarlett’s side, trying to get her to stop drawing power from Cassius. She’d been pulling from him too deeply too quickly. He’d known she’d eventually get to this point—this place of being too hysterical to understand reason—but fuck. He had not anticipated *this*. He had not anticipated she would be willing to risk Cassius to save Sorin. Saving him should not have been in the realm of possibilities, and yet—

“She brought him back,” the High Witch said curtly, her power flaring as it continued to wrap around Sorin.

“How?”

He couldn’t look away from his prince and friend. His chest was indeed rising and falling, albeit shallowly. The charred skin on his chest was slowly beginning to heal as her power combined with whatever the hell Scarlett had done.

And the girl who had turned their entire world upside down when Sorin had brought her across their border was curled next to him, hand fisted in his tunic and face buried in his side. Her breathing was erratic and labored, as if she’d just finished a sparring match. Even in sleep, he could see the grief and worry etched into her features.

“I do not know,” the High Witch said. “But I can imagine the cost was great.”

“Cost? What cost?” Eliza asked, appearing at his side. “Like the cost of a Blood Mark?”

The High Witch shook her head. “This was not Blood Magic.”

“Then what was it?” the general demanded.

The High Witch just shook her head again, lips thinning. “I do not know, but I have seen Blood Magic used on many occasions. This was not that. Give Cassius blood. He is weak, and I cannot tend to him at the moment.”

Cyrus twisted, finding Cassius flat on his back in the sand, chest heaving. He rushed to his side, kicking up sand as he crawled the short distance from Scarlett’s side to his. This entire night he had been going back and forth between the two. Trying to console Scarlett. Giving Cassius blood. Trying to stop Scarlett from spiraling into grief. Trying to get her to stop drawing from the male before him. Now back to give him more blood.

“Cassius?” His eye was closed, the patch still covering the other one. Cyrus wasn’t sure if he’d slipped into an unconscious state from his magic being dragged from him so quickly or if he was just resting. When Cassius said nothing, he reached over, shaking his shoulder gently. “Cass?” A groan was his answer, but at least it was something. “You need to drink.”

“How is she?”

Cyrus huffed a laugh of disbelief, beginning to roll his sleeve back more. “You are weakened to the point of not being able to sit up, and you ask of the girl who did it to you?”

“I am her Guardian,” he replied dryly.

“She sleeps,” Cyrus said flatly, pulling a dagger from his side.

“Maybe we should move before doing this?” Rayner suggested, the cup they’d used for this same purpose only an hour earlier in his hand.

Cyrus looked up at the Ash Rider. “Do you not remember all the things I set on fire when Thia died?”

Rayner’s mysterious eyes seemed to swirl faster. “I remember well, Cyrus. I also remember removing any form of weapon from the chateau and fearing you would still find a way to end yourself with the godsdamn curtains. I remember forcing tonics down your throat to quell your magic so that you did not burn the whole godsdamn place down. I remember feeling utterly helpless as you broke in ways I cannot imagine, and now we are reliving it.”

“And you think it would be a good idea to move her indoors somewhere? Where others could be injured and hurt when she loses control? Because she will, Rayner. You know if whatever the fuck she just did does not work, she will lose herself completely,” Cyrus retorted, blood dripping down from the gash he’d reopened in his arm and spilling into the cup.

“I think it is foolish to be out in the open with our king and queen indisposed,” Rayner replied.

He had a point. If Sorin did survive this, by some miracle of the Fates, then it would be best to keep such news to themselves until they figured out what the hell was going on and what they were going to do about it.

If he did not survive it, it would be best to have the queen already subdued when she woke.

“Yeah, all right,” Cyrus conceded. He turned back to Cassius. “Drink some of this now. Enough to be able to walk. I can get you more when we get to the chateau.”

“The chateau?” Eliza asked, standing over them. “You want us all to go there? Sorin will hate that.”

“Sorin doesn’t exactly get a say in the matter at the moment. He still breathes, and I am still his Second, so the decision is mine to make,” Cyrus replied. “I don’t know what the fuck is going on. I don’t know if someone is going to show up demanding an audience here or in Solembra. If we have them hidden away, we give ourselves more time to come up with a plan and avoid making rash decisions.”

“I agree,” Rayner said. “I will bring Sorin. Briar can carry Scarlett. You help Cassius.”

Cyrus nodded, Eliza moving to gather the weapons they’d removed from Scarlett in case she’d tried to use one.

Which she had.

And then she’d gotten resourceful.

How could she even think clearly enough right now to pull this off? When Thia had died, the grief and pain had been too consuming for him to form a coherent thought. Yet Scarlett had been able to enact an entire plan to save her twin flame. Was there something else he could have done to save Thia if he had been stronger?

“Did you drink enough to stand?” he asked the commander, reaching to help him into a sitting position, shoving his thoughts aside for now.

“I’m fine,” Cassius muttered, pushing his hands away. He attempted to get to his feet, but immediately fell back to his knees.

“Clearly.”

Cassius sent him a droll look.

The sound of rushing water had Cyrus looking over his shoulder to see the portal Briar had opened. Scarlett was cradled to his chest. Rayner had already carried Sorin through, the High Witch following behind. Eliza was waiting on him and Cassius.

He turned back to the commander. “Let’s go then. You’re holding up the show.”

“You are such an asshole,” Cassius muttered, sucking in a breath as if readying himself for the simple act of standing.

“And you’re as stubborn as your ward,” Cyrus retorted, gripping his arm and pulling the male up with him when he pushed to his own feet. Cassius didn’t fight him this time, leaning against him when Cyrus slung an arm around his waist.

They stepped through the water portal, and Cyrus breathed deep as the mountain air hit his lungs. So much better than the sea air he'd been subjected to these past months. Sorin had been creating portals for him to go back to Solembra at night so he didn't have to stay in the Black Halls, but his chest didn't feel as tight when he was in the mountains, away from the sea.

Other than that night he'd smoked mugweed with Cassius.

He hadn't minded the sea that night. He hadn't quite decided if it was the mugweed itself or the company he'd been with on that balcony.

The wards zipped against their skin, Eliza sending flames ahead of them to melt the snow and make a path to the chateau. Having both Sorin and Scarlett with them should satisfy the wards and spells around the chateau to let them in. At least he hoped that was the case. Sorin never let them in this place. It was his own little pity party house. Other than when Thia had died, he'd only ever seen the Fire Prince open the door to this place for one other person.

Rayner already had the door open by the time he made it there with Cassius. The commander's breathing had never eased. One look at the male and one could see he was struggling to even continue walking.

Cyrus led him over to a sofa, helping him ease down to sit, but the commander was instantly pushing back to his feet when he saw Briar and Rayner heading to the staircase at the back of the room that would lead up to the second-floor suite.

"For fuck's sake, sit down," Cyrus sighed, pressing his palm to the commander's chest. It didn't take much effort to push him back down to the sofa.

"I need to be with her," Cassius insisted.

"She's not going anywhere," Cyrus drawled, flames swirling in his palm. "If she wakes, I promise we'll know. She's loud and obnoxious. Might I suggest regaining some strength so you can actually climb the godsdamn stairs without me having to carry you up them? I did that once. It is not

something I ever care to do again. You're heavy." Cassius took the cup Cyrus was holding out to him with a scowl, but stopped trying to get up. "At least you listen to reason better than your ward," Cyrus muttered, once again dragging a dagger along his arm.

"Fuck off," Cassius grumbled, his head tipping back against the sofa cushions, eye falling closed.

"If I did that, your ass would be tumbling down those stairs at this very moment when you finally realized you cannot make it up them on your own right now," Cyrus replied. Cassius just raised his hand and flipped him off. Cyrus smirked, his blood dripping in a steady stream into the cup. When it was nearly full, he said, "Drink up."

Cassius lifted his head, bringing the cup to his lips. Cyrus turned and headed for the stairs, his arm already beginning to heal. "I'll check on her and report back," he said over his shoulder.

His foot had landed on the first step when Cassius called out. "Cyrus."

He paused, glancing back. "Yeah?"

"Thank you," Cassius said. "For helping her. For helping me. For...all of it."

Cyrus nodded. "Rest up, Cass. I'll let you know how she's doing," he replied, turning and heading up the stairs.



"Luan wants to speak with us," Eliza announced as she came through the doorway of the upstairs chateau suite. She held a piece of parchment in her hand. "He says it's urgent."

"Does he now?" Cyrus asked from where he sat in an armchair near the hearth. Cassius was sprawled across the sofa, finally sleeping. The moment he'd had enough strength

last night to climb the stairs, he'd insisted on doing so. He'd watched over Scarlett all night and day; but when he'd practically fallen asleep standing up, the High Witch had forced him away, saying that if he fell onto the bed and landed on Sorin, he'd undo all her hard work over the past several hours. Cassius had muttered under his breath, but he'd been asleep almost instantly when his ass had hit the sofa.

The High Witch had also worked through the night, continuing to use her power to heal Sorin. She looked as exhausted as her son. Shortly after Cassius had fallen asleep, she had asked Briar for a portal to the Witch Kingdoms, asking him to retrieve her later tonight.

The king and queen hadn't moved from where they'd been placed upon arrival. According to the High Witch, Sorin's heartbeat was strong and steady. Cyrus could see for himself that his chest was rising and falling, breaths unlabored and deep. Scarlett was next to him. She'd immediately turned into him as soon as Briar had laid her on the bed. Her hand rested on his chest, and her breathing was nearly in sync with her husband's, as if she had naturally fallen into rhythm with him. Neither had shown any sign of waking any time soon.

"With us and Briar," Eliza said in response to his comment.

"Briar should be back soon," Rayner said from the chair he occupied across from Cyrus. "We can discuss what to do then."

"Any change?" Eliza asked, perching on the arm of the sofa by Cassius's feet.

"Nothing," Cyrus said, his head dropping back against the chair. When the silence became too heavy, he asked, "What do you think the cost was for this?"

"Whatever it was, the High Witch made it sound like it would be steep," Eliza replied grimly.

"I can only assume she saw this Lord of Night, or whatever he calls himself, when Shirina made her sleep,"

Cyrus said. “That had to be how she knew to look for Altaria, right?”

“That’d be my best guess,” Rayner said evenly.

“But *what* exactly did she do?” Eliza asked, her gaze going to the sleeping royals.

“I don’t think that’s the question we should be asking right now,” Cyrus said, studying the queen in contemplation.

“Then what should we be asking?” Eliza drawled.

“We should not be asking what she did, but what she is,” Cyrus said simply.

“She’s Avonleyan. We know that,” Eliza argued.

“But what does that *mean*?” Cyrus asked, his gaze moving from the queen to the general. “The history of that kingdom has all but been erased from this continent. The only books that do remain are hidden away in secret chambers or beneath the Wind Citadel, behind doors not even Ashtine can access. We know very little about the kingdom, its people, or what power they actually possess. And that’s...” He trailed off, not sure how to finish that thought.

“That’s unsettling,” Rayner finished for him. “For all of us, including the queen.”

“Indeed,” Cyrus replied as the sound of the front door opening and closing echoed from downstairs.

“Briar,” Rayner said when Eliza and Cyrus immediately tensed.

“Maybe warn us before we hear them next time,” Cyrus drawled.

Rayner shrugged. “The High Witch is with him. She is... unhappy.”

Eliza snorted softly. “What else is new?”

“There is an issue,” Hazel said tersely the moment she stepped through the doorway, her eyes immediately going to her son. “Has he slept this entire time?”

“Yes,” Cyrus answered.

“Good,” she clipped, moving to the bedside, white light immediately flaring and wrapping around Sorin.

“And this issue?” Eliza asked. They were used to letting her deal with the High Witch, seeing as how the Witches found most males to be an annoyance best dealt with by beheading.

The High Witch leaned back, withdrawing her hands. Violet eyes settled on them, her lip curling back in disgust. “There is a Night Child squatting in my kingdom.”

Cyrus’s brows flew up at that news. “Is it still alive?”

“For now,” the High Witch replied. “How much longer he will remain so, I cannot say.”

“He?” Eliza asked.

“He claims to know the queen. He claims Death’s Shadow sent him to me and that I would provide refuge until he could get to Death’s Maiden,” the High Witch continued, her voice soft and dripping with barely suppressed rage.

Cyrus was on his feet. “Are you saying Auberon Isra is alive and fled to your territory?”

Auberon Isra had been Contessa Rosalyn’s Second-in-Command. They had all assumed Nuri had killed him when she had killed the Contessa to take her place. If what she was claiming was true, Death’s Shadow had spared him, instead of allowing him to flee to a territory where no one would dare seek him out.

And what did that mean for her allegiance? He had been told of her blood vow, but if she had found a way to spare Auberon, were there other loopholes she could exploit?

“Yes,” the High Witch spat. “You have until sunrise to get him out, or I have given Arantxa orders to kill him.”

“Fucking hell,” Cyrus muttered. He turned to the other Fae. “Bring him here? We can’t really risk anyone else discovering he’s still alive. Not right now, with so much unknown.”

“Agreed,” Briar said. He’d moved across the room to one of the windows, watching the sun dip behind the mountain peaks. He hadn’t said much since the throne room, but Rayner had filled Cyrus in on what had happened between him and Ashtine.

The Water Prince turned to face them after another beat of silence. “I checked in on the mortals. We should not leave them alone at the Black Halls any longer.”

“We can’t bring them all here. There’s hardly enough room for us,” Eliza argued.

“I can move them to the House of Water for now,” Briar said. “Sawyer and Neve can watch over them until Sorin and Scarlett wake. I simply wanted to run it by you first.”

“Did Luan contact you?” Eliza asked.

“He did,” Briar replied. “He is coming here tonight.”

“He’s what?” Eliza balked, and Cyrus had to agree with her. Sorin was already going to be pissy about all of them being in here, but Azrael Luan?

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Cyrus cut in. “We do not want it known that Sorin lives. Not until—”

“I know this,” Briar cut in. “But he has information that we need. He is also our only way of getting that information at the moment. I would rather he report here, in a location as secluded as possible.”

“And you believe we can trust him?” Eliza asked, her tone conveying her thoughts on that matter.

“We can,” Briar said. “Ashtine always spoke favorably of him.”

“Ashtine now sides with Talwyn,” Cyrus pointed out, earning a glare from the Water Prince, but he couldn’t deny it. “Who says Azrael has not done the same?”

“He did not,” Briar replied with an eerie calm that had Cyrus knowing he was close to overstepping with the prince. “If memory serves correctly, I was there. You were not. Furthermore, I have dealt with Prince Luan for decades. He

may be as difficult as Talwyn is, but he was also the voice of reason in her ear when needed. If you do not trust him, you can trust my experience with him as a fellow ruler.”

“I did not mean any offense, Briar,” Cyrus said. “I just...” He ran a hand through his hair, his eyes finding their way to his king and queen once more. “I don’t know what to do here. I don’t know what they would want.”

And didn’t that just make him a shit Second? He may have done this before when Talwyn had sent Sorin to the mortal lands for three years, but that had been different. Sorin hadn’t been on his death bed. He had communicated every so often through Amaré, Anala’s spirit animal. They hadn’t been about to go to war against Maraan Lords and seraphs whose power they could not even begin to predict.

He may have been in this role for decades, but there were still times he felt more like that kid on the streets of Aelyndee than he did a member of the prince’s Inner Court. There were still days he woke and wondered how the hell he’d made it from there to here. He’d thank the Fates, but they’d taken as much as they’d ever given. Why they found him deserving of moving from the streets to a palace, he’d never understand, but he certainly had the scars to show it wasn’t just handed to him. Scars that never let him heal quite right.

“You are Sorin’s Second in the Fire Court, but *her* Second slumbers beside her,” Briar said.

Cyrus’s brows shot up. “You are pulling rank as her Third?”

“I will if necessary,” Briar replied. “We are on the brink of war. Lines have been drawn. There is no room for uncertainty.”

“That is how wars are lost,” Cyrus countered. “Rash decisions made by generals and princes not looking at all the angles.”

The temperature in the chateau dropped noticeably as Briar’s icy blue eyes flashed with anger.

“Enough,” Rayner cut in. “Bickering amongst ourselves is also how wars are lost.” When neither Fae said anything in response, Rayner continued. “Briar is correct. We cannot risk meeting anywhere else right now. The Earth Prince does not need to come up here. He can remain downstairs. He does not need to know Sorin lives. He will assume Scarlett is lost to grief, which is not entirely a farce. Agreed?”

Cyrus sighed, swiping a hand down his face again. “Agreed,” he muttered.

He wasn’t entirely sure why he was arguing with them. His own points were valid, but as he’d once told Scarlett, they worked so well together because they all brought their own strengths to the table and worked as a unit. Briar had ruled his Court as long as Sorin, had just as much experience.

It probably had to do with the fact that this involved the Earth Prince. Second to Talwyn. Who had murdered his own prince. Never mind the fact that he lived. The Fae Queen had, for all intents and purposes, killed him, and now her loyal Second wanted to meet with them? He was right to be leery. He was right to resist this to some extent.

“He’s going to need to offer some type of proof for whatever he tries to convince us of,” Eliza chimed in, voicing Cyrus’s thoughts. “He is loyal to Talwyn, not us.”

“He is loyal to his Court,” Briar argued.

“Bullshit,” Cyrus said. “If he had to choose, he would choose her every time. Just as you would choose Ashtine.”

“You know nothing of my relationship with Ashtine, Cyrus. Keep her out of this.”

“We can’t,” Cyrus insisted. “Your relationship with her will clearly impact your decisions. Just like Scarlett impacted Sorin’s choices. It’s not a bad thing, but it is certainly something we cannot simply ignore. The same goes for Luan. We cannot ignore his past relationship with Talwyn. That would be foolish.”

“I never said we had to trust him. I said we needed to hear him out,” Briar countered, his tone going as icy as his power.

“And we will,” Rayner cut in again. “We will hear him out and then discuss our next move from there.”

“I would request you provide me a portal back to the Witch Kingdoms before he arrives. I have had enough male interaction to last me for decades at this point,” the High Witch said from the bedside.

“Of course, my lady,” Briar said, his tone instantly shifting to one of respect. “When you are ready, we can move beyond the wards, and I can create a portal.”

Hazel nodded, glancing at Cassius still asleep on the sofa. “I will return in the morning,” she said, moving to the doorway. “But remember to have the Night Child gone before then.”



An hour later, they all stood on the main level when the front door opened and Rayner escorted Prince Luan into the chateau. Cyrus leaned against the wall, arms crossed. Eliza was doing the same across from him, only she toyed with a dagger.

“Where is your queen?” Luan asked before the door had fully shut behind him.

“As you can imagine, she is indisposed,” Briar replied. They’d all agreed to let him do as much of the talking as possible, given their own history with the Earth Prince.

“And the Witch child? Her Hand-to-the-Queen?” he questioned.

“Consoling her,” Cyrus gritted out.

It wasn’t entirely a lie. He was upstairs keeping watch over Scarlett and Sorin. The gods help them if she woke up and Luan was still here.

“You have information to share?” Briar asked.

Luan turned to face him. “I do. But before I do that, I want you to know that I made sure Princess Ashtine was safely in her Citadel after everything was said and done.”

Angst flashed across Briar’s features. It was gone just as quickly. If he was surprised Luan knew of his relationship with Ashtine, he didn’t let that show either. “Thank you for that.”

Luan nodded. “They plan to enter the Fae Courts,” he said, never one to dance around any topic.

“And we are prepared to meet them should they somehow manage to cross the wards,” Briar replied.

“Talwyn plans to allow them to enter the wards.”

“She does not have the authority to do that for the Western Courts,” Cyrus growled.

“She does,” Briar said. “The wards were enacted by both Fae Queens. As such, both queens have the authority to allow others to cross, just as the ruling royal can grant access to their individual Courts. The queens have never been at odds with one another, save for Esmeray, so it has never been an issue.”

Luan turned to Cyrus. “You were in the Night Children territory when we fought those winged men,” he said. “I do not care how prepared you think your forces are; the truth is none of us are prepared for them. We do not know what they are or what they are capable of.”

No one volunteered the fact that they did in fact know they were seraphs. Other than that, everything he’d said was true. They had no idea how their magic worked or what it was. Could they do more than fly? Was it only the Maraan Lords that had additional gifts? Or did all the seraphs have that too?

“When?” Rayner asked. “When is this to happen?”

“I do not know,” Luan replied.

“And why should we believe you?” Eliza asked.

Rage crossed the prince’s features. “You think I want to hand my Court over to them? They are my people. It is my

duty to protect them.”

“But you are loyal to Talwyn,” the general countered.

A muscle feathered in Luan’s jaw. “I was until she sided against her own people.”

Cyrus pushed off the wall at that. “And if you find yourself in a position that would require you to take her life, would you be able to do it?”

“Would you have been able to kill Thia?” Luan snarled.

“Not if Anala herself had threatened to set me alight with the fires of the sun,” Cyrus said. “But Thia and I were never on opposing sides, and that is precisely why I ask. If it comes down to her life or the lives of your people, who will you choose?”

“I will do whatever is necessary to protect my people, but I am not the one who will kill my queen,” Luan said, glancing at the ceiling as though he knew precisely where Scarlett was. “But I will beg your queen for mercy on her behalf.”

“She will not grant it,” Cyrus said simply.

Luan seemed to flinch at the words, but all he said in response was, “I know.”

CHAPTER 4

SCARLETT

The murmuring of voices was filtering through the fog of sleep. There had been no dreams this time. No Lord of Night. No nightmares. No memories. Just blessed, deep sleep.

But now reality was crashing down on her. Everything that had happened was flooding in, and she immediately found it hard to draw breath.

She blinked her eyes open, thoughts hazy for a minute as she worked out where she was. The exposed beams of the ceiling. The comfortable bed beneath her. She turned her head to see a tub across the room, snow-covered mountains out the window.

Home.

She was home.

Well, at the chateau in her home, but she was back in the Fire Court.

But that was only home if her twin flame lived.

Cassius suddenly filled her line of vision, a hand reaching out to brush back hair from her face.

“Scarlett,” he breathed, relief clear in his tone and on his face.

“Sorin,” she rasped.

“He lives.”

“Is he awake?”

Cassius shook his head, helping her as she struggled to sit up. “Not yet, but the High Witch has said he grows stronger every day.”

The room spun when she made it to a sitting position. She felt so empty. Her power reserves were nonexistent. She’d poured every bit of them into Sorin to call him back to this side of the Veil, to give him the power to come back to her. But that wasn’t why she felt empty.

She couldn’t feel him. She couldn’t feel his emotions. There were no whispered words down their bond. Her head was silent, and once she might have cherished that, but not now. Now she wanted to hear him teasing her, taunting her. She wanted him to call her ‘Love,’ and she wanted to sit and play the piano for him for hours. She wanted to be annoyed with him so she could call him names, and he could grumble about her “godsdamn tongue.”

She wanted him to wake the fuck up.

Tears welled in her eyes when she finally turned to look down at her husband where he lay beside her on the bed. His chest moved up and down in slow, steady breaths. His skin held its normal tanned glow, and dark stubble lined his jaw. She reached over, her hand shaking, as she brushed her fingers along it. He didn’t move. Didn’t respond at all to her touch.

Her gaze traveled from his face down to his chest. Someone had removed his tunic, but there was still white scarring where Talwyn’s power had slammed into him. Her fingers drifted to those scars directly over his heart. Her trembling fingers hovered there, but she couldn’t bring herself to touch them.

“Hazel works on the scarring every day,” Cassius said softly.

She nodded, swallowing down the tears that were burning at the back of her throat.

“You have been asleep for four days.”

Four days? That explained her dizziness. And the pain in her empty stomach. And the full bladder.

Her eyes lingered on Sorin for another few moments before she moved to climb from the bed. When her gaze fell on the rest of her family standing near the hearth, she suddenly remembered the muffled voices that she'd heard when she'd been waking.

Cyrus, Eliza, and Rayner were all watching her, a mixture of relief and wariness on their features. There was a moment of tense silence before they were all rushing forward.

Eliza shoved Cyrus to the side to get to her first, gripping her tightly. The tears she had been fighting broke free, and a sob escaped her throat. "He was gone, Eliza," she whispered. "He was gone, and I was still here."

"I know, Scarlett," she whispered back. Scarlett felt the general's tears mixing with her own.

And gods, her tight hold reminded her of Nuri. Another betrayal she would need to come to terms with. But not right now. She couldn't think about any of that right now.

"Time to share, Eliza dear," Cyrus said, but there was none of the usual mirth in his tone.

Eliza stepped back, and Scarlett turned. She and Cyrus stared at each other for the longest moment. Icy blue eyes locked onto golden ones.

"I'm sorry," Scarlett finally said, her voice breaking with emotion. "I'm sorry. I didn't—I wasn't thinking when I—"

"Shh," Cyrus hushed, pulling her into him. "No apologies, Darling," he whispered.

"He was gone. I didn't know what I was doing. There was so much...nothing."

She was crying into his chest, tears once again soaking into his tunic.

"I know, Scarlett. I know exactly what you were feeling."

And how was that fair? How was it fair that she was able to save her twin flame, but Cyrus had to live without his every damn day? He deserved so much more than that. He didn't deserve this pain. He didn't deserve to have to survive this

kind of loss, to live with it day in and day out. She'd barely lasted hours without Sorin. This male had done this for over a decade.

"You are the strongest person I know, Cyrus," she whispered through her tears.

"I'm not, Darling," he replied. "I simply do what needs to be done."

"You are," she whispered again. "Thank you, Cyrus." He squeezed her tighter. "You deserve so much more than what the Fates have dealt you."

"I am grateful for the things they've given me, Scarlett. Even if only for a time," he replied. Then he pulled back to look into her face. "I think the bigger revelation here is that you just admitted to believing in the Fates."

"Oh my gods," she muttered, shoving him slightly away from her with a scowl. "I did not."

"You totally did."

She rolled her eyes as she reached for Rayner.

"Welcome back, your Majesty."

"Stop calling me that," she retorted, squeezing him tightly. "And thank you. For bringing him back with us that night."

Rayner said nothing else. Just tightened his hold for another second before releasing her.

Which was good because she really needed to use the bathing room.

When she emerged from taking care of her needs, Rayner was coming back into the room, a tray of food in his hands. Cassius was seated in a chair by the bed, where she could only assume he had sat while she had slept for four days.

Four wasted days.

She climbed onto the bed, Cassius immediately passing her a glass of water as she settled cross-legged beside Sorin. After draining the glass, she asked, "Callan? Tava?"

“They are at the House of Water with Briar. Drake and Eva too. Briar will be here later tonight,” Cyrus answered, sitting at the end of the bed. Rayner moved closer, standing at the foot of the bed, his arms crossed, while Eliza began pacing on the other side.

Scarlett looked at Cassius. “And you? Are you okay after I... You know.”

“I am fine, Seastar,” Cass reassured her. “Cyrus has been giving me blood.”

“But what *exactly* did you do?” Eliza cut in.

Scarlett had a pear in her hands, turning it over and over. “I don’t exactly know.”

“What does that mean?” she pushed.

Scarlett sighed, setting the pear aside and looking up at her family. “I was desperate, lost to this nothingness that was in my soul, when Shirina did what she did.”

“You woke up with a new Mark,” Cassius said.

Scarlett’s gaze fell to her forearm, to the interlocking circles. “I don’t know what it does or did,” she said, tracing the Mark with her fingernail. “Only that he told me when I woke up, Altaria would be here with a vial. I needed to drink it and then give my magic to Sorin. I didn’t care how it worked. Only that it did.”

“The High Witch said there would be a cost for this,” Rayner said, his voice low and grave as always.

She met his swirling gaze. “It is one I would pay a thousand times over.”

“You can’t say that without knowing what it is,” Eliza said.

“Of course I can, and I would. There is nothing I wouldn’t do to keep him on this side of the Veil.” When the room fell silent, she changed the subject. “What’s our next course of action? Callan and Eva are safe. What of Ashtine?”

The Fae looked amongst themselves while Cassius pressed a piece of dried meat into her hand, trying to get her to eat

something.

“Ashtine stayed behind with Talwyn,” Rayner said. “Briar tried to argue with her.”

“She sided with Talwyn?” Scarlett asked, unable to hide her shock. Another betrayal to add to her list.

“Not with her as the queen, but with her as a friend.”

“There is no difference,” Scarlett argued.

“Ashtine believes there is,” Rayner said.

Scarlett couldn't exactly argue with that. The Wind Princess was odd and somehow wise beyond her years, partly due to the winds speaking secrets to her and partly due to the massive library beneath her Citadel where she spent her childhood. A library that held a mirror gate she would really like to get back to. She had so many questions for this Lord of Night.

“We'll come back to Ashtine. Azrael? I'm assuming he is with Talwyn as well?” A tense silence settled over the room as she took a bite of the meat. “Someone just say it,” she sighed.

“Luan is hiding out... Here,” Cyrus finally supplied.

“Here? As in the Fire Court?”

“Here as in... He's downstairs.”

“What?” she demanded.

“There's more.”

“I swear to Saylah, Cyrus, if you tell me that fucking Talwyn is here too—”

“Talwyn is not here,” Cyrus cut her off quickly. “But Luan showed up the night after...everything happened. He told us Talwyn informed him that Alaric and the seraphs were going to invade the Courts.”

“They cannot all cross the wards at once,” she argued.

“They can if Talwyn allows them passage.”

“And what do they want in the Courts?” Scarlett gritted out from between her teeth, the dried meat forgotten in her

hand.

“To overthrow the royalty not willing to side with them.”

“Briar is here,” Rayner cut in. “He is not alone.”

Voices carried up from downstairs, and Scarlett immediately recognized Callan’s. But also...

“Do I hear Auberon Isra downstairs?” she asked, her head tilted. That wasn’t possible though. Nuri had killed him when she’d killed Rosalyn.

“Yeah. We hadn’t gotten to that part yet,” Cyrus said, his hand rubbing the back of his neck. “Apparently Nuri told him to flee to the Witch Kingdoms after she killed Rosalyn. Hazel told us if we didn’t get him out, she would kill him, so he’s here too.”

Scarlett opened her mouth, then shut it again. Because she had nothing to say in response. She didn’t want to focus on any of this. She needed her twin flame and her king, her partner, to wake up and help her deal with this. She couldn’t do it on her own.

“You’re not alone, Scarlett,” Cyrus said softly, closer than he had been moments ago. “He will wake up, and even then, we are all here with you.”

She nodded as Briar came into the room. “You’re awake,” he said, surprise ringing in his voice.

“Why is Callan here?” she asked in answer.

“He and Lady Tava have some very interesting information I think we all need to hear.”

And that was how Scarlett found herself in a room with two Fae princes, a mortal king, two noble mortals, a Night Child, four other Fae, and a half-Witch, half-Avonleyan while her twin flame slept beside her.

“Before I summoned Scarlett for aid,” Callan was saying, “Veda told us of their gifts.”

“Veda’s power was like nothing I’d ever felt,” Scarlett said. “She stopped my arm as if she were holding it with her

hand, but she was across the room from me. I still overpowered her, but it wasn't easy by any means."

"Yes," Tava agreed. "She pulled me to her with the same magic."

"But I've never seen the other Maraans use this gift. Lord Tyndell can alter reality, and Mikale dream walks like the Lord of Night," Scarlett mused, trying to fit all the puzzle pieces together in her head.

"That is because they steal their magic," Tava said.

"Excuse me?" Cyrus balked. He was leaning on his forearms that were resting on the back of Cassius's chair.

"Veda told us it's their rite of passage, so to speak," Callan said. "They kill a magic-wielder in their world and take their power for their own."

"So what you're saying is these seraphs could have literally any type of magic? We have no way of knowing until we see it?" Eliza asked.

"From what Veda said, yes," Tava answered.

"And this is a one time thing? Or can they kill another and trade out their power? Or collect more than one gift?" Scarlett asked.

"She didn't say," Callan replied.

Scarlett fell back against the headboard of the bed. Just when she thought things couldn't get any worse. How could they possibly prepare for this? They had no idea what magic they would be defending against.

The others were debating among themselves when Scarlett said to no one in particular, "We need to go to Avonleya."

The entire room went silent.

"You want to go to Avonleya?" Eliza finally repeated.

"I don't think we have much of a choice anymore," Scarlett answered. "We can't fight them alone. They've fought them before. They must know something we don't."

“Can’t you ask your dream friend?” Cyrus asked.

“First of all, fuck you. He’s not my dream friend,” Scarlett said, flipping him off at calling the Lord of Night that. “Second, I think we finish the plan that was set in motion in that throne room, and then yes, we sail west. Just as we were prepared to do if something went wrong. I would say Sorin nearly dying and Talwyn siding with them is something going pretty fucking wrong. This was always the plan. It’s simply time to go through with it.”

“But we’ve learned new information,” Eliza began.

“That changes nothing,” Scarlett said. “It only solidifies the need to do this.”

“To clarify,” Azrael cut in. He hadn’t looked directly at Scarlett once since they’d all filed up the stairs to this room when she’d refused to leave Sorin’s side. There had been a slight glimmer of surprise when he’d seen Sorin on the bed, alive and breathing, but nothing else from the Earth Prince. “You want all of us to get on ships and sail for a kingdom locked away? When they took the keys from you? How will we even get past the wards?”

“To clarify,” she said coldly, echoing his words. “They didn’t *take* the keys from me. It was deliberate that I had them with me that night.”

“Bullshit,” the Earth Prince spat. “Why would you willingly give him the keys?”

Her lip curled back as she studied him. Bronze skin, black hair, tall, and muscled. He finally met her gaze, earthy brown eyes locking onto hers. “Because I altered them, and he’s about to learn exactly what kind of *weapon* he created.”



“Here,” Cyrus said to Cassius, passing him a glass of blood.

“Thanks,” Cass answered, taking it with a nod from the chair where he sat beside the bed.

Scarlett only left the bed to use the bathing room. Otherwise, all meetings and discussions were had here, in this room where she could monitor her twin flame.

Hazel came every day. She didn't say much to anyone. She'd look at Cassius, but he was too preoccupied with everything else to worry about his relationship with his mother right now. Scarlett wasn't even sure if he still wanted to figure that all out. It was his deal to navigate. She was here when he needed to talk things out. And if they went to Avonleya, there was a very good possibility he'd be meeting his father as well. It was a lot for anyone to process.

Then there was the reason Cyrus was giving Cass his blood. She had no way to replenish her magic because her Source had nearly died and hadn't woken up yet. Her Fae gifts replenished naturally with food and rest, but her Avonleyan gifts needed her Source. Once that Mark was put in place, blood from another Fae wouldn't work. It was part of the Source bond, the trust required of each party to enter into such a thing.

Which made her only other option Cassius, her Guardian.

When her reserves got low enough, the Guardian bond would do its thing and detect the danger it posed, allowing her to draw from Cassius. Cassius fed from Cyrus, and she would draw from Cass. The problem was Cassius wasn't Fae. Fueling her power that way wasn't designed to sustain her like Fae magic would. More than that, Cassius couldn't take enough from Cyrus to keep up with her never-ending well of power. If Sorin had actually died and crossed into the After fully, she would have been able to take another Source; but like her twin flame Mark, the Source Mark had only begun to fade. It had been restored when she had called him back. According to all the information they'd been able to find on Sources, which wasn't much, once a Source was Marked there was no going back. No second chances. They were an Avonleyan's only source of truly sustaining magic unless death itself separated them.

To ease the strain on Cyrus and Cassius, they had resorted to only doing this cycle of feeding and drawing twice a day, but it was exhausting for all of them. She was conserving her white flames and shadows, but not having constant access to that darkness had her on edge. Well, more than she already was because the last days had been nothing but trying to figure out how to prepare for the incoming threat to their Courts. Azrael didn't know when it was coming, only that Talwyn had said it was. Briar had tried to contact Ashtine, but even that had to be planned and carefully executed. As far as she knew, there hadn't been any type of response yet.

"I don't like the idea of only you and Cassius going into the Black Syndicate," Cyrus said, leaning against the wall beside Cassius and crossing his arms.

Scarlett pushed out a breath. "I know you don't. None of you do, but it makes the most sense," she argued. "Cass and I know the ins and outs of the Black Syndicate. We know who to watch out for, and we know how to watch for Nuri. She could easily sneak up on any of you."

"I wouldn't say *easily*," Cyrus grumbled.

She smirked slightly. "I would say *easily*. She did it more than once to Sorin. And didn't she sneak up on all of you in the tunnels when you came to get me in Baylorin?"

Cyrus scowled. "That was different."

"How?" Scarlett demanded.

"It just was."

"I'm going to need a better argument than that to change my mind, Darling."

"I'll come up with one."

"Great. While you work on that, the rest of us will work on figuring out things that actually matter."

"You going into the territory of your former master definitely matters," Briar cut in. "I do not like it any more than they do, but I understand your arguments and agree it is likely the best course of action at this point."

“Thank you,” Scarlett said, exasperated by the fact that they were rehashing this topic yet again. “Let’s focus on how we are going to get these ships out to sea without calling attention to surrounding fleets.”

They fell into discussion again, and Scarlett found it hard to stay focused. She always did. While her mind tried to pay attention to everything going on around her, her soul only cared about her twin flame asleep beside her. It had been a week. Seven entire days since she had given everything she had to bring him back to this side of the Veil. Hazel assured her every day that he would live and that he would wake, but each day that passed had her second guessing it. What if it hadn’t worked at all? What if it simply prolonged the inevitable? What if the Lord of Night was a lying piece of shit who was only using her for his own gain, and he needed her to stay sane, so he tricked her with this insane idea that she could save him?

Gods, she knew that was ridiculous. She knew she was halfway to losing her mind, if she hadn’t already, but these were the thoughts that kept her up at night now. These were the nightmares that didn’t let her sleep. These were things that had hopelessness rising up more and more in her soul with every passing hour.

Maybe she was an idiot for believing that hope was for the dreamers.

Maybe this was hell, just as she’d suspected in the beginning. Maybe this was her own personal Pit of Torment, balanced on the very edge of hope to slowly fade into the nothingness that she felt when she’d watched Sorin fall trying to get to her. Maybe...

Scarlett was rubbing her temples with her fingers, trying to get control of her thoughts, when Rayner caught her eye. There was a faint smile on his lips as he jerked his chin in the direction of the bed, and she twisted to find golden eyes fixed on her.

Golden eyes full of life.

A low groan came from his parted lips, and Scarlett was lurching forward, her mouth landing on his. She kissed him hard, the taste of cloves and honey dancing along her tongue. She felt his fingers on her hips, squeezing weakly, and she pulled back before she punched him in the shoulder.

He let out a grunt as she snapped, “You promised no goodbyes, you asshole.”

Then she was climbing into his lap straddling his hips, hands framing his beautiful face as she kissed him again. When she finally pulled back again, it was just far enough to look at him. Her fingers traced along his brow, his temples, through the long stubble on his jaw. Her eyes fell closed, and she breathed in deep—ashes and cloves and cedar. When she opened them again, tears blurred her vision as she looked directly into the eyes that could see to her very soul.

“You were dead,” she whispered.

“I’m not, my Love,” he rasped back.

“But you were. You were dead. You were gone. You were taken from me. You were—”

His large hand was on her cheek, thumb brushing over her cheekbone as another tear slid free.

Silence settled over them, and Scarlett realized everyone else had left the room, giving them this moment.

“Never again, Sorin Aditya,” she whispered. “Never leave me again. I lived in a world without you in it for a matter of minutes, and I will not survive it again.”

“My Love,” he rasped, trying to lift his head but immediately falling back down to the pillows.

She felt bad about demanding this of him now. She probably shouldn’t have been straddling him when he had just woken up, kissing him, calling him an asshole, but this was them. This made it real. This reassured her she wasn’t going mad, that he was alive and with her and fine. He was fine.

She bent forward once more, bringing her brow to his. “It’s always been you, Sorin,” she said, her tears dripping onto his

face. “From the very beginning. The Fire Prince I hated. The target I couldn’t kill. The general I couldn’t stand. The rescuer from my demons. The savior from drowning. The brightest star in the darkness. Only you. Only ever you. Where you go, I will follow, even if that means crossing the Veil. Never leave me again, Sorin. Never again.”

“Never again,” he whispered, his voice hoarse from disuse.

And she was kissing him again. This kiss was slow and deep and full of promises they would die to keep.

She slid off of him, nestling into his side, her head on his chest. She could hear the steady beat of his heart, and she closed her eyes, reminding herself again this was real. He lived. He breathed. He survived.

His arm was wrapped around her waist, his hand resting on her hip. She felt fingers from his other hand drift through her hair. “I love you, Scarlett.”

“All the way through the darkness, Sorin.”

He was asleep again moments later, but the nothingness in her soul had abated. Hearing him speak. Tasting him on her lips. Feeling his arm wrapped around her. It all grounded her.

And for now, that was all she needed.

CHAPTER 5

SORIN

Present Day

Sorin paced the deck of the ship. She'd been gone too long. They should have been back hours ago. No, not hours ago. Two godsdamn days ago. He could feel her. She was weak and had only managed to get a few words down the bond every couple of hours. He knew she lived, but where the hell was she?

He'd stayed on this deck all through the night, waiting for her and Cassius to appear. That had been the plan. She and Cassius would go into the Black Syndicate. Scarlett would do her thing, and then they would Travel to him. He hadn't liked it. They had fought about it—for hours—but in the end, he had lost. She had said that he needed to be on the ship so she knew where to Travel to. That was the only way she'd be able to find them—through their bond.

There was also the fact that he was still recovering from nearly dying.

Sorin rubbed at his chest where Talwyn's power had slammed into him. The raised edges of the scarring were rough against his fingers. The High Witch didn't know if it would get any better.

He hadn't been able to get to her. Tarek had kept trying to bind him with his fucking vines, and Scarlett had been drained. So godsdamned drained. She had been trying so hard to save Callan's sister. To save Callan. To save them all.

But hearing her tell him to find her in the After?

That pain was far worse than the bolt of energy that nearly separated him from her.

Seeing her face when she realized he was dying?

That had gutted him and was the last thing he remembered before losing consciousness.

The only thing he remembered during that week of sleep was shadows and white flames and embers calling him home, calling him back to her. He'd thought he'd been dead. He'd thought he'd crossed the Veil and was searching for her among the ashes in the voids between the stars, just as he'd always promised he would.

They'd told him how they had gotten out. How Cassius had been able to Travel them all out of there and back to the Black Halls. His heart had been beating, but barely. Scarlett had been in hysterics until Shirina had appeared and somehow made her sleep.

And when she had woken, Altaria had apparently been waiting for her. Sorin hadn't exactly been thrilled to hear that detail, considering the eagle was bonded to a man that kept appearing in Scarlett's dreams. No one knew what she was doing. Everyone had thought she'd lost her damn mind. Which wasn't too much of a stretch since she'd nearly lost her twin flame. *Had* lost her twin flame. According to the High Witch, his heart had stopped, and he had crossed the Veil.

But that wasn't possible. There was no way to come back from the After once you crossed.

He'd woken to utter chaos. Inter-Court matters, Maraan threats, and plans to go to Avonleya dominated their time from sun up to sun down. Scarlett refused to use their Source bond right now, saying he was still recovering. It wasn't until he'd been about to board this ship that he had convinced her to let him refill her power reserves properly. She'd still been hesitant, but based on the fact she was going to face Alaric, she'd conceded. On top of all that, for the first time in his life, he found himself working on the same side as Azrael Luan.

All their planning and strategizing for invasion by the Maraans had been pointless when a week after he'd woken, Princess Ashtine had shown up and laid out a plan to keep the innocent people of their Courts safe while also sparing their own lives. He didn't like the fact that it would appear to everyone, including their own people, that they had abandoned them and left. He didn't like that it looked like they were running away. He didn't like any of the plan actually, but it was how he had ended up on a ship that was the head of the small unit heading west to get help.

On two of the ships behind him, the orphans had been secured and kept out of reach of Alaric. Although their antics with the keys should have stopped any need for them, Scarlett hadn't wanted to risk their safety. Especially not with Nuri in a place unable to protect them anymore since she was bound to Alaric. The plan with the keys had been in effect before the events in that throne room though.

He sank down, leaning against the wall of the ship in the mid-morning sun on the quarterdeck. He sat there utterly useless, waiting for his wife to show up.

To lay eyes on her.

To kiss her until she couldn't stand.

"She is fine," Cyrus said. Sorin looked up. Cyrus's body blocked the sun, casting a shadow over him. "You would know if she wasn't."

"I know."

Cyrus dropped down beside him. "This is all going to work out."

"I know," Sorin repeated.

"You do not sound overly confident."

"He's crabby," came Eliza's irritated drawl. "He always gets pissy when they're separated. Remember when she'd go for those dinners with Callan in Solembra?"

Cyrus snorted a laugh. "Gods, you were a moody bastard those nights."

“It was his own fault,” Eliza said. “We all told him to tell her they were twin flames. Multiple times.”

“Making him take responsibility for his poor choices,” Cyrus said with a grin. “I like it.”

Sorin grumbled curses under his breath, tipping his head back against the wall of the ship behind him, closing his eyes.

“At least you are speaking. Briar is...not,” Cyrus said.

The mention of the Water Prince had Sorin lifting his head and turning to look at the foredeck where Briar stood, watching the water. He'd only spoken when necessary, but every once in a while the waters around their ship would get suddenly choppy and rough as he wrestled to control his emotions over Ashtine choosing to stay behind.

They needed her there. She was someone on the inside. She was watching over Briar's Court, Ermir taking over her Wind Court. Luan had refused to join Talwyn and the Maraans, his Court being turned over to none other than Tarek himself. And his own Fire Court?

Talwyn Semiria oversaw it.

Rayner stepped from smoke a few moments later. He'd been doing rounds on the other ships, making sure nothing was amiss. They had wards in place, but if they could get past wards, so could others. Despite his wife's affinity for Blood Magic, he was still leery of it and knew Alaric had no qualms about using it to achieve his needs.

Briar's Court occupied a ship directly behind them. Sorin had a feeling he came to their ship every day to escape his Court's meddling. It was the same thing he'd done when he'd escape to his mountain chateau. Which is why he left his friend alone for the most part.

Luan was also on their ship, but he kept to himself. Another silent prince who only spoke to any of them when necessary.

And then there were the Tyndells, Callan, and his sister. They also stayed on this ship with his Court, along with

Auberon, the former Contessa's Second, and Beatrix, the Fire Court Witch and Healer.

They'd all become one big, godsdamn family.

A roar had them jerking their heads skyward.

A second roar had them on their feet.

"Where is he?" Sorin demanded, scanning the skies. He may have heard that roar only one other time, but it was one he'd never forget.

"There," Eliza said, pointing off into the distance where a dark speck was beginning to take shape against the clear blue sky in the east.

The roar had brought the others to the main deck, and Sorin and his Court made their way to join them. Callan held Eva's hand in his. Drake had Tava tucked protectively under an arm. Briar and Luan had come to join Sorin, everyone's eyes on the sky, watching the dragon draw closer and closer.

"They are on his back," Luan murmured several minutes later.

"What?" Sorin asked, only half-listening to the Earth Prince as he tracked the dragon's progress.

"Scarlett and Cassius," Luan said. "Ranvir has passengers."

"Impossible."

But as Ranvir flapped his giant wings again, there was no mistaking the head of silver hair that sat atop him, a male at her back.

They all took several steps back when Ranvir finally reached the ship, the entire thing rocking violently when he landed before them on the main deck.

Scarlett slid from Ranvir's back, Cassius helping her down before sliding down himself. The dragon released another roar that had Princess Eva screaming in fright, slapping her hands over ears, before he launched back into the sky. There was a flash of golden light a moment later when he disappeared.

Sorin watched Scarlett slowly drag her gaze over the others, all staring at her with mouths gaping. He found himself rubbing his fingers along his brow as he said, "Love, did we not say no riding the spirit animals, particularly the godsdamn dragon?"

"I had my shadow dragon, but seeing as my power reserves are basically gone and so are Cassius's, I was rather grateful that Ranvir showed up when he did," Scarlett answered, reaching up and brushing back some hair that was fluttering in her face.

Sorin was already striding for her, a dagger slicing a thin line across the Mark on his forearm. He reached for her hand, cutting a gash along her palm and placing it atop the Mark, their blood mixing. His arm looped around her waist, and her head fell forward onto his chest as he felt his magic wrapping around her, pouring into her, filling her.

"I shouldn't be drawing from you like this yet," she said breathlessly. "You haven't recovered enough."

"I have more than recovered enough for this, Scarlett," he murmured, pressing a kiss to her hair. "Let your magic feed."

Rayner had already retrieved a cup, blood trickling from Cyrus's arm into it. Cassius looked like he could barely stand. Scarlett and the commander both looked utterly exhausted.

"What happened?" Sorin asked after a few moments. "Why didn't you Travel to us?"

"I burned down the Fellowship."

Sorin stilled against her. "Come again?"

She looked up at him, a malicious smile slowly filling her face. "I poured my white flames into every crack and crevice of the Fellowship. And after I'd given Alaric the key, I burned the entire thing to nothing but ash."

Cyrus barked a laugh behind her. "Well done, Darling."

"Yes, but..." she said, her smile slipping. "There was an unexpected cost to the Mark we used to hide me from their wards."

“Which was?” Sorin gritted out.

“Cassius couldn’t sense me, which we anticipated, but I also could not Travel with him, so we had no choice but to ride my shadow dragon. When my power gave out and I’d drained Cass of all of his...” She shrugged as she trailed off. “Apparently his daddy knew we’d need help because Ranvir appeared just as my shadows began to give out.”

“You and Cyrus need to stop calling him my ‘daddy,’” Cassius grumbled.

Sorin cut a glance at Cassius, who was sipping from the glass of Cyrus’s blood. “Anything to add to her account of events, Commander?”

“She pretty much summed it all up,” Cassius replied. Cyrus had an arm looped around his waist, keeping him on his feet while he drank.

“You have been flying on a dragon of some sort for the last two days?” Eliza asked, her brows high.

“Has it been that long?” Scarlett asked, her forehead falling back to Sorin’s chest as she continued to draw power from him. “I lost consciousness for a while, so I really can’t say. That’s why I wasn’t as responsive down the bond.”

“Why is it that I have been missing out on all the excitement lately?” Eliza grumbled with a scowl.

Scarlett huffed a dark laugh. “Don’t worry, Friend. There will be plenty of seraphs for you to slaughter when we return.”

Eliza muttered something else under her breath, her arms folding across her chest.

“You need to rest,” Sorin said, tilting her chin up to look into her eyes. They were still icy blue. Not a hint of silver. She was completely drained. This would take a few days to restore.

“We can do the thing first,” she insisted, trying to push off of him and stand on her own.

He ended up catching her when her legs buckled. Her hand slipped from his bleeding arm as he scooped her up. “It can wait.”

“I don’t want to wait,” she whined, nestling into him.

“You do not have a choice, Love,” he replied, striding for the prince’s cabin.

“So fussy,” she murmured, her eyes already fluttering closed.



“Tell me again why we’re doing this on your ship instead of Briar’s,” Scarlett called out from the small bathing suite off the prince’s cabin.

“Why would we do this on Briar’s ship?” Sorin asked, moving to the doorway of the bathing room to find her adjusting the dress she’d put on.

“Because his ship is prettier than yours.”

“For fuck’s sake,” he muttered under his breath.

She straightened, turning to face him to say something, but her eyes widened slightly when they landed on him, her lips parting just a touch.

Sorin smirked back at her. He could feel every lustful thought down the bond.

He wore black pants with a black jacket. Red, orange, and yellow threads ran up the sleeves, creating the illusion of flames. It had been tailored to fit him perfectly. His black hair was swept back casually, a few strands falling over his brow, a crown of flickering flames sat atop his head. They’d hardly had any time alone since he had nearly died. He’d been healing. She’d been scheming.

And burning things to the ground apparently.

His golden eyes glimmered when she finally dragged her eyes back to them, her mouth snapping shut.

“Something to say, Princess?”

“No,” she whispered hoarsely.

Worry crossed his features, his brow scrunching slightly. “Are you all right?” he asked, stepping into the small bathing room.

“Yeah. Yes,” she replied quickly, clearing her throat and shrugging slightly. “You look...”

“Stunning? Handsome?”

“I was going to say younger,” she replied nonchalantly. “Not nearly as ancient.”

“By the gods. That godsdamn tongue,” he muttered.

She smirked at him this time, running her hands down the sides of the dress she wore, smoothing out any creases. His eyes followed her movements, tracking over her hips, her torso, her chest, making their way back to her face. “I can’t believe you packed this dress.”

“It seems only fitting we do this with you in that dress, Love,” he answered with a wink, reaching for her hand. “But also...”

He led her back out to the main room. It wasn’t an overly large room. A full bed was against one wall, secured to the floor like all the other furniture. There was a small desk against another wall, an armoire beside it. A small sofa was secured to the opposite wall.

He could tell Scarlett still didn’t entirely have her sea legs, but after sleeping for three days, she had refused to wait another moment to do this. Admittedly, he hadn’t tried too hard to convince her otherwise.

Sorin dropped her hand, crossing to the armoire. He pulled open one side, reaching up to the top shelf. When he turned back to face her, he held her crown in his hands.

“I don’t really think that’s necessary,” Scarlett said, her nose scrunching. “It doesn’t go with the dress.”

“A crown goes with anything,” Sorin argued, striding back to her and placing it carefully atop her head. “It also looks stunning on you when you wear nothing at all.”

She rolled her eyes, but he caught the slight color that entered her cheeks. “Cad,” she mumbled.

He chuckled, bending to press a light kiss to her cheek. “Ready?” he asked, straightening and holding his right hand out to her.

“Yes,” she breathed, her left hand slipping into his.

Her left hand with her twin flame Mark swirling down her thumb and three of her fingers. Only one remained unmarked.

And they were about to take care of that now.

Long after he had been filled in on everything that had happened when he’d woken in the Fire Court, Scarlett had laid cuddled up beside him. His eyes had been closed, still utterly exhausted, as she’d slowly traced the Marks on his chest with her finger.

“Sorin?” she’d asked, breaking the comfortable silence.

He’d almost been asleep as he mumbled, “Yeah, Love?”

“We... We’re good, right? You trust me, and I trust you. Completely. Right?”

That had certainly jolted him wide awake.

He’d opened his eyes, reaching over to tip her face up to his. “I trust you, Scarlett. I am yours, and you are mine. Always.”

She’d pushed out a long breath, almost as if she’d been relieved. “Okay,” she’d whispered. “Then when you are... better, can we go see Beatrix?”

“Why?” he’d asked, his mind immediately turning over every possibility for why they might need a Witch.

She’d held up her left hand, that new Mark down her ring finger where her marriage band sat atop it. “We have a bond to Anoint, Prince.”

He'd slowly reached for her hand, running his fingers along the Mark. They'd done it. They'd completed the twin flame Trials.

His eyes had snapped back to hers. "When?" he'd rasped out.

Tears had glimmered in her eyes. "When I woke after giving you all my magic, it was there."

Her sacrifice trial.

He'd pulled her face to his then, kissing her until they were both breathless.

She hadn't let it go any farther though. And okay, fine. He'd almost died, so he could understand her being careful.

But then she'd continued to refuse until she was convinced he'd healed enough.

Then all the planning and strategizing had happened. They'd been preparing to leave, and they'd never found time to seek out Beatrix and get this thing Anointed.

The day she'd left for the Black Syndicate, Scarlett had kissed him softly and had murmured that the moment her feet landed on this ship, they would get the bond Anointed.

Then it had been his turn to make her wait.

Eliza had Marked her to hide her Marks from others before she'd gone into the Syndicate, but Scarlett had added additional glamours she'd found in the Sorceress's spell book to make sure Alaric couldn't see through them. They didn't want it known that the Fire Prince still lived.

Sorin ushered her through the door and out onto the quarterdeck before they descended the stairs to the main deck side-by-side, making their way to the foredeck where Beatrix stood waiting for them. The moon was bright, and the stars stretched as far as they could see. It had been Scarlett's idea to do this under the night sky. He hadn't argued. It seemed right to do this in the darkness, beneath the stars, and with her in that dress from the party at the Pier nearly a year ago.

“It would seem the Fates have yet again found a way, Prince,” Beatrix said, her eyes soft and full of an adoration rarely seen from a Witch.

“It would certainly seem that way,” he replied, smiling softly and bending to press a kiss to her cheek.

“And you, young queen,” she said, turning to Scarlett. “You have brought hope to those who thought all was lost.”

“That is what I am told,” Scarlett said with a slight frown.

“I speak not of the kingdom we sail towards, but of the one standing beside you,” Beatrix replied. Before either of them could respond to that, she said, “Left hands out, palms up.” She pulled a black dagger from the cloak she wore, and Scarlett gasped, her hand falling back to her side.

“That is a nightstone dagger,” she said, taking a step forward.

Beatrix gave her a knowing smile. “It is a ceremonial dagger for exactly this purpose.”

“With a nightstone blade.”

“Some refer to it as a blade of the gods, but that is neither here nor there at the moment,” Beatrix said, hushing Scarlett before she could ask another question. Beatrix motioned for her hand to come up once again, and Scarlett obeyed, eyeing the dagger closely.

A slash was cut across both their palms, and the Witch spoke in a language Sorin could not understand. Scarlett seemed to stiffen slightly beside him, but she did not interrupt again. When she finished speaking, Beatrix took Scarlett’s hand, placing her cut along his, and the moment their blood mixed, Sorin sucked in a breath. He heard Scarlett do the same.

Because that was power. Pure and undiluted. His chest warmed, his very soul seeming to gravitate towards her, tugging him closer to her. Scarlett’s hand was squeezing his, and his arm came around her waist as she stumbled slightly. His fire and her shadows encircled them. Snow and ice danced

above his flames, and where they touched, they turned to ash, melding with her shadows.

The pleasure of their power combined with everything flooding him down their bond had him gripping Scarlett tighter to him as their very essences merged, an aura of pure light seeming to glow around them. It was brighter than any star, but all he could focus on were the silver eyes fixed on his.

The glow slowly faded, their flaring power dying down. They were still catching their breath when Beatrix pressed kisses to both their cheeks before squeezing their hands and leaving them alone at the front of the ship. Scarlett moved to the front of the foredeck, staring out at the black water ahead of them. Her hand was raised in front of her as she admired the completed Mark.

He slipped his arms around her waist, tugging her back into his chest. He pressed a small kiss to the spot below her ear, and she hummed in pleasure, dropping her hand to cover his.

“Tell me what you are thinking,” he murmured into her ear.

“I am thinking that I am grateful for these moments to breathe amid the chaos,” she answered. “I am thinking that tonight I do not want to think about Avonleya or Alaric. I do not want to think of the Courts we left behind or feel the heartache of betrayal by those we trusted. I do not want to worry about the friends we left behind—Ashtine and Hazel, Juliette and Arianna. For one night, I want to forget it all. And I am thinking that I am an awful queen for thinking such things.”

“My Love, you left to find help. You left to find the one thing that can stop all of this. You left to save those very people and Courts you left behind. And while I understand why you feel this way—because I feel the same—the stars in your company are just as worthy of your attention as the stars you are fighting for.”

She sighed, her head tipping back against his shoulder. “Such wise words from an ancient prince.”

“Perhaps we should find a better use for that tongue of yours,” he purred into her ear, and he felt the tremor run through her body. He noticed her shift in scent a moment later.

“*Perhaps* you should introduce me to more of your *experiences*, Prince,” she replied, turning in his arms. Her hands pressed against his chest as she pushed up onto her tiptoes to touch her lips to his. His fingers were immediately sliding into her hair, holding her mouth to his.

His tongue tasted hers as his lips moved against her soft mouth. His other hand was tracing down the back of the dress that dipped right down to the swells of her ass. Her hands slid up his chest, looping around his neck. She pulled her body into his, as if she couldn’t stand any space between them.

His fingers trailed down her ribs, slipping to her hips and then her thighs, finding the deep slits of the dress. He began slowly bunching the fabric up her legs. It took a moment for her to realize what he was doing, but when she did, she stiffened, breaking the kiss.

“Out here?” she questioned breathlessly.

“You said you wanted me to show you some of my experiences, Love,” he teased, continuing to slowly pull the skirt of her dress up.

“But anyone could come out here and see us,” she argued.

Sorin brought his lips to her ear. “That is half the fun, Love.”

She was still a moment longer before he felt her relax into him. He resumed the slow bunching up of her skirt as he lowered his lips to her neck, trailing kisses down her throat. Her hands had moved to his jacket, quickly undoing the buttons before slipping it off his shoulders and letting it fall to the ship deck.

“I find it unfair that you have so many layers of clothing on,” she said, her finger already slipping under the hem of his tunic and brushing along his stomach. His abdomen instantly tightened at her touch, her fingers tracing along muscles as she pulled his tunic up.

“You seem to make pretty quick work of them,” he said roughly, letting her slip the tunic over his head and toss it aside. “And this dress will be far more work to take off than any of my clothes, I assure you.”

“You chose the dress,” she tossed back, fingers roaming over his now bare skin, lips brushing along his chest.

“I did,” he conceded, nipping at the sensitive spot between her neck and shoulder. He felt her stumble into him a little more, and his lips curved up against her flesh.

“You wouldn’t *have* to remove the dress,” she said then, her hands dropping to the buttons on his pants. But instead of undoing them, she ran her hand over him atop the fabric.

“Shit,” he breathed, his hips involuntarily bucking into her hand, and he felt her smile against his skin this time. “And why is that?” he gritted out as she continued to stroke him through his pants.

She pushed back up onto her toes to whisper into his ear. “Because I remember how much you enjoy no pants dilemmas.”

A small scream of surprise escaped her as he had her up against the side of the deck in the next breath. He lifted her by the hips, setting her on the narrow ledge.

“Sorin!” she gasped, her nails digging into his shoulders.

“I will always catch you, Love,” he said, one hand firm on her hip while the other reached up to her hair. “This, on the other hand,” he added, plucking the crown from the top of her head. “No guarantees.”

She laughed, the sound of it breathing life into his very soul. She took the crown from his hand and tossed it onto his discarded tunic. When her eyes met his once more, her features had softened. He brought his hand to her cheek, thumb brushing along her skin.

“A million stars in the sky above us, and you are still the brightest,” she murmured, fingers finally beginning to undo the buttons of his pants.

“A million stars in the sky, and you are the only one I care to look at. The only one that matters,” he replied.

She pulled him free as he bunched up her dress, lifting her slightly to let it pool around her hips. She spread her legs, letting him step between her thighs, and he could already feel her slick heat against him.

Then he felt her shadows rake along his skin as if she were lightly dragging her nails along it. The sensation made him groan, his fingers flexing on her hips. His embers rose up to greet her shadows, and his flames skittered along her arms, rolling along her torso.

But when her actual fingers touched his flesh, ice cold as she dragged them along his ribs, he hissed between his teeth.

She laughed tauntingly, but it quickly turned into a gasp as he jerked her hips forward. He’d already been lined up perfectly, and he slid into her with ease.

“I swear to Saylah, if you drop me in the sea, Sorin...” She sucked in a breath, her head tipping back and up to the sky as he thrust in deeper.

“You would be fine. You can breathe underwater,” he replied, relishing the feel of her around him.

“So not the point,” she panted out, fingers digging into his shoulders when he thrust into her again.

“Relax, Love,” he murmured, his mouth finding her throat again. “Don’t think. For one night. Remember?”

He felt her shudder slightly before her head fell into the crook of his neck. The nails digging into his shoulder loosened some. Her entire body loosened, letting him take control of it. He felt her tip her hips up slightly, letting him slide in even deeper, and she moaned into his neck when he hit that perfect spot.

He slipped a hand between them, his arm looping around her back. His fingers slipped down to rub tight circles against her center, and he instantly felt her begin to clench around him. A few moments later, she was crying out, the sound muffled against him. A few more thrusts, and he found his

own release as she continued to spasm around him before she went limp against his chest.

He pressed a kiss to her hair, her temple, her jaw.

She just groaned.

He lifted her left hand, pressing another kiss to that completed Mark.

“Thank you for not dropping me in the sea,” she eventually murmured into his chest.

He’d been running his fingers through her hair, and he let out a bark of laughter. “All my experiences prepared me for this, Princess.”

She tsked, pinching his bicep, and he laughed again. “Still a queen, you know,” she grumbled.

“Queen just doesn’t have quite the same ring as princess,” he said, lifting her down, her dress falling back down to her feet. “Come on, Love. Let’s get you back inside.”

She bent and retrieved the crown while he tucked himself away. He left his pants unbuttoned, grabbing his tunic and jacket before taking her hand.

As they were descending a set of steps, she said, “Sorin?”

“Yeah, Love?” He glanced back over his shoulder. Her silver hair was fluttering around her on the sea breeze, and her eyes were almost glowing, as bright as the stars above them.

“When this is over, where do you want to live? Will we be expected to reside at the Black Halls?”

“Perhaps,” he said, fighting the grin when her nose scrunched in annoyance at the word.

“But you love the mountains, and you are still the Fire Prince. Wouldn’t you rather be in Solembra?”

“I wish to be wherever you are, Love.”

“Yes, yes,” she said, waving her hand dismissively. “But what will be expected of us?”

“This is an incredibly random topic.”

“Not really,” she said with a shrug as he led her down the steps that would lead to their cabin. “I never let myself think of the future. I didn’t *want* to think of the future. It held nothing I desired except the illusion of freedom I never thought I would see. But you...” Sorin came to a halt outside their door, turning to face her fully. All he could feel down their bond was a deep contentment. “You make me want to plan a future, Sorin,” she finished softly.

And then he was pressing her up against the wall, his mouth on hers once more, his hand caressing her cheek. It was a slow kiss, full of all the promises and vows they’d ever made to each other. When he pulled back, he brushed his lips over the tip of her nose before he said, “Then we will plan a future together, Scarlett. Always together.”

CHAPTER 6

CALLAN

Callan Solgard sat on one of the steps descending from the quarterdeck, watching Sorin and Eliza spar with Drake and Cassius. Rayner and Cyrus were monitoring, coaching the non-Fae on adjustments to make. They'd been on this ship for over two weeks. It had been five days since Scarlett and Cassius had appeared on the back of a dragon. Not the shadow dragon she liked to conjure, but an honest-to-the-gods dragon.

Tava had taken his younger sister, Eva, to another ship to spend time with some of the children. Eva had been banging on the door of his cabin before the sun had risen. Tava had been with her, apologizing profusely for waking them. It was good for Eva. After everything she had been through, everything she had witnessed. She'd hardly spoken for an entire week after they had watched Alaric slit the throats of their parents. They'd fled to the Black Halls with the Fae before Briar had moved them to the House of Water, and Callan hadn't left his sister's side that entire week. Tava had brought them food, water, whatever they'd needed.

He didn't know what the Lady was thinking or feeling about anything. They'd agreed to explore a real courting rather than the ruse they'd been portraying for the last couple months, and then they'd been pulled into this nightmare. He kept thinking he would wake up at any moment. It was too surreal. The things he'd seen. What he'd endured. A year ago, his biggest problem was a wraith who'd walked away from him without explanation. The Fae were a vague threat to their kingdom, but one kept under control. He'd never truly worried

about them. They'd been as mythical to him as the lost Avonleyan Kingdom they were sailing towards.

He didn't know where to go from here with anything in his life— his throne, his people, his sister, Tava. He certainly wasn't in any right state of mind to be contemplating a relationship, and it hadn't exactly been at the forefront of his thoughts lately. He didn't know what his future would hold anymore. Was he a king? Would a king run from what was threatening his people? His kingdom? That future he was contemplating wasn't as clear cut and laid out for him as it had been nearly his entire life.

“Good morning, your Majesty,” chirped a voice of darkness. A moment later, Scarlett was plopping down beside him on his step, passing over a steaming cup of tea.

“You detest such titles,” he said, taking the cup from her.

“I detest the cold,” she grouched. “But a title should be used when the occasion calls for it.”

“And this occasion calls for it because?”

Scarlett was quiet for a long moment before she said, “You are a king, Callan. You deserve that title and the respect that comes with it. I am sorry I did not always give that to you.”

It was his turn to fall silent for a moment. He took a sip of the tea, and a harsh cough escaped him when it burned on the way down. Not because it was hot, but because it wasn't just tea. “What is in this?” he asked hoarsely, peering into the cup.

A sly grin tilted her lips. “Tea...and some liquor,” she said, taking a big sip from her own cup.

Callan huffed a laugh, following suit and taking another drink. He nodded toward the deck below. “You are not training this morning?”

She sighed dramatically. “I have been instructed to ‘take it easy today.’”

“By Sorin?”

“Yes,” she rolled her eyes. “Even with bright silver eyes, he still insists on being an overprotective pain in my ass.”

Said pain in her ass glanced over at them as if he'd heard her, and she wiggled her fingers at him.

"It is good you finally let someone in," Callan said. "It is good you let someone take care of you every once in a while."

"It is," she agreed. Scarlett went quiet, fiddling with her teacup, then she cleared her throat. "Anyway, I am also rather cranky today about this abysmal weather, and no one wanted to spar with me because I get extra violent when I'm crabby."

Callan barked a laugh, and it felt strange. He was fairly certain he hadn't so much as smiled in the weeks since he'd watched death claim so many he cared for.

"So you are drinking instead?"

"If I am being forced to endure being stuck on a damp, cold ship under grey skies, I am going to drink, your Majesty," she said, clinking her teacup against his before throwing back the last of hers.

"Fair enough," he said, doing the same.

She leaned back on her elbows, tipping her face to the cloudy sky, her eyes falling closed. "What do you need to talk about, Callan? And do not say 'nothing.' We both know that is bullshit." Her shadows flowed from her, wrapping around their empty teacups and taking them to...wherever they went. Then she reached into her cloak pocket and pulled out a small bottle of liquor. She unscrewed the cap, taking a pull directly from the bottle before passing it to him and waiting.

He took a drink, feeling the alcohol warm everything on its way down. "Tava is really good with Eva," he finally said.

"Mmm," she hummed. "Losing a parent is hard. Seeing your mother and father killed in front of your eyes... That will leave a mark. It will never go away, but she has you. That will help."

Callan nodded, taking another pull from the small liquor bottle before passing it back to her. She would know. She'd seen the woman she'd called mother be taken apart piece by piece. "I do not know how to help her...deal with all of this. *I* do not know how to deal with all of this."

Scarlett's eyes had moved to the horizon, watching the waves. "When I lost Eliné..." She sighed. "My people were two young girls who were being trained to take life just as I was, a best friend instructing said training, and a master who made sure that I associated survival, love, and family with him. She has you, Callan. You. Pure light and all things good. Will she struggle? Absolutely. But as long as she has you, she will be okay. She will not turn to violence and rage like I was encouraged to do. You will make sure of that."

"How do you know?"

"Because when I met you, for the first time in years, my world wasn't quite so dark."

"My light was simply not enough for you," he said, not out of bitterness but more of an observation.

"No, Callan. My darkness was not enough for *you*," she replied, passing the liquor back to him. "You deserve so much more than my world of shadows, and I think you are finding the light far more beautiful." A comfortable silence fell between them for a time before she said, "But how about *you*? You also lost your parents. You also saw them taken before your very eyes. And Finn and Sloan..." She swallowed thickly. "I am sorry, Callan. Just as I know what it does to a little girl to see that, I know what it does to a person to see their friends fall."

"Yeah," he said quietly.

What else was there to say? Nothing really. He saw Finn and Sloan falling when he closed his eyes, collapsing as the life was snuffed from them with the squeeze of a fist. He heard Eva's horrified screams in his dreams. He felt his chest constricting with Alaric's power when it got too quiet, when he was too still.

"Everything you are feeling, Callan? And everything you are not feeling? It is all okay. It is... Those feelings are valid. I want you to know that. There is no right or wrong way to survive this as long as you survive," she said softly.

And wasn't that what he was doing? Simply surviving at this point? It didn't seem like it was enough. It seemed like he should be doing more. He was supposedly a king. He was responsible for his little sister now. He had so many godsdamn responsibilities. He'd thought he'd have more time before he would find himself in the position of ruling.

And yet every day since that throne room, it was all he could do to get out of bed in the morning. To put one foot in front of the other. He could hardly focus on the next hours, next minutes, let alone days to come.

Scarlett bumped her knee against his. "Don't push the grief and anger and sorrow down, Callan. Don't let it grow and fester and draw you into the darkness. It is harder for people to find you there. And the longer you stay, the more you forget that there are stars worth fighting for. Don't..." She turned, looking out over the endless waves around them for a long moment. "Don't shut people out. It takes longer to heal when you don't let people in."

"Do you ever really heal?" he asked, stretching his legs out before him.

"No," she said quietly. "But the days become bearable. They slowly become brighter. Then you have a good day amidst a mess of bad ones, and you think maybe it is worth it. To fight for the good days. It doesn't hurt any less. It just hurts differently, and the pain isn't quite so staggering when you have people to keep you from drowning." Her head turned, silver eyes settling on him. "Fight for the good days, Callan. Even if they are few and far between right now, fight for the good days. And if good days seem too impossible right now, fight for the good moments that manage to appear amidst the hell you're enduring. The glimpses of light. Fight for those."

"I can't..." His throat bobbed, eyes darting to the sea. "I do not sleep at night, Scarlett," he finally managed. "I can't... When I do manage to sleep, I wake up in a cold sweat because all I see is..."

Scarlett was silent, letting him try and get his thoughts together, try to put some sort of voice to them. But when he

didn't continue for several minutes, she said, "I wish I had a map to give you to guide you through this, Callan. I wish I had some great secret that would make this even slightly easier. But you have to walk through it. You have to face the storms that will come for you over and over, the memories that threaten to keep you locked in this nightmare. You will be different on the other side. You may not even fully recognize yourself. But you will make it to the other side, Callan. And on the days you think you won't, I'm here to sit in your darkness until you're ready to find your light."

Callan swallowed thickly against the burn in his throat. He might hate how the last year had been between them, but what had Tava said? That she believed he and Scarlett were meant to be in each other's lives? Scarlett might not believe in the Fates, but he was starting to believe their meeting was not by chance, if only so she could be here, at this exact moment in time with him, giving him hope that he would indeed make it through this.

She leaned over then, wrapping her arms around him, and he found himself gripping her tightly back. "Don't let them steal your light, Callan," Scarlett whispered. "This world needs it."

"If I did not have so many responsibilities before me right now, I would question if the glimpses of light are even worth it at this point," he finally managed, his voice barely a whisper. He turned to look at the queen. "What does that say about me? As a person? To say something like that? To even *think* it?"

"That you are human, Callan," she replied. "It says that you are a normal person. Despite the titles you bear, at the end of the day, you are just like everyone else. A normal person with perfectly normal feelings."

"And what does it say about me as a king?" he pressed on, ignoring her comment. "You call me Majesty, but have I earned such a title? I fail to see how, Scarlett. I have done nothing to earn anything I have. I have only lost everything that ever mattered."

“Not everything, Callan,” she said, her tone as soft as before. “But when you are drowning, it is hard to see beyond the waves keeping you under.”

“You did not disagree with me. That I have not earned such a title.”

She shrugged slightly. “I hated it when people would say things to try to make me feel better or downplay what I was feeling. Is it my place to say if you have earned it or not? That is up to you to decide. You and your people, not me. But if you feel you have not yet earned it, if you feel your people do not believe you have earned it, there is nothing stopping you from starting the work to earn it now. If you think more is needed to be worthy of that crown when it is placed upon your head—because it will be, Callan. I *will* restore your kingdom to you—then you have between now and then to become worthy of it.”

He scoffed. “You make it sound so simple.”

“It will not be,” she said, taking another pull from the bottle. “In fact, it will be grueling and hard, and you will often wonder if it is truly worth it.”

“Thanks for that,” he muttered, taking the bottle she held out to him.

She shrugged again and then sighed, as if in pain. “I cannot believe I am going to say this, but if the Fates do exist, and that is a very strong *if*, then I would have to believe that you were made for such a time as this, Callan. You were destined for your throne, as I was for mine, but if you do not want that path, then you do not have to take it.”

“And what happens then? To my people?”

“They would no longer be *your* people. It would no longer be your concern,” she said simply.

“I cannot simply...walk away from them.”

“Then I guess you have your answer. So get up...your Majesty.”

She took the liquor bottle back from him and got to her feet. Then she was sauntering down the stairs towards those sparring. “Okay, assholes,” she called out as she neared. “Who’s sparring with me?”

Cyrus glanced at her. “We already told you: no one wants to spar with a cranky queen who hasn’t eaten. Did you eat breakfast?”

She glanced at the bottle in her hand. “I drank it?”

Cyrus snorted as Sorin said, “You have been drinking this morning?”

She slid the bottle behind her back. “Of course not. *Tea*. I drank tea.”

“Scarlett.”

“Sorin,” she mocked. “Spar with me.”

“Not if you have been drinking. I thought you were taking a day off?”

“Winner gets to pick the position tonight,” she taunted.

For a split second, confusion clouded his features. Then Callan could see the heated look he gave her even from where he still sat on the steps.

“Such a dirty tongue this morning, Princess,” Sorin crooned, his voice dropping low and predatory.

“Still a queen, you know,” she said airily.

“I am well aware,” he replied, prowling towards her.

“I guess if you’re not going to spar with me, I’ll go to Briar’s ship. It’s bigger anyway.” Then she was squealing around laughter as Sorin hoisted her over his shoulder. “Sorin! Put me down!”

Callan couldn’t hear what he said to her as he made his way to the prince’s cabin, but he found himself smiling as he watched them. If she could find something to laugh about after everything she had faced, he could do the same. He could focus on one moment at a time. He could fight for the glimpses of light.

He pushed to his feet, jogging lightly down the steps and making his way to the Fae warriors.

The Fae. A race of people he'd become so embittered towards because of what they had represented to him, of what he had thought they were taking from him.

How foolish he'd been. Wrapped up in his own little world of royalty and propriety. Raised to find value in what others could give him rather than in what he could provide to those who had nothing to offer in return. He'd often contemplated lately how silly it was to shelter a Crown Prince when he was one day expected to rule over a kingdom.

Now he contemplated how idiotic he'd been to *allow* himself to be so sheltered.

"Cyrus," he called out as the Fire Second turned to speak to Cassius.

He looked back over his shoulder. "Callan?"

"Will you train me? You and Eliza and Rayner," he clarified.

"You want us to train you?" Eliza asked, her head tilting and copper braid slipping over a shoulder.

"You know how to handle a sword," Cyrus said, his arms folding across his chest. "I've seen you spar."

"Yes, but not as well as I could. When we go into battle again, I want to be able to fight," Callan said, lifting his chin. "I want to be able to defend my family, my— The people I care about."

"You are still just a mortal," Eliza said, eyeing him thoughtfully now.

"So were Sorin's High Force," he countered.

"But they were soldiers. They'd been training for the king's army nearly their entire lives," Cyrus cut in.

"I don't want to be like my father," Callan said, his tone shifting. "A king should not constantly be behind closed doors in council rooms, making laws and decisions that affect people

he knows nothing about. If I cannot walk among my kingdom, my people, without fearing for my life, then I should not be a king. If I am not willing to fight for my people, willing to pick up my own sword and go fight beside them, then I should not be their king. If I am not willing to do whatever possible to better myself for my people, even those who would rather see me dead right now, then I should not be their king.”

The others were staring back at him when he fell silent. For the first time since he had met the Fae, some type of respect looked back at him. He’d been bitter in the Fire Court—ridiculously self-pitying, if he were being honest—with how they’d treated him. But he’d never acted in any way to earn their respect either. He’d never had to earn respect before. Another thing that had always simply been given to him because of his title.

“If he wants it badly enough, he can obtain that level of skill. I did,” Eliza finally said. “I did that and then some. I surpassed all my teachers.”

“So you will do it? You will train me?” Callan asked, glancing around at the Fae.

“We can’t really do much on a ship,” Eliza mused in contemplation. “But we can do what we can until we reach Avonleya.”

“And then?”

She flashed him a wicked grin. “And then the real fun begins.”

CHAPTER 7

TALWYN

The black wolf stumbled slightly as she traversed the rocky ground of the Fiera Mountains. The sun was quickly setting, and even her heavy fur coat wouldn't completely shield her from the elements of the mountains. Spring may have begun to make itself known in other areas of the continent, but high in the mountains snow still blanketed everything. The winds still howled as if she were in the Shira Cliffs. She padded past a few evergreens before finally spotting the cave ahead. The same cave she'd sought out last week.

She dropped to her belly on the hard, cold earth when she was deep enough inside the cave to be free of the elements. The growling of her stomach seemed to echo off the cave walls. She'd forgotten to eat. Again. Which was fine. Food tasted like ashes on her tongue these days anyway.

She curled into a tight ball, tucking her nose into her fur. This was the only place she could sleep anymore. Tucked away in the cold caves of the Fiera Mountains. She couldn't sleep in her chambers in the White Halls because Tarek was there, and everything about him being there felt off. He still called her his twin flame. She still adamantly ignored that voice in her head that told her he was not.

That voice that sounded like Azrael Luan.

That voice that made the ashes of her heart stir, as if it would almost start beating again.

If only.

But she had seen Scarlett come apart when she'd watched Sorin dying. She'd watched her instantly descend into hysterics. She had always reasoned that her reaction to losing Tarek wasn't as strong as Cyrus's because they hadn't completed their Trials. But Scarlett and Sorin hadn't either. They may have completed a few, but their bond had not been Anointed. There was no denying anymore that Talwyn should have felt something more when she had thought Tarek was dead. So either something was wrong with her or... It had not been a true twin flame bond at all, and she'd offered up a piece of her soul she would never get back.

Not that she had much of a soul left at this point anyway.

She'd gone to Azrael's Desert Alcazar, tried to sleep there, but it smelled like him. Soil and forest and fir. She'd thought that might be comforting on some small level.

She was wrong.

She couldn't even bring herself to sleep in his bed. She'd curled up in her wolf form on the floor of his room, but even that brought forth memories of late night talks and the most effective distractions.

Distractions that Tarek in no way came close to comparing to.

She didn't try Sorin's Fiera Palace. She'd vomited when she'd stood outside the palace after she'd let Alaric and the Maraan Lords into the Courts. It was the price of securing their alliance in the coming war with Avonleya. Because there would certainly be a war. Scarlett had made sure of that by tricking Alaric into closing all of his rifts and dropping the wards that kept the Shifters and Witches in their own territories.

But when Talwyn was standing there beside the Tana River, looking up at his home, all she could see was Sorin showing her the Twilight Fires when she had been a child. Sorin teaching her how to hold a sword in the private training pits on the top level beneath a ceiling of fire glass. Sorin bringing her hot cocoa after letting her play in the snow all afternoon while Eliné had been attending to other matters.

Sorin sneaking her an extra bowl of frozen cream when Eliné had said no.

And then all she could picture was the bolt of energy leaving her palm. Hitting him in the chest. Him dropping to his knees. Scarlett's screams of anguish.

No. She would never be able to sleep there.

So here it was. In a cold cave.

There was a rustling of leaves, and she lifted her head as an earth message drifted to the ground. She nudged it over with her nose so she could read it.

Where are you, Moonflower?

Moonflower. A name she'd once cherished. A name she'd thought held so much meaning.

Now it just grated on her ears when she heard it.

The wolf huffed, burying her nose back into her fur, ignoring the note.

Ignoring the wind howling outside.

Ignoring the gaping hole in her soul that would never heal over.

Ignoring the ashes of what was once her heart.

Three weeks. It had been three weeks since that throne room.

Three weeks since she'd begun counting down the last days of her life.

Because she knew Scarlett would come for her. Even if she somehow managed to survive a war with Avonleya, she would not survive the wrath of Scarlett Aditya for taking her twin flame from her.

She had often wondered these last few weeks where she would go when this was all over, when she crossed the Veil into the After. Would Arius, the god of death, pass judgment for her transgressions? Or would he deem her unworthy of even giving her that? Would he leave her to wander the After

on her own, abandoned to her own failures? Send her straight to the Pits of Torment? Or maybe this was to be her punishment. To walk on this side of the After for centuries with the weight of her choices staining her soul. Utterly alone and with the knowledge that she had done this to herself, even if she had done it to protect her people from being used by Avonleya again. Would it be worth it in the end? She had to believe it would. She had to believe this hadn't all been for nothing, that she hadn't sacrificed everything for nothing.

And as she finally drifted off to what was sure to be another restless slumber, she couldn't help but hope Scarlett came soon. Because while she certainly didn't deserve saving or any amount of mercy at this point in her wretched, miserable life, she still wanted it over and done with.

Maybe in death she'd find sleep more peaceful.

Or not.



Talwyn stepped from the air in front of the castle gates in Baylorin. Tarek had sent a message that Alaric was requesting her presence. Immediately.

The “immediately” part made her wait an hour before Traveling here. She walked past the guards without glancing at them, pushing through the front doors. She was halfway across the entrance hall, making her way to the stairs that would lead up to the council room they usually met in, when a voice of silk and honey made her nearly jump out of her skin.

“You made him wait,” Death’s Shadow purred. “How incredibly defiant of you.”

Talwyn glanced over at the Night Child with an uninterested glare. She was clad in her customary black pants,

black tunic, and black cloak. Her hood was down, but she had numerous weapons in place, along with her black gloves.

“He is not my king nor my master. I will answer his summons when I am able,” Talwyn replied.

“Not your master, yet you still heed his summons.”

Talwyn’s lips pursed. She couldn’t say she had interacted a lot with Death’s Shadow over these last few months, but the times she had and from what she’d observed, she knew this was normal behavior from her. Arrogance. Taunting. Slightly insane.

“We are allies in an upcoming war. I will meet with him when needed to strategize and plan,” Talwyn gritted out.

Nuri shrugged a slender shoulder. “Or he just extends a longer leash to you than he does to the rest of us.”

A breeze swirled around them as they climbed the stairs, a reflection of Talwyn’s irritation, and Nuri huffed a laugh. “Would you like to hear a story?” she asked as she toyed with a knife.

“Why would I want to hear a story?” Talwyn retorted, wondering if the female was truly going to be following her all the way up to the third floor. “Don’t you have something to do? People to kill for your *master*?”

“I rarely do the actual killing,” Nuri replied.

“You are a Wraith of Death. That is what you are known for,” Talwyn said dryly.

“I am Death’s *Shadow*,” Nuri drawled. “I shadowed the targets. Figured out their whereabouts. Let them know death was coming for them.” She flipped her knife again. “I was the fear and the favor.”

“The favor?”

“I always thought it a kindness to give our targets notice we were coming. It gave them time to get their affairs in order. Some took advantage of the opportunity, others did not.”

Unsure of how to respond to that, Talwyn said, “Then what were the others?”

“I was the fear and the favor. Scarlett was the pain and the justice. Juliette was the mercy from her wrath. Unfortunately for you, Juliette will not be here to grant you such a thing.”

“And yet here I stand while Scarlett flees to the west, to the very kingdom who started this entire mess centuries ago,” Talwyn spat.

“Did you know Scarlett hunted down the assassin who killed Eliné?” Nuri asked, ignoring her verbal tirade.

Talwyn stiffened. “Why would that matter to me?”

A grin that was as insane as Nuri surely was filled her face. “Because that assassin killed a woman who wasn’t even her real mother,” Nuri said simply, that knife twirling in her hand again. “Can you just *imagine* what she is going to do to the person who took her king, husband, and twin flame from her? I thought you might like to hear the story of what she did to Dracon. You know, to prepare for what will surely be a thousand times worse, especially with those fancy magic tricks she possesses.”

Talwyn stared at the new Contessa, her features carefully neutral and betraying nothing of the unease that had slithered down her spine.

“I know she will come for me. I have magic tricks of my own,” she retorted, lifting a hand and letting vines form, reaching for Death’s Shadow.

“You and your prince sure do like these pretty plants,” Nuri mused, clearly unconcerned as the vines began to snake up her legs.

“Tarek is not a prince.”

Nuri’s fangs snapped out as a vine began to wrap around the wrist of the hand that held her knife. Faster than Talwyn could track, Nuri tossed the knife to the other hand, slicing down the vines on her legs while simultaneously biting through the ones on her wrist with those fangs.

“I wasn’t referring to the wanna-be Fae prince.”

“Azrael?”

“Yes. The tall, moody one who also likes to grow green things and tries to bind me with them,” Nuri quipped, stepping from the pile of vines at her feet and continuing to climb the steps. “Anyway, once we tracked Dracon down, we took him to a more secure location. So his screams wouldn’t draw unwanted attention,” she continued. “And she certainly took her time with him. Hours. Days. We weren’t trained as healers, but we definitely knew how to torture and make sure one stays alive and awake to feel all of it. Isn’t it delightful that our training was so thorough?”

“Yes...delightful,” Talwyn ground out from between her teeth.

“Do you want to guess her favorite weapon to use? I don’t think it is one you would expect,” Nuri said thoughtfully, as if Talwyn would actually want to play this inane guessing game.

“Why are you telling me any of this?” Talwyn asked in annoyance.

Nuri shot her a look that made it clear she thought she was speaking with someone who was dense. “Were you not listening? I am the fear and the favor.”

She turned to tell the Night Child she could stop speaking, but she was gone. How she had disappeared in the middle of a stairwell, Talwyn had no idea. She turned back to step onto the third floor landing to find Tarek standing there, waiting for her.

“Talwyn,” he said, pale green eyes scanning her from head to toe. “We were starting to get worried when you did not—”

“Come running like a dog being summoned?” Talwyn cut in, her head tilting.

Tarek paused. “I was going to say when you did not return my message.”

“I have other things to do. I run four entire Courts. I cannot simply drop what I am doing when I receive a message that

the Assassin Lord would like to hold an impromptu meeting,” she said, brushing past him and continuing to make her way to the council room.

Tarek fell into step beside her, his hands sliding into his pockets. “You did not sleep at the White Halls last night... Again.”

She said nothing, wondering why they had to meet in the council room at the end of this ridiculously long hall.

“I waited for you, Moonflower.”

She fought the flinch that wanted to overtake her, her jaw aching from how tightly she was clenching her teeth.

“Where do you disappear to every night?”

“I have things to tend to.”

“Where?” he pushed.

She pushed out an exasperated breath. “As I have already stated, I have four entire Courts to run now.”

“But you must also rest, Talwyn,” he said softly.

“I do,” she said, fighting the urge to run the final steps to the council room door.

She wouldn’t have made it far though. A hand was grabbing hers, tugging her to a stop. His other hand came up, the tips of his fingers skating along her jaw. “Talk to me, Talwyn. I cannot help if you do not let me in. You used to tell me everything.”

“Then you let me believe you were dead for ten years,” she retorted.

“And how much longer will I have to atone for that sin?” he asked, taking a step towards her. She stepped back, Tarek noting the movement. “All of that was for you. All of it to get your revenge, and now we are on the verge of attaining just that. I do not know how to prove myself anymore to you.”

He’d taken more steps towards her while he spoke, and she’d retreated just as many. Now her back was pressed to the wall, and she tilted her head back to look up into his face. His

eyes searched hers, as if he thought he could find the answers he sought there.

He wouldn't find any answers there though. Only the cold emptiness that was now her soul. There was only one who could read her simply by looking at her, and he was on a ship fleeing to the west with the Fire and Water Courts. She'd driven him from his own home. She'd driven all of them from their homes.

"Talwyn?" Tarek said, fingers toying with the end of her braid that had slipped over her shoulder.

The door of the council room flung open, causing them both to whip their heads to the sound.

"About time you found her," Mikale Lairwood, current king of Windonelle, sneered. "She was summoned over an hour ago."

"Apparently your leash is not as long as we thought, hmm?" Nuri quipped, sauntering past them.

Where the hell had she come from?

Talwyn made to push away from the wall, but Tarek hadn't moved, still crowding her against it. "Have dinner with me tonight, Talwyn." She opened her mouth to object, but he brought a finger to her lips, silencing her.

She shoved down every urge to bite that fucking finger.

"I know you are busy. I know you have more responsibilities than you ever had before, entire Courts depending on you. But have dinner with me. Just the two of us. We will talk and figure this all out."

He does not see you, Talwyn.

Azrael's words echoed in her mind as Tarek continued to search her face, looking directly at her but unable to truly see her.

"Do not ever silence me again," she said, her tone dripping with venom. Her winds came up, pushing against him, forcing him back.

“Talwyn, do not do this,” he sighed, irritation creeping into his tone.

“They are waiting on us,” she sneered, walking past him and into the council room.

Just in time to see a knife fly from Nuri’s hand directly at the king’s head. Mikale ducked with a curse, and Alaric—the Assassin Lord and Maraan Prince—sighed from the head of the table. “Nuri, stop throwing knives at Mikale.”

Nuri just pulled another knife from her belt, beginning to spin the point against one of her glove-tipped fingers.

Alaric glanced up, black eyes settling on Talwyn. “Glad you could join us, your Majesty,” he said. There was no sarcasm in his tone, but she knew he had to be irked she’d made him wait.

She slid into a seat at the table, Tarek pulling out a chair beside her. Balam Tyndell was seated to Alaric’s right, Mikale across from him, still glaring at the Night Child. Next to Mikale sat Mordecai, Alaric’s chief seraph. He was a large male, taller and broader than any Fae, but he still had the arched ears the Fae and Maraans had. He had deeply tanned skin, and his brown feathered wings that arched over his shoulder were nearly the same shade. His black hair was tied up on top of his head, eyes the color of a thunderstorm watching her carefully.

“We find ourselves in need of your assistance,” Alaric said, leaning back in his chair. His hand rested on the table.

“Beyond letting you into my Courts?” Talwyn asked coldly.

Alaric’s brow arched. “We are allies, are we not? Do we not assist one another?”

Talwyn nodded curtly.

“Good,” Alaric continued. “We need you to go to Siofra and speak with the Alpha and Beta. Persuade them to join our cause. You have decades of history with them. I believe you would be more successful at this endeavor than myself or Balam.”

Talwyn blinked slowly at him. “You want me to go to the Shifter siblings and try to convince them to side with us?”

“Not try,” he said. “I need you to succeed, your Majesty.”

“What makes you think that is even a possibility?” Talwyn asked. “They sided with Avonleya during the Great War, as did the Witches. I suppose you want to recruit the High Witch next?”

“The High Witch has already chosen a side,” Alaric said. “Any Witches that will side with us have already been serving me for decades. But that is not the only task I have for you.”

“What does that mean?”

“This brings me to the second thing I require of you,” he said instead.

“I did not realize I was to be delegated to.”

A thin, pointed smile curved on Alaric’s lips, telling Talwyn she was trying his patience. “I am told there is someone in the prison beneath the Black Halls.”

“There are many people in the cells beneath those halls,” Talwyn returned. “You will need to be more specific.”

“She goes by a different name here, but I can only assume it is her. From what I have gathered over the decades and from what Tarek has shared, she is how the Witches and Shifters of this realm gained their gifts.”

Talwyn’s brows rose in surprise, and she sat back in her chair. “You speak of the Sorceress?”

“The Sorceress,” Alaric scoffed, something akin to annoyance flickering across his features. “It is unsurprising, I suppose, that she took that title here, considering her mother is often referred to as that.”

Talwyn glanced at Tarek, who was stoic beside her before returning her attention to Alaric. “What do you want with her?”

“I want you to release her.”

“You what?” she balked. “Absolutely not.”

“It was not a request, your Majesty.” His voice had gone low and deadly, but despite what Nuri had said, he was not her master nor her superior.

“Do you have any idea how dangerous she is?”

“I know exactly how dangerous she is if it is indeed who I believe her to be,” Alaric replied.

“Then you are incredibly stupid to want her released.”

The entire room stilled, and Tarek’s hand landed on her thigh beneath the table. He squeezed in warning, but there was no way in any of the realms she would be responsible for releasing the Sorceress upon their world. There was no way she was adding that atrocity to her list of sins.

“Tell me, your Majesty,” Alaric said after a long stretch of tense silence. “Do you know of Zinta and her sister, Taika?”

“No,” Talwyn replied tightly, wondering what this had to do with anything.

“Zinta is the true Sorceress. Her twin sister, Taika, is known among the gods as the Enchantress.”

“Then what is the Sorceress that resides in the prison beneath the Black Halls if not the true Sorceress?”

“Daughter of the goddess, Zinta.”

“There is not a goddess named Zinta.”

Alaric arched a brow in amusement. “No? The gods and goddesses you serve here are not all that are in existence, your Majesty. There are many realms in just as many worlds. There are bloodlines and beings walking in those worlds that have never stepped foot in this one and some who have come and gone from this land.”

“Bloodlines like the Maraans?” Talwyn asked with a cold smile.

“Careful, Child,” Alaric said, his tone going arctic once more. “As I have repeatedly told Scarlett, we are here because of what lies guarded in Avonleya. If not for that, we would have never been sent here.”

“Explain that.”

“Succeed in this matter and I will,” he countered.

Talwyn leaned forward, one hand splaying on the table. “This is not a negotiation. This is not a give-and-take relationship. If we are true allies, you will share any information and knowledge you have with me.”

“I agree,” Alaric replied, his fingers drumming once again. “True allies should be able to trust one another, yes?”

“Yes,” she gritted out.

“And yet I find myself wondering why the Royals of the Courts who refuse to side with us are currently on ships sailing west,” Alaric said, his voice tight with rage. “Why are they still breathing, your Majesty?”

“Banishment was sufficient.”

“Not in this matter it was not. You now send aid to the very people you seek revenge against. Not only that, you send them some of the most powerful aid in this world. Tell me why I owe you any explanations at this point, *your Majesty*.”

Talwyn sat back in her seat. “If you desire my aid in anything else,” she spat, “you will share what you know. I will not be kept in the dark, or you will not have access to me or my Courts or any of my historical relationships.”

Alaric gave her a pointed smile. “I think you will find, my dear, that you have more need of me than I do of you at this point.”

“I rule over half of this continent,” Talwyn countered.

His smile turned sardonic. “And if you wish that to remain this case, you will not fail at these tasks.”

Wind swirled at her fingers where she still had her hand splayed on the table. “Are you threatening me and my kingdom?”

“Of course not, your Majesty,” Alaric said, getting to his feet. “I am simply recommending that you re-evaluate your

position on this.” He turned to Mordecai then. “Come. We need to finalize preparations.”

The seraph stood, stalking for the exit.

“What preparations?” Talwyn demanded.

“Nothing that concerns you, your Majesty,” Alaric replied with a wave of his hand. “Only those you let flee to the west.”

Talwyn stood so fast, her chair toppled over behind her. “You are attacking them?”

“I am fixing a problem *you* created and getting my weapon back,” Alaric said sharply before he left the council room, Mordecai following him out.

She knew this would happen at some point. She knew that eventually they would be attacked, that she would have to face them on the opposite side of a battlefield. She just thought she’d have more time to prepare.

She suddenly understood the grace Death’s Shadow offered in her so-called favor by allowing her target time to prepare to face hell.

She whirled on Tarek. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Tarek stared up at her from his seat. “When did I have the chance to do so, Talwyn? When you were sleeping somewhere other than your own bed? Or when you have been *busy* running these Courts you suddenly rule?”

She pressed her tongue to her cheek, unable to argue against that. Tarek slowly got to his feet. “Let’s go have dinner, Talwyn. We can discuss matters.”

“Fine.”

“What an interesting relationship you have with your leash,” Nuri said, getting to her feet and pulling her hood up. “If I know my sister at all, she has plans for him too.”

“When Scarlett returns here,” Mikale cut in, “she will have her own matters to deal with. Any plans she has for the queen or Tarek will become obsolete.”

Nuri's gaze slowly slid to Mikale. "I cannot decide who I am more excited to see her deal with. These two," she said with a nod of her head in Talwyn and Tarek's direction. "Or you."

Mikale smirked. "She has had plenty of opportunities to *deal* with me. She has failed every time."

"Because others have rescued you," Nuri said casually. "What will you do when there is no one around to save your ass or clean up after your mistakes?" When Mikale didn't say anything in response, Nuri's lips curved up. "The correct answer, your *Majesty*, is that you will die. Just like everyone else in this room. She will spare no one."

"Even you?" Mikale sneered.

Nuri's grin fell a fraction, and in a voice Talwyn had never heard from the Wraith, she said, "Especially me."

CHAPTER 8

SCARLETT

She was fidgeting. She knew that as her foot began tapping beneath the table again.

At the back of the ship, directly above the quarters she shared with Sorin, was a dining room of sorts. It had two long tables with benches on either side of them. They had sparred this morning, but this was the first meeting they'd all be having together since she and Cassius had returned from Baylorin. They'd decided to do this over dinner. It was a conversation that was likely to go well into the night. They'd be discussing what was to come next. Getting the keys to Alaric had only been the first step of many, and she wasn't entirely sure what their next step would be. Everyone would be looking to her for guidance and instruction, and she simply didn't know.

She had no idea what would happen next. She had no idea how long it would take to reach Avonleya. Any books she'd been able to find about the kingdom never had any maps. She had no idea how big the continent was they were sailing towards. She had no idea if they'd be able to get past the wards that kept them contained. She had no idea about anything. And shouldn't she? They would be looking to her, expecting her to have answers. She was their queen, their leader, and she could offer them nothing.

Sorin's hand slid onto her thigh, the pressure causing her to stop the tapping of her foot that had progressed to the bouncing of her knee. Eliza and Rayner were here, along with Briar and Sawyer. They were waiting for the others. Nakoa

and Neve had taken watch on the ship housing the majority of the children.

Sorin didn't say anything. He simply leaned over, pressing a soft kiss to her cheek.

Stop being annoying, she sent down the bond.

He arched a brow. *By kissing you on the cheek?*

Yes. It's sweet. We don't do sweet.

His lips tipped up, and gods, she wanted to skip this meeting and go back to their quarters where he'd carried her over his shoulder this morning. Things were simpler there, when it was just him and her. When she could pretend, just for a moment, that none of this was weighing on her. That she wasn't sailing towards a kingdom with more secrets than she could count. That millions of Fae, Shifters, Witches, and mortals back home weren't depending on her to find an answer there. That she didn't know if everyone would come out of this alive on the other side. They'd already lost too many. Finn. Sloan. Callan's parents. Innocent children deemed a necessary sacrifice by Alaric and the others.

"I know we have talked about this, but we don't have any answers for them, Sorin," she said in a hushed tone. "We don't have a clear course of action. Shouldn't we have that as the rulers of these Courts?"

"No, Scarlett," he answered. "We will not always have the answers, nor should we. That is why we have Inner Courts and allies. That is why we all work together, and it is why we have these meetings."

She sighed heavily. "I know," she muttered. And she did know all of that, but she was still adjusting to having this. She was still getting used to having so many people working with her, to not having to do so much on her own. It hadn't even been a year since she'd met Sorin, and her life had gone from an assassin waiting out her master to a lost princess to a queen. She'd gone from mortal to Fae to Avonleyan in just as much time. It was so much. Too much to process. And when it all became overwhelming, when all she could feel was the weight

of it all pushing her back under the water, she focused only on the next step. Nothing else. But she was so godsdamn tired of that. It seemed as though that was all she had done for the last month. Or rather, all she had done since Eliné's death, if she were being really honest.

Footsteps sounded and a moment later Cyrus came through the door, Cassius at his side. They were chatting about something or other, their heads close together. Cassius nodded at whatever Cyrus was saying, but he glanced at Scarlett and a frown immediately formed. He made his way over to her, taking a seat on her left. Cyrus sat across from him, next to Eliza.

“What is wrong?” Cassius asked, leaning in and speaking low.

“Nothing.”

His frown deepened, his chocolate-brown eye studying her intently. She knew he wanted to push, but more footsteps drawing near had him keeping his mouth shut.

Prince Azrael came through the doorway next, Auberon with him. Both wore stoic expressions, void of any emotion. Azrael's hard eyes skimmed over them all, avoiding eye contact with her. Cyrus had told her what he had said when he came to them, that he would beg her for mercy for Talwyn. He had yet to ask. Cowardice or smart, she couldn't decide.

As for the Night Child, she still wasn't sure what to make of him. She didn't trust Night Children. Even the one she thought she could trust had betrayed her, and while she understood it, knew why Nuri had made that choice, the pain of that betrayal still cut deep. She couldn't help but think of Nuri whenever she saw the vampyre. That wasn't his fault, but it was there nonetheless. Until he had proven himself, she was very careful about what was said and revealed to him. Which was proving difficult when he sat in on these meetings.

She sighed, her foot beginning to tap beneath the table again.

“You have never been a fidgeter, Scarlett,” Cassius said, leaning in once more. He was right. Alaric would have beat that out of her if she had been. She’d quickly learned to never show nerves in any situation, especially when it involved the Assassin Lord.

“I am just tired,” she replied.

“Day drinking and fucking all afternoon will do that to a person,” Cyrus quipped from across the table.

“You would know. About the drinking part anyway,” Scarlett retorted irritably. She was still crabby, despite the said drinking and fucking. She would relish a chance to throw down with anyone at this point, to release some of the violent energy in her limbs.

Cyrus flipped her off with a scowl, and she sent him a mocking smile before blowing him a kiss.

Before Cyrus could retaliate, Lynnea came through the door, a large bowl in her hand. They were paying her, despite her protests of it not being necessary, to make sure they were fed three meals a day. The young Witch loved being in the kitchen, which wasn’t all that surprising considering the Witches brewed potions and tonics on the regular. It was in her blood well before she knew she was a Witch. Callan came in behind her, plates and silverware in his hands, a bread basket balanced on top of the dishes. Drake and Tava followed with more platters.

“Do you need anything else tonight?” Lynnea asked, placing the bowl on the table. It was full of rice. Drake’s tray held fish, and Tava’s held what appeared to be roasted root vegetables. Not that Scarlett was being picky—because she was damn glad she didn’t have to be cooking—but she would be perfectly fine not eating fish for the foreseeable future whenever they reached dry land.

“No, Lynnea. This is more than sufficient, as always. Thank you,” Scarlett replied. There were murmurs of agreement around the table, and Lynnea dipped her chin before she left the dining area.

“I still have a hard time believing she is a full-blooded Witch,” Auberon said, watching Lynnea go.

“I still can’t believe we have a Night Child on this ship with us, but here we are,” Eliza said, reaching for the plates Callan was passing down the table.

Idle chatter was had while they dished up their food and ate. Scarlett didn’t pay much attention. Her thoughts were on all the decisions that lay before her, as they often were these days.

She was absent-mindedly reaching for another piece of bread that Sorin had buttered and set on her plate when Cyrus said, “So how much longer do you think we’ll be on this ship, Darling?”

She lowered the bread back to the plate, brushing crumbs from her fingers. “I don’t know. We’ve never seen maps. I’ve only read hints on its location. If I knew where it was, I would Travel us there.”

Cyrus grumbled something she couldn’t hear under his breath, and Scarlett felt her features tense. She knew he hated being in the middle of the sea. He hated the sea in general. It reminded him too much of Merrik. Sorin had provided him with portals back to Solembra at night when they were at the Black Halls, but there wasn’t anywhere for him to go now. They couldn’t risk going back to the continent until they were ready to take on Alaric and his seraphs, and who knew when that would be.

“What is our plan for returning, then?” Sawyer asked from where he sat next to Briar.

“I suppose that depends on what we find when we get to Avonleya.”

“Do you think he’s done it already? Taken down the wards?” Eliza asked.

“Yes,” Scarlett answered. “He would have been very vengeful after I burned the Fellowship to the ground. Getting Talwyn to shift the keys would have been his highest priority after that. He told me she already knew how. They were just

waiting on the final key. Hazel said she'd get me word, but I do not know how since she cannot send any type of message."

They had hoped Ashtine might send a wind message, but they couldn't bank on that. Not with her choosing Talwyn. She glanced quickly at Briar, whose eyes were hard as he tapped his finger lightly on the table.

"And why do you assume this has been accomplished?" Auberon asked, his blue eyes watching her closely.

"Because I know Alaric. He would have been irate about me burning down his Fellowship and sought immediate retribution," Scarlett answered. "He is incredibly patient until he isn't."

And it was Cassius who reached over and squeezed her shoulder this time. She reached up and gripped his forearm, squeezing back; both of them pushing down memories of just how true that statement was. Of the times Alaric had lost his patience with them, snapping in the end. He prided himself on control— of everything around him, of the people around him, of his circumstances. But Scarlett wondered now if that need for control was because he could scarcely control himself.

She cleared her throat. "So I suppose our next step is hopefully getting into Avonleya."

"Hopefully?" Azrael repeated.

"Yes, hopefully," she replied. "I do not know how long it will take. I do not know what we will find when we get there. I do not know if they will let us in, if we will have to fight, if they will be willing to help us. I can only hope that all of this wasn't for nothing."

"To make sure I understand this correctly," Auberon said smoothly, "our entire plan is essentially...hope?"

"We have several things in motion, as you are well aware, Auberon," Sorin cut in. "How those plans play out will depend largely on what we find when we reach Avonleya."

"And when we return to the continent?" the Night Child continued. "Should we return and win, will you keep the territories divided?"

Scarlett glanced at Sorin before she said, “I really don’t think it is our place to decide that. Not by ourselves.”

Auberon leaned forward in his seat, pushing his plate aside. He’d hardly eaten anything, Rayner and Eliza taking turns to supply him with blood each day. It kept the threat of the Night Child a little lower considering he would be unable to harm them, and the two kept a close eye on him. He may have fled when Nuri killed his Contessa, but none of them trusted the vampyre.

“You are aware that you could easily take and rule the entire continent, are you not?” Auberon asked.

Scarlett lifted her chin, her bread forgotten on her plate. “I have no desire to rule the continent. I had to be convinced to rule the two Courts I now preside over. I do not wish for more.” Her eyes shifted to Prince Luan with her next words. “However, I will rule over the entirety of the Fae Courts until a replacement has been agreed to and a coronation has taken place for the Eastern Courts.”

A muscle ticked in Azrael’s jaw, and he locked eyes with his fellow princes before meeting her own gaze. “Did you see her when you were there? Did you see anyone aside from the Assassin Lord?” His voice was low and dark, as she’d always experienced from the Earth Prince.

“I did see others.”

“And?”

“And none of them still breathe. Rest assured that had I seen *her*, I would still be there, making sure I had wrung every last ounce of agony from her bones before I let her cross the Veil to the After,” Scarlett said, deceptively calm. “If I had seen her, Prince Luan, Talwyn would no longer be an issue.”

Something shuttered in his eyes before he quickly locked down whatever emotion he was feeling. And that right there was why she didn’t trust the Earth Prince any more than she trusted Auberon at this point. He may have been fleeing with the rest of them. He may have chosen their side in this war.

But he would still spare Talwyn if he could. He would still do whatever he could to save his queen from her wrath.

“As it stands,” Scarlett went on after a tense moment of silence, “Talwyn is still an issue, along with Tarek. As far as we know, he has gotten his wish and now presides over the Earth Court.”

“As a fill-in,” Briar cut in.

“What does that mean?”

“Unless the previous Royal has died, a new Royal cannot be named without a formal abdication,” Briar explained. “All of those overseeing Courts right now are fill-ins until either the ruling Royal abdicates, dies, or is challenged.”

“Then why are we not still there if you are all the rightful rulers of those lands?” Callan demanded.

“For the same reason you are on this ship,” Eliza answered. “Their deaths would be imminent.”

“Had we not been warned of the attack, Azrael and Briar, along with their Courts, would likely be dead,” Rayner added. “The issue here is that they believe Sorin to be dead. Technically, Talwyn could appoint a new ruler to the Fire Court.”

Scarlett’s palms immediately started sweating at the mention of Sorin being dead, her heart rate spiking. It never failed. It didn’t matter that he sat beside her at this very moment. The mere mention of him being gone had her scrambling to maintain control of her thoughts, keeping those images locked up tight.

Breathe, my Love.

She looked up at him, a tight smile on her lips. Golden eyes softened with empathy stared back at her. She swallowed thickly before saying, “That will not matter. If she appoints another, Sorin can challenge as soon as we return. There is no one more powerful with the fire element.”

“But in the meantime, whoever she appoints can make a fucking mess of things,” Cyrus said, his forearms resting on

the table as he leaned forward.

“Then why hasn’t she done so yet?” Callan asked.

“Maybe her Second has some insight?” Eliza said, and all eyes went to Azrael.

His shoulders tensed, bronze skin tightening over coiled muscles. “I do not know why she would delay this. I can only assume it is because there are more pressing demands being made of her right now.”

“Like betraying her entire race of people?” Scarlett asked bitterly.

“She believes this to be in their best interest,” Azrael said.

“She believes this to be in *her* best interest, Prince Luan. You know that as well as the rest of us do,” Scarlett retorted.

That muscle ticked in his jaw again. “She made her choice, and I made mine. I will aid your agenda in whatever way I can, but I cannot answer questions I do not know the answers to.”

“You know her better than anyone. You can offer insight,” Cyrus countered.

“I can speculate, and I have. She likely has more pressing matters at hand. She excels at prioritizing matters,” Azrael said.

“And we would do well to do the same,” Sorin cut in. “Whether or not Talwyn appoints a new ruler over the Fire Court is not our most pressing matter.”

“Agreed,” Briar said. “We should be figuring out the best way to prepare for these seraph armies.”

“That is difficult given we do not know what type of magic we will be up against,” Sawyer supplied.

“The fact that they can fly also puts us at a grave disadvantage,” Rayner said.

“The Witches would have the griffins,” Scarlett said. “And if the Shifters still side with us, some of them can fly, right?”

“Perhaps,” Azrael agreed. “However, without the Wind Court on our side, it deepens our disadvantage and strengthens them.”

Silence fell, Briar going still at the mention of the Wind Court. They had not heard from Princess Ashtine since she had appeared to warn them of the incoming move on the Courts.

“We would also need to find a way to communicate with the Witches and Shifters before returning,” Sawyer said, breaking the silence. “They won’t do us any good if we can’t do that.”

“And will the Witches and Shifters be in any place to help us when we return? They will have been doing their best since we left. If it takes months to return, they could be too exhausted to aid us,” Cyrus added.

“I think even this discussion should be tabled at the moment. The Royals, the seraphs, battle plans, none of that is the most important matter at hand,” Sorin said. “We need to figure out how we are going to handle Avonleya when we arrive. We need plans in place for every situation. If we are not welcomed. If we are received kindly.”

“How are we getting in without the keys?” Cyrus asked. “We never did find this lock, right?”

“I assumed we could get in because she is Avonleyan,” Auberon said. “Are you telling me we are sailing towards a continent we might not even be able to *find* because of wards we do not know if we can get through?”

“We have the High Witch’s son, who is also part-Avonleyan,” Sawyer reasoned. “Perhaps he can bring down the wards.”

“These are not just any wards though. Avonleyan magic is different from what we had on our continent. Scarlett’s gifts are proof of that. They will be stronger, impenetrable,” Rayner argued.

“I thought she was the one who was in contact with this Lord of Night,” Azrael cut in. “Are we not sailing there with the assumption he is there and will let us in?”

“Yes,” Sorin answered. “But even if we are let in willingly, we still must be prepared for the various ways we could be received. Scarlett may be Avonleyan, but that is all we know.”

“For all we know, her family could be on bad terms with the rulers,” Cyrus said with a shrug. “Maybe that’s why they got her out and sent her to our continent.”

“To be raised by an Assassin Lord,” Scarlett said flatly.

Cyrus shrugged again. “We’re walking in blind here, Darling. We have no idea what to expect. That’s why I’ve been focusing on what I do know— our enemies back home.”

“That is incredibly helpful *right now*,” Scarlett drawled.

“I’m glad you think so,” he volleyed back with a smirk, “because I’ve been thinking we need to find a way to drop the enchantment in the mortal lands so we can access our magic there. I know you dropped the wards around the Witches and Shifters that kept them sequestered, but do you think we can do that too?”

“Sure. I’ll add it to my list of pressing matters that need to be dealt with,” she retorted.

Sorin glanced side-long at her, his arm slipping around her waist and tugging her gently into his side a little more. Something in her chest loosened. Just having him touch her seemed to ease her stress. This was new. He’d always had an effect on her somewhat, but not an instant reaction like this.

No, this hadn’t started until their twin flame bond had been anointed. Everything was more intense. She could feel his emotions more clearly. Could sense his location more accurately. And his physical touch? The sex had been good before, but now? Gods. There was a reason they’d spent the afternoon behind closed doors. But even the simple act of a hand resting on her knee could bring comfort or have her clenching her thighs, the bond seeming to know exactly what it needed to elicit at the time.

“And what of the new *Contessa*?” Auberón sneered down the table. “What are your plans for her?”

Scarlett stiffened, any comfort she'd felt from Sorin's touch instantly evaporating. Her eyes slid to the vampyre, settling onto his blue gaze. "Nuri will be dealt with as I see fit."

"Is she under your jurisdiction?" he countered.

"No," Scarlett replied. "Technically, one could say *you* are under *hers*."

Auberon's cheeks flushed with anger. "She killed my Contessa," he said, tone going eerily soft.

"Which, as I understand it, is how the changing of leadership takes place in the Night Child lands, is it not? Is it any different than someone challenging one of the Fae Royals for their title?"

"Are you saying you condone her actions?" Auberon demanded, pushing slowly to his feet.

"I am saying how she is dealt with is not your concern unless you plan to challenge her yourself," Scarlett replied. "But I can assure you, you will not win that fight."

"I served Rosalyn for centuries. You would do well not to underestimate me, your Majesty," Auberon said softly.

A smile lifted on Scarlett's lips, her head tilting to the side. "You served her for centuries, and yet Nuri snatched her from right underneath your blood-sucking little fangs. Perhaps it is you who should not underestimate her."

Auberon jerked back as if she had struck him. "Are you telling me you plan to leave her in power? Plan to allow her to rule the Night Children territory?"

Scarlett casually lifted a hand, shadows forming above her fingertips. She let them curl around her fingers, drifting down her palm. "I will not repeat myself again, Auberon Isra. I will decide how Nuri is dealt with, and when I have made that decision, I will let you know. Do not ask me of it again."

"That is not how this matter should be handled," he argued.

The shadows drifting before her grew as her temper frayed. “Enlighten me then, Auberon. How do you wish me to handle her?”

“She should have to answer for her betrayal!”

“Betrayal of whom? Because she was not loyal to Rosalyn. She had never pledged her loyalty to her. *I* was betrayed by Nuri. Not Rosalyn. Therefore, one would stand to reason that *I* should get to deal with her. Do you not agree?”

Auberon clenched his jaw tighter but didn’t respond.

“I think this is a topic we can return to later if needed,” Sorin hedged carefully. “After Scarlett has had more time to think on how she wants to handle the situation.”

Thick silence hung in the air before Sorin added, “I think we should call it a night. We can meet again tomorrow afternoon.” His fingers flexed along her hip where his hand rested.

The others all mumbled words of agreement rising from the benches, but her eyes slid to Azrael, still in his seat. She let him see every bit of loathing and fury she held for his queen. She held his stare, until he closed his eyes, nodding to her in acceptance.

It didn’t pay to ask for her mercy. Cyrus was right. It would not be granted.

“Come, my Love,” Sorin said gently, reaching for her hand as he climbed off the bench. “Let’s get some air beneath the stars.”

“I don’t want some air,” she sighed, pushing to her own feet, ignoring his outstretched hand. “I am tired. I just want to go to bed.”

“Then that is what we will do.”

“I should check on the children. I haven’t been to their ship since I got back from Baylorin.”

“Tomorrow,” he countered, keeping pace beside her as they made their way out of the dining space and down the

steps that would lead to their cabin below it. “We can do that instead of training.”

She didn’t say anything else, and neither did he. Not until they had entered their quarters, and he had shut the door. She immediately slid off her boots, making her way to the bathing room. Gods, what she wouldn’t give to bathe right now. A bath sounded divine. She was sick of washing with a rag, and her hair was atrocious. She was reaching to peel her tunic off when she noticed Sorin leaning against the door, his arms crossed.

“What?” Scarlett asked, trying to sense his emotions down their bond, but he appeared to be blocking it somewhat, immediately putting her on edge.

“We cannot kill her, Scarlett,” Sorin said, watching her warily.

“Cannot kill who?”

“We cannot kill Talwyn.”

“We cannot...” She trailed off, entirely confused by that statement. “Of course I am going to kill her, Sorin. She nearly killed you!” Scarlett cried, clamping down on the surge of memories that tried to rush up. The memories she fought every minute of every day, even though he lived. Even though she slept beside him every night. Even though she could see him and touch him and feel him, those nightmares still found her whether she was awake or sleeping.

“But she did not succeed, Love. I am right here,” Sorin said gently, taking a step towards her. He stilled when she stepped back from him. “Scarlett.”

“Do not *Scarlett* me,” she snapped, shadows rising from her skin and swirling around her arms. “She *did* succeed, Sorin. You were dead. You had crossed the Veil. My twin flame Mark was fading. You were ripped away from me!”

She was screaming, in near hysterics. And all she could feel was the panic and grief and *nothingness* she had felt when he was dying. When he was dead.

She let all of that flood down their bond, and Sorin's eyes widened. He stumbled mid-step, attempting to come to her once again.

“Do not tell me I do not get to take her life for taking you from me, Sorin. If Shirina had not put me into a dream state for the Lord of Night to speak to me, you would be in the After, this world would be nothing but ashes, and I would be crossing the Veil at this very moment to find you.” Her breathing was harsh, chest rising and falling too rapidly. Her shadows were thickening, cocooning around her.

“Scarlett.” Sorin swallowed thickly. “Love, I *feel* what you felt. I *understand*. But I am still here. The Fates had other plans. I—”

“The Fates,” she spat. “Do not speak to me of the *Fates*, Sorin.”

“She is a *queen*, Scarlett. The same as you. We cannot simply kill her without repercussions,” he argued, his eyes following her as she began to pace in the small quarters.

“A queen?” Scarlett scoffed, pausing to turn back to him. “If you honestly think she will be the queen of anything after this is said and done, you are mistaken. Aside from the fact that she will be *dead*, she has put her own Courts and mine in unnecessary danger. She deserves to rule over nothing.”

“Scarlett, we cannot kill her,” Sorin insisted.

“Tell me, Sorin, do you not wish to kill Mikale?”

“Of course I do,” he growled.

“Why? All he did was fuck me, and one could even argue it was with my consent. I chose it, allowed it, to save an innocent life. He did not *kill* me. Forced me to kill my sister, yes, but she also still lives, same as you. Perhaps he should be allowed to live as well? He is now a *king* after all,” Scarlett retorted coolly. Embers flitted across Sorin's golden eyes. “Or Alaric? Yes, he beat me, manipulated me, ordered who I knew as my mother killed, but I still live. I was not taken from you.” She shrugged. “I suppose we shall let him live as well? He is a Maraan Prince, as royal as a king. And Lord Tyndell? He is

nobility. He allowed me into his home. He never struck me. He gave me a place to live. Provided me with food, clothing, shelter. I suppose, based on your arguments this evening, he shall be allowed to live as well.”

“Scarlett,” Sorin growled again, rage pouring down the bond from his end.

“No, Sorin,” she continued, ignoring the flames winding up his arms. “You are right. Come to think of it...” She tapped her chin in mock contemplation. “This whole journey to try and find Avonleya is ridiculous. If we are not to kill the Maraans, there is no reason to bring war to the continent. Because—based on your incredibly sound logic—they are all royalty. None of them have succeeded in killing me, only caging me to be used for their own nefarious purposes—”

She gasped as she found herself up against the wall. Sorin had moved so godsdamn fast she hadn’t even seen him. One hand held her wrists above her head, the other gripped her chin. “The Maraans are all dying, Scarlett. Make no mistake about that,” he hissed, embers turning to small flames in his eyes.

“So is Talwyn, Sorin. Make no mistake about that,” she replied, her tone lethally soft. “She tried to take what is mine. I am yours, and you are mine. If she had succeeded, do you understand that I would not be breathing right now?”

The flames banked, Sorin’s features softening slightly. “Scarlett, you have your family, Cassius—”

But she was already shaking her head, Sorin’s hand moving with her chin. “I would have crossed the Veil to find you, Sorin. They would not have stopped me.”

“I know you would have tried, but they would have stopped you...” He trailed off when she shook her head slowly again.

Her shadows latched around his hands holding her in place. They pulled his fingers from her body. She felt him try to resist, but her magic was stronger right now. Would always be stronger when her reserves were full.

“They would not have succeeded in stopping me, Sorin,” she said quietly, his eyes wide as she held him back with only her shadows. She took one step forward, cupping his cheek. “I cannot live in a world without a you and me. I told you on my birthday I would not survive it. I will not do it. I refuse. You were taken from me.” Her voice broke on the last words, and she swallowed down the sob, but the tears still fell. Sorin gently pulled her hand from his face before cupping her own, thumbs swiping away tears. “You were taken from me *because of her*, Sorin. Do not deny me retribution for that. Do not ask that of me. It is not fair of you.”

Sorin pulled her into his chest, and she buried her face in his tunic, tears she’d been holding in for weeks surging up. She hadn’t allowed herself to feel any of this since she had used the Mark the Lord of Night had given her to bring him back from the After. She’d forced herself to push it down, remain numb to it, so she could stay focused on their next task. There was always the next thing to be done, the next problem to solve, the next meeting to attend. And now she was suffocating. Now she felt like she was drowning because she hadn’t been allowed the time to simply *feel* all of it.

Sorin stroked her hair, and she didn’t know when or how he did it, but she found herself lowered to the floor, her legs wrapped around his waist as he held her close. The newly anointed bond coiled around her, his flames winding around her shadows, locking them tight in their own little world where nothing could touch them. Where it was just him and her.

What she had almost missed out on because of Talwyn.

After several minutes, she pulled back enough to tilt her face up to his, to look into his golden eyes. “It is not fair of you to ask this of me, Sorin,” she whispered.

“I know, Love,” he said, just as softly, his words feathering across her lips. “Just... Can we discuss it more? How it will happen? And when?”

She felt herself tense at his words, but the bond quickly coiled tighter, soothing and calming. She didn’t reply. She didn’t have it in her to argue about this any more today. She

couldn't help but feel...hurt? Is that what she was feeling? Why did she feel like he was choosing Talwyn over her in this moment? That was ridiculous, right? That notion, the idea that she would even feel that way, was ludicrous.

"I'm going to wash up," she murmured, pushing off of Sorin and getting to her feet, wrestling to keep her emotions from flowing down the bond. Now that the floodgates had been opened, she struggled to rein them back in.

"Do you want some wine?"

She shook her head, offering him a weak smile as she made her way to the small bathing room. The first thing she was doing when they reached land was bathing. She didn't care who or what was there to greet them. A bath was at the top of her list.

She emerged later and found Sorin seated at the desk, pouring over some papers. He was shirtless and barefoot. He looked up when she came out of the bathing room, quickly looking her up and down. She'd pulled on one of his shirts over her undergarments.

"What are you doing?" she asked, moving to the bed.

"Looking at these maps you brought."

"They don't offer much."

"It doesn't appear so, but maybe we missed something."

She huffed a soft laugh. "You mean you didn't stare at those things the entire time we were apart trying to keep yourself occupied?"

"Of course I did, but we still could have missed something."

"We've all studied those maps for hours, Sorin," she replied pointedly. "None of us missed anything. We're sailing towards the unknown."

She slipped between the covers, snuggling beneath the furs that Sorin had thought to bring knowing how much she hated being cold. He got up from the desk, moving to the bed and stretching out on his side on top of the blankets. She rolled

onto her side so she faced him, tucking a hand beneath her cheek. He reached over, slipping hair behind her ear.

“I love you, Scarlett. I will always choose you. You know that right?” he said, trailing his fingers along her jaw.

“I know,” she replied quietly.

“I once told you if you wanted to burn the entire world to ash, I would help you do so,” he went on. “If you need this vengeance, I will not stand in your way.”

“But you still want to discuss it more,” she supplied, looking past him and over his shoulder.

“We have time, Love. So much can happen between now and when the opportunity for that vengeance will come.”

She nodded.

“Scarlett.” She brought her eyes back to his. “I am yours, and you are mine.”

“All the way through the darkness,” she whispered.

“All the way through the darkness,” he echoed, leaning in and pressing a kiss to her brow. “Sleep, Love. I’m going to wash up.”

She nodded again, watching him make his way to the bathing room. And when he closed the door and her heart lurched, she forced herself to breathe deep, in and out. She reminded herself over and over that he was still here, just in the other room. Talwyn hadn’t succeeded in taking him from her, but she wouldn’t fail at making her pay as if she had.

CHAPTER 9

CYRUS

Cyrus tilted his head back, his eyes falling closed, trying to avoid inhaling too deeply.

The godsdamn sea.

Nowhere to escape from the smell of salt water, the sound of gulls crying, even in the night.

No way to escape the memories.

Merrick and Thia. Thia and Merrick. It was nonstop these days. No matter what he did to keep busy. No matter what pressing issues they had to deal with or endless meetings and strategizing sessions they had, as soon as it was over, the memories surged, dragging him back under.

They had been on this godsdamn ship for weeks. How much longer could it possibly take to get to Avonleya? Fuck, it didn't even need to be Avonleya at this point. Just somewhere, *anywhere*, away from the godsdamn sea.

Calling flames to his fingertips, he pushed out a hard sigh, opening his eyes. The star-filled night sky stared back at him as he sat against the mast on the foredeck. He'd taken on the night watch. Again. He could never sleep at night these days. It was too quiet, and the quiet is where his nightmares liked to lurk.

They were all struggling. They were all barely keeping it together. Briar. Azrael. The mortals. His king and queen. He was in good company at this point, he supposed. What was that saying? Misery loves company? That wasn't true though. Company usually lessened the misery. Misery was more like a

spirit luring you away from those who could keep you sane. Misery didn't love company. Misery loved solitude. There it could grow and flourish and infest every thought.

A shadow fell over him, the flames he was toying with flickering at the movement. They illuminated a smirk on a face surrounded by brown hair that had grown back out since he'd cut it while healing from all his injuries. He didn't have a patch on his eye tonight, his other chocolate-brown eye taking him in on the deck of the ship.

"No alcohol tonight?" Cassius asked, a brow arching.

"Eliza would kick my ass if I drank while on watch," Cyrus said with a grin. He would never drink while on watch anyway, but a pissy Eliza was something no one wanted to deal with. Ever.

"That's always entertaining to watch," he replied with a shrug.

"You are a prick," Cyrus grumbled, thinking of how Eliza *had* kicked his ass while sparring earlier that day. This whole lack of sleep thing was messing with him in more ways than one.

Cassius chuckled, lowering down to sit beside him. He stretched out the leg that still gave him trouble at the end of the day, massaging the sore spot.

"You still using compresses on that?" Cyrus asked with a pointed look at his leg.

"Sparingly," Cassius replied. "Since we don't know exactly how long we'll be on this ship, I try to only use them when it's really bad."

Made sense.

Cyrus rolled the flames along his knuckles again, tilting his face back to the sky.

"How's Scarlett?"

"She's...doing her usual thing," Cassius said. "Trying to keep herself busy to avoid dealing with everything that's happened these last weeks."

Cyrus made a noise of acknowledgement. “You’d think she’d have learned by now.”

“Oh, she has,” Cassius countered. “She used to repress and stab things. Now she keeps busy until she figures out how to verbalize her thoughts without daggers.” He paused before adding, “For the most part.”

Cyrus snorted a laugh.

“How’s Sorin?” Cassius asked.

“Worried about...everything. His wife. His Court. All of us. He’s always been responsible for the well-being of others. I sometimes wonder if he forgot how to make sure he’s taking care of himself as well,” Cyrus answered.

When silence stretched between them, he glanced at Cassius from the corner of his eye. The commander was watching him toy with his fire. Cyrus sent a flame leaping at him, and he jerked back with a curse. Cyrus laughed, commanding the flame to expand, winding it around Cassius’s wrist.

“And you say I’m a prick,” Cassius muttered, watching the flames dance along his skin.

“It’s been well-established that I am indeed an asshole,” Cyrus said with a shrug. “You’ve seen Scarlett use her magic. This is no different.”

“I was not expecting flames to be thrown at me,” he deadpanned.

“No sign of your own magic emerging again?”

Cassius shook his head, lifting a hand, and Cyrus directed the flames to move into his palm, pooling there and glowing bright. “Maybe when we get to Avonleya,” Cassius mused. “Maybe being in that land will make it stir again.”

“Maybe,” Cyrus mused, but he didn’t think so. The only time Cassius’s magic had surfaced was when Scarlett had been in danger. Sure he’d Traveled a few times, but from what he’d been told about the events of that throne room, Cassius had produced some type of flames of his own. In the chaos, no one

had paid much attention, and since they had more pressing matters to deal with these days, it hadn't been discussed much. But Cyrus had thought on it during these night watches, wondering what kind of magic would produce black flames. Not the flames Scarlett would sometimes create when she combined her shadows and fire. These were pure black flames. He was guessing it had more to do with the fact that he had been continuously fueling Scarlett's power while Sorin was healing. Scarlett was still refusing to draw from Sorin unless absolutely necessary, much to Sorin's dismay. Cyrus had lost count of how many standoffs the two had had over this. He had bets daily with Eliza and Rayner about who would win that day.

But since Scarlett had stopped needing to draw from Cassius, Cyrus had been hoping that power might manifest again. Although, maybe the commander being unable to produce black flames that he very likely couldn't control on a ship was for the best. Maybe the Fates really were helping them out on this one thing.

"What do you know about Sargon?" Cassius asked.

"Not as much as I know about some of the other gods," Cyrus admitted. "But I did look into him more after Ranvir showed up at the Black Halls and the High Witch all but confirmed you are a descendant of him."

"And?" Cassius pressed.

Cyrus shrugged. "He's the god of war, courage, and bravery. Ranvir is his spirit animal, and the dragon has a brother, Edjer, who is bonded to Arius."

"That is all common knowledge," Cassius sighed in resignation.

"It is," Cyrus agreed. "What is not as well known is that Sargon was Arius's Second."

"Why would the god of death need a Second-in-Command?"

"I don't know if that was an actual title," Cyrus said. "From what I could gather, they worked closely together. I

couldn't find much on it, but it explained why their spirit animals were dragon siblings."

"Interesting," Cassius murmured, his gaze moving towards the sea.

"It is something I hope they have books on in Avonleya," Cyrus added.

"Ranvir showing up to save me and Scarlett kind of solidified the fact that I will be meeting my father when we get to Avonleya."

Cyrus slowly turned his head to look at him at the randomness of that statement. Cassius was staring straight ahead, his hand still massaging his thigh. They hadn't talked about this since that night they'd smoked the mugweed at the Black Halls.

"Yeah," Cyrus agreed. "It would appear he plans to meet you if he's putting forth effort to keep you alive."

"I don't..." Cassius trailed off before he tried again. "I don't know how I feel about it. About meeting him."

"Do you feel the same way about him as you do the High Witch?"

"No," he said. "She knowingly abandoned me. He had no idea I existed, according to her."

"Why would she lie about that?"

"There wouldn't be a reason, which is why I'm inclined to believe her."

"The High Witch is many things, but a liar is not one of them," Cyrus said. "She is painfully blunt."

"I am well aware," Cassius said grimly, still studying the flames in his hand as if they held the answers to all his questions.

"Did you ever *want* to meet your parents?"

"Of course I wanted to know about them."

“Knowing of them and actually meeting them are two very different things,” Cyrus replied.

“I think...” Cassius sighed. “I think I had these versions of them built up in my mind, of what I hoped they were like. I know it’s childish. I was an orphan, for fuck’s sake. It was far more likely they didn’t want me. But as a kid, I liked to pretend otherwise. And I’ve just held on to that idealistic image, you know? I was forced to grow up far faster than other children, but on the nights when I was by myself, I’d let myself imagine what it would have been like to have even one parent who cared. It was nice to pretend. If only for a little while.”

“You don’t have to explain this to me, Cass,” Cyrus said. “You do not need to justify your feelings and thoughts about this to me or anyone else for that matter.”

Cassius nodded, tipping his head back against the mast behind them. Cyrus pulled the flames from his palm, moving the fire to hover above them and casting a soft light in the night.

“It’s just the High Witch is...who she is. And maybe I’d be more inclined to give her a chance if I didn’t have these versions of them in my mind.”

“You are worried your father will be a disappointment like you have found your mother to be?”

Cassius huffed out a humorless laugh. “Maybe he has the same fear, huh? That I will be a disappointment. One would think I would be more worried about that than him being a disappointment to me.”

Ah. So this was the real issue finally coming to light.

“Anyone who finds you to be a disappointment is a fucking idiot,” Cyrus retorted. “You are a lethally trained assassin—”

“Exactly what every father hopes their child grows up to be,” Cassius said grimly.

“If anything, he’s going to be disappointed in your lack of manners. It’s rude to interrupt. Is that a Black Syndicate thing?”

Scarlett has the same issue.”

“Fucking prick,” Cassius muttered under his breath.

“Anyway,” Cyrus drawled. “Aside from the apparently unwanted assassin thing, you were a commander of the king’s armies at a very young age. You took on a Guardian role as a ten-year-old, and you are the Hand to one of the most powerful queens in the realm.” Cassius started to say something else, but Cyrus shot him a look, and Cass shut his mouth with a glare. “If those accomplishments aren’t enough, your loyalty knows no bounds. You rarely let your emotions cloud your judgment or get the better of you. You know how to both calm an irate and irrational bratty assassin and offer a queen sound advice. You willingly sacrificed your life for hers and innocent children. Those are not the attributes of an assassin but the characteristics of a noble Hand, Guardian, and friend. If someone is disappointed in you for *that*, then they can fuck all the way off. Just because you share blood with someone does not mean you are required to claim them as your father or mother. I would know.”

Cyrus suddenly realized the sky was beginning to lighten. It was nearly dawn, the night almost over, and another realization washed over him.

“On top of all that,” he said, “you are incredibly adept at reading people and knowing when they need a distraction without drawing attention to it.”

Cassius shrugged like it was nothing. “I needed to talk about my father. You needed a distraction. Seemed like a good trade-off.”

But it wasn’t nothing. Ever since his shadow had fallen over him, Cyrus hadn’t once thought of the sea. He hadn’t been plagued by memories of Merrick or Thia. He hadn’t found himself wishing for Solembra.

And for the second time, it was because of the male sitting next to him.



“You’re tensing before each hit,” Eliza chastised Callan.

“Probably because a Fae warrior is swinging a godsdamn sword at me,” Callan bit back.

“How else would you train?” Eliza retorted. “You need to stay loose. You react faster that way. This is basic stuff, princeling. Were you coddled in your training as well?”

Cyrus huffed a laugh from where he was seated on a step as Callan cursed the general under his breath. She was making him spar with Rayner, which was probably the right move. Rayner wouldn’t necessarily go easy on the mortal prince, but he would certainly be nicer than he would. Or Eliza. Or Sorin.

Rayner was definitely the best choice.

“Didn’t they warn you she was an ass when training?” Scarlett asked, sheathing her long knife at her side and moving to get a drink of water.

They had been training for the last hour, the sun trying its hardest to peek out of the clouds overhead on another dreary morning. They’d taken to sparring in rotation. There simply wasn’t enough room for all of them to spar at the same time. Scarlett had just finished facing off with Sawyer, who was making his way to his brother. Briar was speaking quietly with Sorin and Luan off to the side now. They’d go into meetings this afternoon, strategizing and planning. Or trying to plan. The fact of the matter was no one knew what to expect when they finally reached Avonleya.

He glanced over at Cassius, who was speaking with the Tyndell siblings. That was another thing Cyrus had spent time contemplating during those night watches. For the life of him, he could not figure out why the Lord had claimed them as his children. There had to be a reason. Nothing these Maraan

bastards did was without a reason. All of their movements were carefully orchestrated like a chess match, each move calculated and with purpose. He had spent hours going back and forth on strategy with Scarlett, trying to understand the Maraans and how they thought. More than once he'd had to take a break when Scarlett would elaborate on methods used to train her or the motives of Alaric. He understood now how she was this broken girl Sorin had brought back from the mortal lands. He understood to an extent how thoroughly Alaric had made sure he was rooted in her psyche. It was brilliant if Cyrus was being honest. Completely demented but psychotically brilliant in making sure he retained as much control over her as possible.

But that brilliance was rooted in desperation, and if Cyrus could figure out what exactly was driving him, they could exploit that to no end. Scarlett didn't know though. All they knew was that Alaric was running out of time before he faced the wrath of Achaz. The master had a Master, and his Master was getting pissed. They wanted whatever was being kept hidden in Avonleya, and if that was the motivation, then they would make damn sure they got there first.

The last three nights, though, he hadn't needed to keep his mind as busy. Cassius had taken to joining him for the night watch. It had become an unspoken thing between them, and he would appear at the foredeck shortly after Cyrus had changed out with whoever had been on watch before him. And that extra presence kept him grounded and the memories at bay. He would sleep later this evening for the few hours that were required of a Fae not using much magic.

"You sparring, Darling?" Scarlett asked, plopping down beside him.

He shrugged.

"I need to ask you something," she said after she took another drink of water.

"What's that?"

"It will be a hard question."

He turned to look at her then, unable to read her expression. “Color me intrigued, Darling.”

“And I need this conversation to stay between you and me,” she added, her eyes flicking to Sorin.

“Scarlett,” he started, his tone full of warning. “I will not be a part of keeping something from your twin flame and my prince and king.”

“I understand,” she replied. “Can you just hear me out first? Then if you still think the same, I will tell him myself. He kind of already knows anyway.”

“Kind of?” he asked skeptically.

She pushed out a harsh sigh. “If Thia had lived—”

She paused when Cyrus sucked in a sharp breath. This was not at all where he thought this conversation was going to go.

“If she had lived, would you have still sought revenge against those who had tried to take her life?”

“I would not have stopped burning every last one of them until even the ashes were nothing,” Cyrus said, his voice low and lethal. “Simply threatening her would have been enough of a reason for me to end their lives, let alone nearly succeeding in doing so.”

“What if Thia had asked you to spare them?”

“What?” He balked at the mere idea of that. The deaths he had bestowed upon the Night Children who had taken Thia from him had not been quick nor painless. It had been hours of slow burning, torturous and precise dagger placement, and making sure those fuckers had felt every last bit of it.

“If Thia had asked you not to seek that revenge on her behalf, would you have still gone through with it?”

“Why would she—” He stopped speaking when he realized why she had to be asking this. “Sorin has asked you not to kill Talwyn.”

Scarlett’s lips were pursed, her features tight, and she nodded once in confirmation.

Cyrus pushed out a long breath. “That is... a hard thing to ask of you.”

“It is. And you are the only one who could possibly understand.”

“If someone hurt you, Sorin would burn them from the inside out without question, let alone if they nearly succeeded in killing you.”

“That was my argument as well. He says we need to consider the fact that she is a queen. I assured him she would not be a queen at the end of this.” Her voice was as dark and lethal as his own had been moments ago.

“It is unfair of him to ask this of you, Scarlett,” Cyrus said. “But at the same time, he helped raise her. He may not get along with her anymore, but he still cares for her on some level.”

“I can’t not kill her, Cyrus,” Scarlett said softly. “She nearly took him from me. If I had not been able to bring him back, I don’t know what I would have done. I don’t know what I would have become. I don’t know that I would still be breathing.”

“I know, Scarlett. I understand.”

“I knew you would,” she said. “That’s why I wanted to ask you. Why you are the only one I can talk about this with. Cass will try to convince me to let this go, to not give into the rage. Eliza will encourage me to go after her. And Sorin...”

“Has asked you not to go after her.”

“He has said he understands my need for this, but he would like to continue to discuss it. But Cyrus, the idea of *not* doing anything...” She trailed off, staring out over the sea that so often called to her.

Cyrus wasn’t sure how to reply, and before he could formulate a response, Scarlett was bumping his leg with her knee. She jerked her chin, and Cyrus followed her gaze to see Sorin heading their way.

“Why do you two look thick as thieves?” Sorin asked when he came to a stop before them.

Scarlett gave him a small smile as she pushed back to her feet. “We sparring?”

He studied her for a moment before his eyes flicked to Cyrus. “What were you two discussing?”

Scarlett opened her mouth, but before she could respond, Cyrus said, “Thia.”

“Thia?” Sorin repeated, his eyes widening slightly.

“Yep,” Cyrus said, getting to his feet. He clapped Sorin on the shoulder. He caught Scarlett’s gaze. “We’ll talk more later.”

She nodded, her smile tightening. He’d let her decide how much of that conversation she wanted to share with Sorin. He needed time to process. He couldn’t imagine what he would do in her situation. Because she was right. Not doing anything was hardly an option. It went against every instinct of the twin flame bond. It was in her blood to protect her mate, just as it was in Sorin’s. And gods, for Sorin to even ask that of her?

“You look like you need to stab something.”

Cyrus found himself standing next to Cassius, unknowingly having made his way to him.

“Or burn things to the ground, but considering we’re on a boat...” Cyrus shrugged.

“The rest of us appreciate that,” Cassius replied. His good eye raked over him. “You have a weapon?”

Cyrus smirked, and a moment later, flames flared. He pulled his sword from the fire, twirling the hilt in his grasp.

“Neat trick,” Cassius said.

“If we could get that magic of yours to sing a little, you could do the same,” Cyrus replied, falling into step beside the commander as they made their way to one of the make-shift sparring rings.

“If you have any ideas on how to make that happen, let me know,” Cassius joked, getting into a ready stance.

“Oh, I have plenty of ideas,” Cyrus retorted. “None that you would likely find acceptable.”

The brow above his patch arched. “Do tell.”

Cyrus lunged, Cassius blocking with ease, and they leapt apart. “The only time it has ever manifested is when Scarlett was in danger.”

He caught Cassius’s feint left as the commander said, “Are you suggesting we put her in danger to see if my magic will manifest?”

“I said you likely wouldn’t find it acceptable.”

Cassius barked a laugh as they leapt apart again.

“But we can talk about it tonight,” Cyrus said, studying the commander’s movements to try to find a weakness. He really didn’t have any. He was as impeccably trained as any of them, and considering he had trained Scarlett, their matches usually ended in a draw unless Cyrus used his magic.

Fifteen minutes later, this match was no different. They were both breathing hard when they finally called it a draw, and Eliza had finally released Callan from her torment. They were gulping down water when Cyrus’s gaze fell on Sawyer, who was still with Briar, talking to Eliza and Rayner now.

“You should really practice those Traveling skills,” he said to Cassius.

Cassius slowly lowered his waterskin. “And go where?”

“You can Travel. You can go anywhere, but you should practice with it until mastered. You never know when you will need it,” Cyrus replied, replacing the cap on the waterskin. “And you should practice Traveling with others.” He reached over, clasping a hand onto the commander’s forearm. “Try Traveling to Briar’s ship.”

“Now?”

“Scarlett hasn’t drawn from you in days. Your reserves should be fully replenished. Maybe tapping into this power will call your other gifts forward.”

“I don’t think that’s how this works,” Cassius started.

“Just try,” Cyrus urged.

It took a few moments, and Cyrus could see the concentration and focus settle over Cassius. His brows scrunched together, the one dipping below his eye patch slightly, and then Cyrus felt the pull in his navel. A second later, they were standing on the deck of Briar’s personal ship.

“Perfect,” Cyrus said, dropping Cassius’s forearm and looking around. “This way.”

“What? Where are we going?” Cassius asked, falling into step beside him as Cyrus led him towards the back of the ship.

“You’ll see.”

“As much as Scarlett teases Sorin about this, I have to admit, Briar’s ship is grander than his,” Cassius said, taking in the ship as they moved.

Cyrus snorted. “Be sure and let Sorin know that.” He pushed open a door and found two more behind it on either side of a short corridor. “You’re up, Witch-Child. You feel those wards?”

“What?”

“The wards,” Cyrus hissed in impatience. “You feel them?”

“Of course I can feel them. The people who put them in place can feel them as well. They are meant to keep people out.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Cyrus said, waving a dismissive hand. “That’s where you come in. They’re meant to keep *Fae* out, but you are not Fae. I need in that room,” he added, pointing to the door on the right.

“Why?”

“We don’t have much time. Can you get me in or not?”

“Cyrus...”

“It’s nothing nefarious, you pious prick. I promise I’ll explain. But seriously, can you get me in or not?” Cyrus said, shoving down his impatience. Or trying to. Sawyer was still on the other ship, but it was only a matter of time before he came back here to get ready for his round of watching over the children. Nakoia and Neve were there now, and their watch would be ending soon.

Cassius sighed, stepping forward. He raised his hands as if he were feeling for physical barriers.

After a few minutes of silence, Cyrus hissed, “Can you do it or not?”

“Can you shut up long enough to stop breaking my concentration?” Cassius bit back. “I almost have them undone.”

Cyrus smirked to himself. It had been *years* since he’d been able to pull this off. Sawyer wasn’t going to figure it out for just as long. Finally, Cyrus felt the wards falling away, and another minute later, Cassius was pushing the door open.

Inside was a small cabin with the usual amenities bolted to the floor— bed, desk, armoire. Various papers, clothes, and other objects were scattered throughout. Cyrus moved about, lifting up pants and parchment.

“Who’s room is this?” Cassius asked, still standing in the doorway.

“Sawyer’s.”

“And why did we break into Sawyer’s room?”

“Help me look for a mirror.”

“A mirror?” Cassius repeated. “You had me disable wards and break into a room for a mirror?”

“Don’t worry. He has plenty more.” Cyrus moved to the desk, opening drawers and rifling through contents.

“Oh good,” Cassius said. “I was worried we were taking his last one.” Cyrus turned and smirked at the commander’s

snark. Cassius sighed. “What exactly does this mirror look like?”

“It’s small. Will fit in your palm. Round. Set into glass as blue as the sea.”

“And why do you want this mirror?”

“It’s super special to him,” Cyrus replied. “He wouldn’t have left it behind.”

“Great, but that didn’t answer my question.”

“The first time I met Sawyer he was a gods-awful prick. He was already Briar’s Second at that time. So I watched him. Figured out what he prized most, and he loves this fucking mirror,” Cyrus said.

“Are you telling me you’ve been waiting *decades* to steal this mirror? To get back at him for something that happened just as long ago?” Cassius asked incredulously, turning from rifling through the armoire to look at him over his shoulder.

“No,” Cyrus countered. “I’m looking to steal it *back*. It took me several years, but I finally managed to nick it from him one night while we were celebrating something or other at the House of Water. The others had gotten drunk, but I’d only pretended, knowing it was the perfect opportunity.”

“And what is so special about this mirror?”

“It’s imbued with his super special Water Gazing power,” Cyrus answered.

“He’s a Water Gazer? Like Briar?”

Cyrus nodded. It was a rare gift—like Wind Walking and Ash Riding—but Briar had it, and apparently it ran in the family. It allowed them to turn any body of water into a two-way mirror. But this particular mirror had somehow been imbued with Sawyer’s gift, much like the Water Fae could imbue weapons.

“I don’t know when he finally figured out I’d taken it, but it took him nearly three decades to get it back from me. Now it’s become a game of sorts,” Cyrus said, lifting the mattress and feeling along the bedding.

“How long has he had it back?”

“Six years.”

“And before that?”

“I’d had it for nine,” Cyrus answered. “I’ve lost count of how many times it’s gone back and forth.”

“This is ridiculous,” Cassius muttered, turning back to the armoire.

“Well, get used to it, Commander. You’re an accomplice now. Sawyer will have it out for you too.”

“I’m not technically a commander anymore,” Cassius said, stooping down to dig through the bottom of the armoire.

“No,” Cyrus agreed. “You’re Hand-to-the-Queen. Shall I start calling you Lord Hand?”

“Do you ever stop being a sarcastic bastard?”

“Not if I can help it, my Lord Hand,” Cyrus answered.

Cassius sighed loudly. “Here you go, you ass.”

Cyrus straightened just in time to catch the object Cassius tossed his direction. His hand closed around smooth sea glass, and Cyrus held the small mirror up before him, a wide grin forming. “Nicely done, Lord Hand”

“Shut up,” Cassius muttered. “Let’s get out of here before we’re caught.”

Cyrus slid the mirror into his pocket. “Of course, my Lord Hand. Whatever you say.”

“Stop calling me that, or I’m leaving you here,” Cassius replied, stepping through the door and back out into the daylight.

“Does it bother you to not be a commander anymore?” Cyrus asked, Cassius reaching over and gripping his arm.

“No. It bothers me that you’re calling me Lord Hand,” he retorted dryly.

Cyrus snickered as he felt the pull of Traveling. Cassius had taken them to the front of their own ship.

“You really don’t mind the commander thing?” Cyrus asked again.

“Why would I?”

He slipped his hands in his pockets, fiddling with the mirror. “It was your title. Part of your identity. You were fairly high ranking.”

“As you said, I am now Hand to the one of the most powerful queens on the continent. I’d say that’s a little higher ranking,” Cassius replied with a half-grin.

“I suppose it is.”

“The company is a little better too. I really only cared for Drake and Tava, and they’re here with us. So I guess it’s a win-win.”

“You didn’t have anyone in the Black Syndicate?”

“Aside from the Wraiths? No. Nuri and Juliette had their own personal guards, but they were killed as punishment for letting them get caught the night Juliette died,” Cassius said. “They were never as close as Scarlett and I were. Probably the only two in the Fellowship Nuri and Juliette didn’t fuck aside from me.”

Cyrus huffed a laugh. After a moment of content silence, he asked, “Want to practice Traveling some more?”

“You have more shit to steal?” Cassius asked, turning and arching a brow.

“No. I was more so hoping if you started using your magic, the rest of it might manifest. Unless you want to try out my first idea...”

Cassius shook his head. “Scarlett gets into enough trouble without us putting her in danger on purpose. Give her a day or two, and she’ll do that herself.”

CHAPTER 10

CALLAN

Callan grunted as he was knocked onto the deck of the ship for what had to be the fiftieth time that morning.

And they'd only been at this for an hour.

He'd lost count of how routine this had become since he'd asked Eliza to train him two weeks ago. How every night he went to bed sore and exhausted, even with the salves Cassius gave him to soothe the aches. Still, he was lucky to sleep even a few hours, and he always woke to nightmares of his parents' blood pooling across the floor. Of Finn and Sloan falling as they tried to protect him, his sister, the royal family.

"Better," Eliza said, reaching down and yanking him to his feet.

"Better?" Callan repeated. "How was that any different from before? I still ended up on the ground."

"Yes, but you blocked the first attack before the second one took you down. That's progress," Eliza said, kicking his feet apart a little more.

He'd known asking her to train him would be difficult, but good gods. Fae training was a completely different kind of torture. It was no wonder his father's high force was so elite. If Sorin had been this demanding and brutal for the three years he'd been there...

But it hadn't been his father's order to train them up. Not really. It had been the suggestion of Lord Tyndell, the High Commander of the kingdom's armies. The Lord had whispered and gently nudged him in this direction for months until one

day, his father had “come up” with the idea of building a stronger force to protect against the unending threat of the Fae. All for this. All to eventually get Mikale Lairwood on the throne.

Now all the mortal kingdoms were ruled by Maraan Lords who all answered to Alaric, a Maraan Prince and the son of Deimas, who all the mortals believed had “saved” them from the Fae who were trying to enslave them. How had history gotten it so wrong?

A fist to his jaw had him stumbling backwards, and he found an angry fire general in his face. The fist wasn’t surprising. It was that it came from her. She had refused to spar with him, making him face off against Rayner or Cyrus.

“If you’re going to waste my time, your Majesty, you get a fist in that perfect face of yours. Focus,” she snapped before stepping back and motioning at Rayner. Callan heard Cyrus snicker from where he was sparring with Cassius, but he didn’t dare look at him and risk another blow. Cassius would give him some ointment he’d been taught to make that would heal his bruises within the day when they were done with this training session. Until then, he’d spar with an aching jaw because the general hadn’t held back on that hit.

“Focus on your opponent,” Eliza barked. “Nothing else. Watch his eyes, his feet. Study his movements.”

Rayner lunged. Callan managed to block his sword, but his feet were again swept out from under him, and he was again on his back.

“Again,” Eliza ordered as Rayner tugged him to his feet this time.

“He moves too fast,” Callan grumbled. “I can’t keep track of everything like I do with a mortal.”

“You need to be able to anticipate his moves, Callan. We’re all faster and stronger than you. We’re always going to be, and this is without our magic. You need to find other advantages and weaknesses and capitalize on them.”

“How am I supposed to fight against magic?” Callan asked, frustration overcoming him. He’d never expected this to be easy, not in the slightest, but he hadn’t expected to be this godsdamn terrible either. He hadn’t expected to get his ass handed to him this easily every morning. How the hell did Scarlett do this before she could access her magic?

As if she’d heard his thoughts, the Wraith herself materialized in front of him. She plucked the sword from his grip, tossing it to her husband, who caught it with ease. Then she shoved two long knives into his hands. “You’re trying too hard, Callan.”

“Trying too hard?” he echoed in disbelief. “Am I supposed to not be trying?”

“You’re so focused, you’re not letting it come naturally,” she returned, beginning to circle him. She’d pulled more long knives sheathed down her back because the female never went anywhere without a minimum number of weapons on her body.

“What is natural about fighting a Fae warrior?” he scoffed, watching her as she moved, sliding her feet along the boards of the deck.

“Fighting to survive,” she replied simply.

And then she leapt at him. He had no warning. She’d given no hint she was actually going to attack him. He’d thought she was giving him a pep talk.

He blocked with one of the knives on instinct, and when she spun and brought her other one up, he blocked that one too. She leapt back, a small smile on her lips as she began moving again. “You were trained as a prince, Callan. You were trained for tradition, not actual war. You were never expected to ever step foot on a battlefield.”

She attacked again, and this time, one of her blades cut a shallow gash along his chest.

“Stop thinking,” she ordered, coming at him again, not giving him any chance at a reprieve.

He ducked as she swung for him, and she smiled as she whirled and swept at his legs. He found himself on his back again when her foot connected with the side of his knee, but she didn't stop like the others had. She leapt for him, and he barely managed to roll out of the way in time.

"Get up, Callan!" Drake shouted from a sideline somewhere.

And he was scrambling to his feet, blocking a blade that was swinging for him. She came for him again and again, and he didn't have time to prepare. He didn't have time to study her movements. He didn't have to think, only to react. Another blade sliced across his torso, and he snarled in frustration.

"Use it, Callan," Scarlett demanded. "Let that fury out."

He gritted his teeth, blocking her next attack and shoving her back.

Her grin widened, eyes dancing with excitement, and he realized she may have been trained to take life, but she *enjoyed* this part of it. The training. The sparring. Getting knocked down and forcing herself to get back up.

He lunged at her this time. She blocked easily enough, dancing out of the way.

"Yes, Callan!" she encouraged.

She came at him again, slipping around him and landing a kick to his lower back that sent him to his knees. Drake and Cassius were on either side of him, but it was Eliza who spoke to him.

"Fight, Callan," the general ordered. "Fight her. Now."

"I can't fight her," he panted.

"You can," Eliza insisted, stepping back as Scarlett came for him again.

Was she ever going to stop? Eliza had him practicing technique and form. She pushed him, but not like this.

"He can't fight me," Scarlett taunted, circling him once more. "Never could. I was always too much for him to

handle.”

He scoffed, rotating to keep her in his line of sight.

She winked at him.

Godsdamn winked in the middle of a sparring match, as if this were nothing for her.

“If you can’t fight me, Callan, how are you going to fight for your people?”

“Stop,” he gritted out, blocking her thrust.

“No,” she replied calmly. “Tell me, Callan. How will you protect your people from those who took your parents from you?”

“*Stop*,” he snarled again, lunging at her this time. She deflected easily.

“They took them from you, Callan. Right in front of you,” she continued. “In front of Eva. Your sister had to see her mother and father murdered right in front of her eyes.”

“Enough,” he spat, both knives swinging for her in a move Eliza had made him practice for an hour straight one day. He’d never gotten the hang of it, even after continuing to practice it every fucking day.

But he got it today. It was perfectly executed, as if his body knew exactly what to do, and one of Scarlett’s knives went skittering across the deck.

She wasn’t even phased. She flipped away from his next attack, his blades barely grazing her tunic.

“They took Finn and Sloan, Callan,” she continued, somehow popping up behind him and landing a clean kick to his back that sent him to the deck of the ship yet again.

He rolled as she moved to jump on top of him, his feet kicking out and launching her backwards. He knew she could have caught herself with her magic, and was even vaguely aware of Cyrus holding Sorin back with a hand on his shoulder.

Scarlett was climbing back to her feet as he got back to his. She pulled a dagger from her boot. “They will come for you, Callan. They will come for you. Your people.”

She lunged for him, landing hits again and again, and she never let him breathe. Never let him catch his breath or collect himself. Just kept coming for him. But he was beginning to hold his own. Sure, she wasn’t using her magic, and maybe she wasn’t coming at him with everything she had, but she certainly wasn’t going easy on him. Years of training he’d never had to use slowly began waking up, and the more she pushed him, the more he began to react on instinct, letting muscle memory take over.

Now she had him back on the ground, straddling his waist, somehow keeping him from flipping her off of him. She leaned closer, a manic gleam in her eyes. “What will you do when they come for Tava?” she whispered. “What will you do when it is Mikale who has the blade to her throat instead of Veda? What will you do when he does to her what he did to me?”

He let out a bellow of rage at the mere idea, and before he knew what he was doing, he was flinging Scarlett off of him. She rolled to her back beside him. He heard her land with a curse. But before he could capitalize on his advantage, she was punching him in the side, and he barked a curse of his own.

“Good, Callan,” she panted from beside him. “Good.” She dropped her hands to her side, the one long knife she still held slipping from her fingers with a clatter.

“Are we finally done?” he gasped.

“Yes,” she agreed. “You finally tapped into that rage you’ve been harboring.”

“And that’s a good thing?” he asked between breaths. He saw figures moving towards them in his periphery, but he was breathing too hard to care at this point.

“You will need that rage, Callan. When you’re fighting, when your survival depends on it, you use everything you have. The light and the dark. Use it all. Despite what they told

you, you were built for this. You were not built to sit in a castle but to defend the people outside it. A king who fights for *all* his people, not just those who sit in the castle with him.”

There was a hand in his face as Drake reached down to pull him to his feet.

Sorin was doing the same for Scarlett, but she was smirking up at him as if she hadn't just sparred for an extended period of time. She opened her mouth, clearly about to say something snarky, when her face leached of color. Sorin was suddenly yanking her to her feet and into his side, his sword drawn in the next breath.

Callan glanced around at the rest of the Fae. Eliza had gone rigid, pulling a sword from flames. Rayner appeared a moment later directly in front of them, and Cyrus was stepping in front of Cassius and Drake. Auberon and Azrael were suddenly there. Callan had no idea where they'd come from or why, for that matter, and a moment later, Briar and Sawyer appeared as well.

“Scarlett, my dear,” came a male's voice. “How wonderful to see you again.”

“You can all see him, right?” Scarlett murmured. Callan knew the Lord had a strange power that allowed him to alter a person's reality, but it was still bizarre to him that she was questioning such a thing.

“We can see him,” Sorin replied. “We all felt the warning from the wards.”

Lord Tyndell stood across the deck from them. Eyes that were nearly black skimmed over Callan and Drake before settling on Cassius. “Commander Redding,” he greeted with a nod of his head.

“Do not speak to him,” Scarlett spat, pushing Sorin aside and stepping forward.

The Lord's head tilted, a corner of his mouth tilting up slightly. “Isn't the Guardian supposed to be protecting you? Not the other way around?”

“Shut up,” Scarlett snarled, shadows slithering up her body and clinging to her like armor. Exactly how she’d looked when Callan had summoned her to deal with Veda and save Tava. Cyrus moved with Cassius as the commander moved to Scarlett’s side.

“Father?”

They all turned to look at Drake, his features a mask of shock as he looked back at the man. Eliza had moved into position before him.

“Hello, Drake,” Lord Tyndell replied. Callan could swear that there was fondness in his tone, which didn’t make any sense.

Shadows were suddenly surrounding him, herding him closer to Drake until they were both enclosed by them. He felt them slide around his body, as if creating a secondary shield, before additional smoke and ashes were added by the Fae in front of him.

“Shut up, and stay out of their heads,” Scarlett snarled, taking another step towards the Lord.

Lord Tyndall held up a hand. “I am only here to talk at the moment, Scarlett. Think of me as the messenger.”

The wickedness that filled Scarlett’s face had Callan flashing back to a dark night under a full moon as he’d watched her stand over a female, slicing into her body with malice.

“Careful, *Balam*,” she purred. “I’ve become rather adept at sending messages of my own.”

The Lord’s features tightened. “I am aware, Scarlett.”

She moved forward again, shadows writhing around her until those damn shadow panthers Callan had often glimpsed were prowling in front of her. Sorin and Cyrus lazily flicked their hands and what Callan could only describe as vines of pure flames appeared in their hands. The same flames flared around Eliza’s sword. Sawyer had long daggers of ice in his hands, and Briar had vortexes of water swirling in the air

beside him. Azrael and Auberon stood stoically, arms crossed, as they surveyed the Lord before them.

“Did he get my latest one?” the queen asked, her head tilting to the side. There was a burst of white flames, and when it receded, she was holding a sword. “Because I am more than ready to return his *messenger* as a message of my own.”

“I am not here to fight with any of you,” the Lord replied with utter calm. “I came to offer an exchange and to see my children.”

“Consider your offer rejected. As for your *children*, every one of us here knows they are not your children.”

The Lord’s features went cold, his calm façade faltering. “They may not be my blood, but I raised them. I cared for them more than their father ever would have.”

Before anyone could say anything to that, Azrael said tightly, “The sky.”

Cyrus and Cassius stayed fixed on the Lord, but everyone else looked to the west, where a figure was flying towards them. As it drew closer, Callan realized it was a male with wings, like he had seen Veda sprout from her back. It had to be seraph.

Then he lurched forward at the same time Drake let out a cry of rage.

“Tava!” Drake bellowed.

Because that was his sister the seraph had with him. One muscled arm was wrapped around her torso, the other had a hand clamped to her mouth, muffling her screams.

The entire ship rocked when the seraph landed on the main deck beside Lord Tyndell, and it was the Lord who was snarling at the winged male.

“What the fuck are you doing with her?” he demanded. “She is not who you were sent to retrieve.”

“I know what my orders were,” the seraph replied gruffly. “This one shoved the child out of the way. One of the water Fae was able to shield the girl before I could grab her, so I

grabbed this one instead. I had to take out one of the Fae to get away with her, but I figured she would be better than nothing.”

No one dared to move.

“That is my daughter,” Lord Tyndell snarled again. “Remove your hand from her mouth.”

The seraph did as ordered, and Tava immediately looked at them all. “Neve has Eva, but Nakoa...” She trailed off, tears streaming down her face. “I’m so sorry, Briar.”

Callan glanced at the Water Fae who had gone still as death.

“Azrael take Briar and Sawyer to the ship with the children. Check on Nakoa. Go now,” Scarlett ordered, turning back to Lord Tyndell. “Tell me again how you are not here to fight with us.”

“This was not supposed to happen. It is an unfortunate turn of events, but before your associates depart...”

Everyone stilled once more.

“You should know we have seraphs on every one of your ships. They are not there to hurt anyone, but will if they feel threatened as Haniel obviously did,” Lord Tyndell went on.

“Haniel, is it?” Briar asked, his tone icy and vicious.

The seraph stiffened, jerking his head in a single nod.

“If my general is dead, I will drown you on dry land while simultaneously slowly freezing every drop of blood in your body.”

The seraph’s lips curled into a daring, cruel smile. “I would like to see you try, Water Prince.”

Briar’s lips peeled back, and Callan was sure the prince was about to lunge at him, but the seraph still held Tava.

“Let her go,” Drake said from behind Eliza. “If you care for us the way you claim to, then demand that he release her, Father.”

Lord Tyndell's gaze snapped to Drake before they slowly moved back to Tava. "Haniel, give her to me."

"That is *not* what I said," Drake snarled. "I said release her."

"I am not going to hurt her," Lord Tyndell returned calmly. "But I do need to have a conversation with Scarlett. Several of them, it appears. I am certain she will be more agreeable while Tava is by my side."

"Then speak," the queen spat.

Lord Tyndell's eyes drifted over her before moving over her shoulder. "How interested he will be to learn your twin flame lives. We will need to adjust our plans to accommodate that fascinating discovery."

"Fuck," Callan heard Scarlett mutter. She was silent for a moment, and he could only assume she and Sorin were having some sort of silent conversation using their bond.

"You look identical to your mother," Lord Tyndell was saying, his dark eyes back on Tava, and there was no mistaking what Callan saw in the Lord's eyes now. That was... sorrow. Sorrow and grief.

"What is his message?" Scarlett asked sharply, Sorin stepping to her side once more.

King and Queen.

Shadows and the flames in which they thrived.

"I suppose my wording was incorrect," Lord Tyndell conceded, tearing his eyes from Tava to refocus on Scarlett. When Scarlett didn't respond, he continued. "I am the offer before the message, but considering who is somehow still at your side, I will extend the offer to you both. Come with me back to Baylorin willingly, along with the Solgard heirs, and we will allow the rest of your company to continue their passage west without interference."

"And when I refuse the offer?" Scarlett asked, twirling the hilt of her sword.

"Then he will deliver his message."

Scarlett stilled. “Personally?”

Lord Tyndell nodded. “He will come for you himself and send these ships to the bottom of the Edria.”

“His little power to crush a heart will not accomplish such a thing,” Scarlett countered.

“No,” Lord Tyndell agreed. “But the seraphs that he will bring with him can.”

“We will see them coming from miles off,” Sorin cut in. “We will take them from the sky before they can get close enough to attack even one.”

“And yet we have a seraph on every ship already,” Lord Tyndell countered.

“One or two is easy enough, but the number needed to take us *all* down?” Scarlett countered. “That will not be so easily accomplished.”

“We have more than elemental magic, my dear.”

Shadows rose up behind her, the panthers in front of her splitting into several wolves, while blinding white flames raced around them in a large circle. “So do I,” she said coldly.

“But will it be enough to save all the innocents you have with you?” Lord Tyndell asked. “Before you answer, I will give you an hour to debate your decision. Not as a courtesy to you, but to my children, who I am hoping will return with you.”

His hand fell from Tava’s arm, and she was instantly racing across the deck, not to Callan, but to Drake. The shields around them seemed to recognize her, letting her pass through, and Drake was enveloping her in his arms.

“Are you all right?” he murmured, clutching her to his chest. Callan could see her visibly shaking.

“They were trying to get Eva,” she replied, her voice trembling as much as her body. “I couldn’t let them take her.”

“I know, Tava,” Drake murmured again, tucking her head under his chin.

“Why won’t he leave us alone?” she whispered. “If we’re not his, what does he want with us?”

“I wish I knew,” her brother replied.

Eva.

They were here for him and his sister and Scarlett. And now they knew Sorin lived. An ace up their sleeve now lost.

And yet all he could seem to focus on was that Tava had gone to her brother instead of him.



“Our priorities are the four main ships that house us and the children,” Sorin was saying from where he stood at the head of the long table in the dining room at the back of the ship. “If we lose the others, we’ll make do.”

“Two of those other ships have all of our supplies, Sorin,” Cyrus argued. “We can’t just say the hell with them.”

“I understand that, but if we are forced to choose, we choose the people.”

“Obviously,” Cyrus drawled, “but that doesn’t mean we simply abandon the other ships with us. We already took the bare minimum necessary. If we lose those supply ships, the rest of this passage will be taxing on everyone.”

Scarlett sat silently beside her husband, head propped on a fist as she listened and watched everything taking place around her. She’d hardly spoken since Lord Tyndell had vanished into the air, taking the seraph with him. Azrael had immediately taken Briar and Sawyer to the ship where Eva was, and the Earth Prince had promised to bring Eva back with him when they returned.

Callan was seated on a bench down the table, his leg bouncing incessantly beneath it as he waited to lay eyes on his

sister.

“We make those the second priority,” Sorin was saying. “But our people and those children... We all come out of this alive.”

“How do we prepare for their magic?” Auberon asked. He sat across from Callan, beside Rayner. “These seraphs could have any gift, possibly not even a power from this world. How do we counter that?”

“You prepare for any and every possibility,” Scarlett said, speaking suddenly. The hand she’d been resting her chin on fell to the arm of her chair. “If you have not been trained to expect the unexpected, then you will sit this fight out.”

“What?” Eliza balked. “We will need every weapon possible, Scarlett.”

Scarlett was shaking her head. “Those not prepared to fight this way will be liabilities, and you know it, Eliza. Our focus and attention will be split. We are already at several disadvantages. We cannot afford more.”

“She makes a valid point,” Rayner supplied.

“Those who are not trained to fight this way will be placed with the children to guard them,” Scarlett continued. “We take down—”

“Hold on,” Callan interrupted, holding her stare when Scarlett’s eyes connected with his. “Are you telling me you will not allow some of us to fight?”

“Yes,” she said, no room for argument in her tone.

But he was damn well going to argue about this. He’d just lost his family and his best friends to these Lords, and she expected him to stay out of this battle?

Not an option.

“No,” he snarled. “I am going to fight, Scarlett.”

“Callan, I do not have the time to debate this with you. You are not prepared for this type of battle. Some day you will be, but that day is not today.”

“I am a king as much as you are a queen,” Callan seethed. “You do not get to make these decisions for me.”

Scarlett pushed to her feet, bracing her hands on the table as she leaned towards him. “Tell me, *your Majesty*, when you die out there today—because you will. My warriors will understand that your safety is not the priority today—So when you die out there today and leave your kingdom to Eva, who would you like to rule in your stead until she comes of age?”

“You are a bitch,” Callan sneered.

A growl emanated from Sorin, but Scarlett raised a hand to stay him.

“I am when I need to be,” she agreed. “And right now, I need you to hear me, Callan. I cannot have you up there. You are not ready for this, but you know who you are ready to protect? Those children. Who will be hidden below decks. I need you there, with Drake and Tava, ready to protect those children at any cost. Because if they get through us, you will be their last hope.”

The entire room fell silent, and Callan swallowed thickly.

“The choice is indeed yours,” Scarlett continued. “I am not your queen, but I would assume you desire to protect those you cherish most.” Her eyes flicked to Tava, who was seated across the table from him, Drake’s arm draped around her protectively. “They are your only subjects on these ships. They are the only ones who are your responsibility.”

“I disagree,” Callan argued. “Those children are from the Black Syndicate. Part of *my* kingdom. They are as much my responsibility as they are yours.” Scarlett’s head fell forward, and then she was turning slightly, looking at Sorin who was obviously speaking down their bond. “Don’t do that,” Callan snapped. “Don’t speak about me when I’m sitting right here in front of you.”

“We are wasting time,” Eliza cut in. “We need to be strategizing. If Callan wants to risk his life and be up there fighting with us, it is not our responsibility to stop him.”

Scarlett's lips pressed together in a tight line, her eyes flickering to Tava again, before she muttered, "Fine."

Sorin's hand came to her back, but no tension left her body. She was stiff, and Callan could tell she didn't like the way this had gone. He understood. He really did. She viewed *him* as her responsibility. She had claimed him as one of her own. She would die for him, kill for him, just as she had for Tava. Asking this of her went against everything she was.

But how could she ask him to do that same thing? How could she ask him to hide when those children were as much his subjects as they were hers?

Azrael appeared suddenly, Briar and Sawyer with him, Eva clinging to Sawyer.

"Callan!" his sister cried, Sawyer setting her onto the floor. She came running to him, and Callan immediately twisted to pull her into his lap. Her eyes were wide, and she buried her face in his chest. How much more trauma would she have to endure? He lifted his gaze, finding Scarlett's stare fixed on Eva, and Callan knew she was thinking the same thing.

"Nakoa?" Sorin was asking. Azrael had stalked to the table and taken a seat, but Briar and Sawyer were still rooted to where they'd appeared.

Sawyer shook his head as Briar said, "Neve reported he fell protecting Eva and Tava. We didn't have time to get more than that. We need to prepare." He paused for a moment before he added, "But Haniel is mine."

Callan swallowed thickly. The Water Commander had died defending his sister and Tava.

"She stayed there with the children. Two other Fae have joined her," Briar continued. "But we will need more there."

"Were all the children accounted for?" Scarlett asked.

"They were frightened and hiding," Sawyer supplied. "It is impossible to say for sure."

"I will go there," Tava said, looking to Scarlett. "I have been spending my days with them. I will help keep them as

calm as possible. Keep them busy during...everything.”

“I will go with her,” Drake said quickly.

Scarlett nodded. Her eyes scanned those around her, skipping over Callan. “I do not know you all well enough to say who should be stationed where. Make the plans,” she said, deferring to Sorin as she sank back to the bench. Her head tipped back, eyes closing.

Sorin, Briar, and the others fell into battle talks and strategy. Eva was quiet in his lap, clinging to him, and Callan knew Scarlett was right. He couldn’t leave her while this was all going on. He needed to be with her, defending the ones he cared for. Eva. Tava. Those children that were from his lands. He pushed his pride down, preparing to tell them he would go to the ship with Drake and Tava.

Sorin was handing out assignments. “We will send Rayner with you two. He will aid Neve and those already there, but they will be above deck. We cannot spare anyone to be below deck with you and Drake unless Callan chooses to be stationed there with you.”

“I will be fine with Drake if Callan chooses to be elsewhere,” Tava replied. “It has long been just Drake and me. This will be no different.”

Callan’s gaze snapped to her. She was poised, her hands in her lap, but her eyes were on Sorin, chin high. He knew her though. He’d watched her work, watched her use words as her weapons rather than daggers. She excelled at speaking in double meanings, and this was no different. She was giving him an out. She was offering him this path to end the courting that had never really started.

And a part of him wanted to take it.

She had gone to Drake instead of him when their father had released her, and Callan didn’t blame her. He’d hardly seen her these past weeks, and when he did see her, they only spoke of Eva. She would ask if he needed anything, and he would send her away, saying he was fine. He was so lost in his own grief and trauma, trying to process it all, and she was

giving him that time and space, offering to take this additional expectation off of him.

Would she wait for him? It was wrong to ask her to. And what if Scarlett was right? What if he came out so different at the end of all this that he and Tava simply wouldn't work in the end? He didn't want to drag her down while he navigated this darkness. It wasn't fair to her. It wasn't fair to either of them.

"Well, your Majesty," Scarlett said, drawing him from his thoughts. "Where do you desire to be stationed?"

He swallowed thickly, glancing at Tava from the corner of his eye. No emotion showed on her features. She was the portrait of a demure lady, the role she had been raised to play. Submit to the men in her life. Bow to her king. Be seen, not heard.

"Make your choice, Callan," Scarlett said when he didn't answer. "We need to get people into positions."

He looked down at Eva in his lap, her light brown hair braided down her back. Tava must have done that.

"With her," he finally answered. "I will stay with and protect her."

CHAPTER II

SCARLETT

Scarlett stood on the main deck of their ship, Sorin and Cassius at her sides. Rayner, Sawyer, Eliza and Neve were guarding the children and the Baylorin royals. Briar and Auberon were on Briar's main ship, along with a few other warriors from Briar's Court. They'd strategically placed the rest of their small forces on the supply ships. They'd had to be crafty with their maneuvers, not sure where exactly the seraphs Lord Tyndell had mentioned were at on the ships. Maybe they didn't truly have them stationed on every ship. Maybe the Lord had been bluffing. It was entirely possible, but they had to treat his words as the threat they were intended to be.

Cyrus had stayed on their ship with them, standing at Cassius's side, and Azrael was here too. Mainly because Scarlett didn't trust the Earth Prince not to try to return to his queen's side by whatever means necessary. She'd been contemplating how to handle the prince this last week. If she was going to bring him into Avonleya with them, she had to be certain he wouldn't try to pass information back to Talwyn. She had to be sure he was on their side. Time and again she kept coming back to the Blood Bond, but she couldn't bring herself to demand that of him.

Which left her back at the beginning with no viable options.

But now wasn't the time to think about this. She'd gotten Callan and Eva below deck, despite Callan being a royal pain in her ass. She'd spoken the truth in that short meeting. He

would be a liability. Instead of being solely focused on killing Alaric when he showed his face, her attention would be divided if Callan had stayed above. She'd threatened that she'd instruct her warriors not to make him a priority, but it had been a lie. Everyone knew that, even if no one had called her out on it, but it had gotten her point across. It's not that the mortals were useless, but they weren't prepared to fight magic-wielders.

Now they stood and waited. For what? She didn't know. They couldn't possibly think that a legion of seraphs could just descend on them and win. Alaric was too smart for that.

But how had they found them?

That had been the single question that had been running through her mind over and over. How had they been able to pinpoint their exact location in the entirety of the Edria Sea? They had been sailing for weeks. They could have literally been anywhere west of the continent. So how had they done it?

"You should fill your reserves," Sorin said quietly into her ear.

"You need your magic as much as I need mine," she countered. "I will not draw from you right before battle."

"Yours are depleted from training this morning. I have some to spare."

"No."

"Scarlett."

She tipped her head up to look at him. "Silver eyes, Sorin," she said, pointing to them. "My reserves are fine."

"Fine is not good enough to face Alaric," he retorted.

Scarlett rolled her eyes. "You're lucky I'm even letting you stand beside me right now. I should have made you stay below with Callan and Drake. If Lord Tyndell hadn't already seen you, you would be." A growl emanated from him, and she patted his chest mockingly. "Glad to see you're back to being an animal."

“If you think you could keep me from your side, you are delusional,” Sorin snarled.

“If you think I’m going to draw power from you and weaken you before battle, *you* are delusional,” she snapped back. “I will not even entertain the idea of doing something that will increase the likelihood of having to repeat the experience of that throne room, so do not ask it of me again.”

Sorin’s golden eyes softened. *Scarlett*, came a soft caress down the bond. *We are going to need to work through this, my love.*

And we will, but not today.

He leaned forward, brushing a soft kiss to her lips.

Cyrus cleared his throat loudly. “You two do realize we are about to be fighting for our lives, right?”

Scarlett pulled back with a sigh. “Yes, Darling.”

“Just making sure.”

She flipped him her middle finger as the air shimmered across the deck a moment before Lord Tyndell stepped from the air, the seraph from before at his side. He scanned the deck behind her, his features falling for a moment before hardening.

“My children have decided not to come home, I see,” he said gruffly.

“They have,” Scarlett replied.

“And our offer of exchange is being rejected as well? Since Callan and Eva are also absent?”

“How observant of you.”

There was a small tilt of lips as the Lord said, “I do so miss your dinner conversation.”

“Where is Alaric with his message?”

“I came first. To see if his presence was necessary.”

“Even if I had agreed, he could still drag his ass here and collect me himself,” she replied. Her shadow armor was tight against her body atop a Witchsuit Hazel had given to her.

More shadows swirled along her feet, seeming as restless as she was. She hated the waiting, the anticipation of fighting. She was ready to get on with it if it had to happen.

“Always so blood-thirsty, my pet.”

The cruel voice sent a shiver up her spine and had Sorin snarling again, drawing his swords from his back simultaneously.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Scarlett demanded when Mikale appeared beside Lord Tyndell. A huge seraph appeared with him. He was taller than anyone on the ship, his grey wings stretched out behind him. His black hair was tied in a knot on top of his head, and green eyes glared back at her.

“This is her?” the seraph asked, his gaze never leaving hers.

“It is,” Mikale answered.

“Seems a little rude that you know who I am, but I do not know who you are,” Scarlett drawled, her shadows writhing and beginning to take shape behind her. She crossed her arms, her head cocking to the side as she studied the seraph.

“You will become well acquainted with him soon enough, my pet,” Mikale said, his hands sliding into his pockets.

She lifted a hand with a dark grin, white flames flaring to life in her palm. “Does he like fire as much as his kin?”

“More so,” the seraph returned, his wings flaring brightly as fire wound around them with what had to be his own fire magic.

“Fuck,” she heard Azrael breathe.

“That’s inconvenient,” Cyrus muttered.

“Not the word I would use,” Cassius murmured.

Scarlett clenched her fist, extinguishing her flames and shoving down her frustration. “I’m sure my blades will cut your wings from your body all the same.”

“You will never get close enough with one to find out,” the seraph returned stoically.

“Why are we just standing around talking? What is the message?” Sorin asked tightly.

“It had to be retrieved first,” Lord Tyndell replied.

“What do you mean ‘retrieved?’” Scarlett asked.

But a moment later, her question was answered as objects appeared in the sky, dropping to the decks of the ship with sickening thumps. Sorin was reaching for her, but she shoved his hands away.

“What the fuck?” Cyrus muttered, stepping forward.

Cassius and Sorin were closing in around her, while Azrael moved forward with Cyrus to try to figure out what exactly they were looking at.

“Move, you overbearing asses,” she growled, trying to shove by Cass and Sorin, but they were solid walls of muscle. There was no getting by them without tapping into her magic, and she needed to save that.

Cassius was spinning to face her a moment later, his hands gripping her shoulders. “Seastar...” He looked utterly helpless as he met her gaze. “When we tell you what the message is, you need to keep control of yourself. Do you understand?”

“Why wouldn’t I keep control of myself?”

“Because those are heads and body parts, Scarlett,” Sorin answered grimly.

“What?” Her face scrunched at what he’d said, certain she hadn’t heard him correctly. “Of what?”

“Of people, Scarlett. Of...Fae. From our Courts.”

Her entire body went ice cold. Then hot. Then cold again. Her shadows thickened, swirling around her, flames and ice whirling among them.

“Move.”

Her voice was as dark as her magic, and Sorin and Cassius both stepped aside. Mikale was smirking at her. Lord Tyndell looked sorrowful, as if he was upset it had come to this. The seraph looked bored, his arms crossed, watching her warily.

She looked down at the body parts scattered around the deck of the ship. You wouldn't be able to tell if the limbs were Fae simply by looking at them. Arms. Legs. Feet. Hands.

But the heads? They all had the arched ears of the Fae.

How Sorin knew they were from their Courts, she didn't know. Maybe he'd just assumed. She didn't care. Alaric had killed innocent people to send her a message.

And then Alaric stepped from the air in front of her.

"You are dead," she said, her tone the embodiment of darkness itself.

"You killed my people; I killed yours. You wanted a war, my Wraith. I gave you one," he returned, his voice deathly calm.

She lunged for him, and he leapt for the sky, black wings ripping from his back. Scarlett's shadows were already forming a dragon behind her but not fast enough. She threw fire, freezing it as she had done in the Night Child territory. Leaping from blocks of frozen flames, she went higher and higher, racing after him until her shadow dragon bellowed its own fury. She knew where it was without having to look, and she leapt to its back as it soared past her, a stream of fire erupting from its mouth.

Alaric spun in the air so that he faced her, and when her shadow dragon spewed fire again, it hit a shield of something Scarlett could not see.

"Those were innocent people!" she screamed at him.

"You have been killing people since you were twelve," he retorted, black wings flapping lazily to keep him aloft. "Or has it become so second nature to you that you have forgotten your first kill?"

"They were not innocent people," she retorted, blades of ice forming in her hands.

"How would you know?" Alaric asked. "You were told what you needed to hear."

“What?” Scarlett balked, rearing back and nearly losing her balance on the dragon. “You lie.”

“I suppose you will never really know, will you?” he sneered.

Her shadows were snaking over his shield, trying to find a way in until she realized they weren't moving along his shield at all.

The shield was absorbing them.

She wrenched them back to herself, strengthening the dragon that was hundreds of feet above the ships and the sea below. Alaric's lips tilted up slowly as she realized what his power was.

He couldn't only crush hearts with his fist. He could draw the life force from a person. Not from her apparently—or he would have surely done so already—but he could draw her magic from her, slowly drain it like the draining Mark he'd placed on her had done. He would absorb every bit of power she threw at him until she had nothing left.

“You are my weapon,” Alaric said coldly. “I created you. I will have you back one way or another.”

He nodded at something over her shoulder, and she looked behind her to find the seraph from the ship hovering. She'd been so focused on Alaric, so blinded by rage, she hadn't heard him follow them to the sky. She threw one of her ice daggers at him, but his fire magic melted it before it made contact. Turning back, she tried to keep track of Alaric as well, but he was gone. He must have Traveled. It wasn't safe to assume anything, but she didn't expect him to stay and do his own dirty work. That was clearly what this seraph was for.

She swung her shadow dragon around to face-off with the seraph, discarding the ice dagger and pulling a knife from her belt, sending white flames winding around the blade. She cocked it back to throw at him.

“They instructed me not to kill you,” he told her ominously, “but I will hurt you if required to incapacitate you.”

“He really didn’t prepare you for me at all, did he?” Scarlett simpered, sending the knife flying, aiming for his chest.

He shielded with flames of his own, but she’d expected that. She’d sent her white flames hurling for him directly behind the knife. White flames met with orange fire, and the result of those two powers colliding threw her backward.

Her shadow dragon was quick to react, swooping under her and catching her, but she heard the muffled cries from below, her name being yelled. No one could reach her here. No one else could get into the sky like she could. Not without some wind magic.

She turned back to find Alaric hovering in the air again, and she cursed. She would not win like this. Not with Alaric’s newly revealed power.

“Come home, Scarlett.” His tone was clipped and edgy. “Come home, and your friends live.”

“I’ve stopped believing anything you have to say,” she spat back.

Alaric’s features darkened, the sharp lines of cheekbones going taut. “So be it.”

Then he was gone, but only for the time it took Scarlett to blink. He appeared again to her left.

With a dozen seraphs.

And again to her right with the same.

And then above Briar’s ship with more.

And above the ship with the children.

Traveling with that many people had to be draining him. How much longer could he keep this up? And how did the Maraans replenish their gifts for that matter?

It dawned on her then. The Fae. They had to use the Fae the same way the Avonleyans did. There had been times when she and Nuri and Juliette had been ordered not to kill Fae targets, but to bring them back to the Fellowship for

questioning. Scarlett had always assumed someone else had interrogated, tortured, and then killed them.

But she'd seen some held in the cells beneath the Fellowship. She'd never thought anything of it, believing Alaric had a good reason for keeping them alive. He'd always given her an explanation for why her targets had to die. The only time he hadn't was when he'd wanted her to kill Sorin to earn the ending of her stay at the Tyndell Manor.

And it had all been lies. Just like everything else this male had fed her.

He appeared in front of her again, anger and victory glinting in his dark eyes. He stretched out a hand, drawing her shadows to him, and she felt her shadow dragon drop slightly. How the hell was he doing that?

A cruel smirk appeared on his face. "You think you have me all figured out, don't you, Death's Maiden? I still have cards up my sleeve. I am just as much under your skin as you are under mine. You cannot win. You will not beat me, but you can save those you care for."

"You can drain my power?" she asked, trying to stall for time while she figured out what to do.

"I can," he answered. "I can draw it to me and strengthen my own. The stronger the magic I draw from, the stronger I become."

He'd been feeding from *her*, she realized. He'd kept her locked up in the Fellowship for more than one reason.

With a wicked grin of her own, she replied, "Keep your cards close, Alaric. I'm coming for them all."

Then she sucked every bit of her magic into herself and plummeted to the sea below.

She heard Alaric's bellowed yell of fury and panic, her stomach in her throat, as she free-fell. She looked up to find five seraphs diving for her, their feathered wings pinned back. They were much bigger than her, gaining on her quickly.

She twisted so she was facing them, her back to the waves below, and sent white flames in their direction. Two shielded with flames, but the others veered off to avoid their feathers catching alight. She twisted back, finding the sea below much closer than she'd anticipated, and quickly grappled for her water magic. It wasn't seamless enough yet though. She had been practicing fighting with her gifts, using her magic, but her water magic had always been her weakest power. Not that she was any less powerful with it, but she leaned on her Avonleyan gifts too heavily. They came more naturally to her, and she wasn't as proficient with the Fae gifts that had been transferred to her.

She heard Cassius yelling her name and felt Sorin's panic down the bond. She had to block him out to put all of her focus into her magic. Flipping again, she threw out her hands to try to draw up some water from the sea, but she was still fifty feet above it. Her shadow dragon would never form in time to catch her at this rate. She could hear the seraphs drawing closer again.

And then water was surrounding her. An orb of water in midair, suspending her there. The outer layer of water froze solid, creating a shield, and she looked down to find Briar's eyes fixed on her. He gestured towards his mouth and nose, and she knew he was telling her to make an air pocket. Because she could breathe underwater, like he'd always said she could, and a moment later, she was gasping down deep breaths to calm her racing heart. She was still stuck in midair, the seraphs hovering around her aquatic safety, but then the fire seraphs began throwing flames of orange and yellow at the ice-encased bubble. She glanced back down at Briar, his features tight as he worked to hold the shield, and she sent her own water magic to work with his, reinforcing the outer layer of ice.

Until black flames were shooting past her.

She whirled inside that bubble of water to find Cassius. In the air. Dark leathery wings protruding from his back like... Ranvir's.

Those were dragon wings.

She lurched forward, her hands coming up to the icy wall of the bubble. Her gaze connected with his good eye. But it wasn't chocolate-brown. It was a deep amber-red color, his pupil a vertical slit, and it was glowing like her eyes did when her reserves were full.

More black flames sprung up around him, and he threw them at the nearest seraph. And then the seraph was gone, nothing but grey ashes on the wind drifting down to the sea.

“Fall back!”

Scarlett looked up to find another seraph hovering above them all. He had brown wings and black hair knotted on top of his head. His grey eyes were fixed on Cassius with hatred. Cass was reaching for her with one hand, motioning to her to lower her shield. His other hand was still raised, black flames at his fingertips, warning off the seraphs.

None of them made a move for her as she pulled back her magic and felt Briar's slowly peeling away too. The Water Prince kept a sheet of ice at the base, giving her some place to stand, and she inched towards Cassius. The moment her fingers touched his outstretched hand, he was jerking her into him, an arm looping tightly around her waist. She felt Briar's magic disappear, and then she was hanging in mid-air, her arms tight around her Guardian's neck.

There was utter chaos all around them. The sounds of battle rang out below, but their attention was fixed on the five seraphs before them. Cassius's wings beat harder to keep them aloft. She didn't know how long he'd be able to keep hold of his gifts. This was the first time he'd ever used them fully, and she did not know how he was controlling them right now. The first time she'd accessed her gifts fully, it had been a disaster.

“How is one of Arius's guards here?” the lead seraph demanded. The remaining four who had been trying to get to her were in formation behind him, their wings an array of colors.

“He is not full-blooded.”

Alaric's angry snarl cut through the din, and he appeared next to the seraph. His lip curled back as he took her and Cassius in.

"Put your flames out," she said to Cassius. "Now."

He didn't argue. It took him a few moments to do it, but the black flames at his fingertips disappeared.

"Then who is his father?" the seraph demanded again.

"I do not know, but we will figure it out. There are not many options. Sargon is very particular," Alaric answered. His gaze lingered on Cassius a moment longer before he met her eyes again. "Looks like we both had cards revealed today, my Wraith."

"The only thing I am of yours is your death," she snarled back. She felt Cassius's arm flex around her waist. He had to be getting tired. No one could maintain this much magic their first time accessing it fully. He didn't know how to draw from his power wells properly. Hell, she could scarcely manage that most days, and she'd been training with her gifts for months now.

Alaric seemed to almost appreciate the statement she'd made, a look of pride crossing his features. "You are exactly as I trained you up to be, Scarlett Monrho. Ruthless. Vindictive. *A weapon*. I will see you at home." He turned to the seraph beside him. "I want her brought to me. The rest can go to the bottom of the sea."

The seraph nodded, a warrior following orders, and then Alaric Traveled. Scarlett knew he wouldn't be back. Not this time.

The moment he was gone, she released her shadows, willing them to pool quickly into her dragon. The seraphs above were already attacking again, but none came for them.

"Let go of your magic, Cass," she said. "My shadows will catch us."

"Gladly," he muttered, and a second later she was falling again, only to land on shadows a few moments later. They

were directly above Briar's ship, and she dove for the ship's deck.

She leapt from the shadows, landing on her feet next to the Water Prince. Cassius landed beside them, immediately sinking to a knee and trying to catch his breath.

"You need blood," she said, dropping to a crouch beside him, a hand coming to his back. She signaled to a Fae across the ship who began to make his way over. It was slow going though. He had to stop every few feet to defend against attacks.

"I can wait for Cyrus," Cassius said.

She turned back to him. The wings were gone, but his eye was still glowing, the pupil still vertical.

"You're still using your magic, Cass," she insisted. "You need to stop, and you need blood now."

"I will wait for Cyrus," he repeated.

"Cassius! He is on another ship. We are in the middle of a battle—"

"Then get him over here," Cassius snapped at her, and she drew back.

Cass was never like this. Ever. He was level-headed and logical. He only got like this when it involved her.

"I've never fed from another Fae," Cassius grumbled. "Just...get Cyrus."

Scarlett studied him for a fraction of a second longer, about to argue further, but then Briar was beside them.

"I hate to interrupt," the Water Prince said tightly, two long spears of ice appearing in his hands. "But we have incoming, and my reserves are not at their fullest at the moment. I have brought Sawyer from the other ship to help."

Scarlett looked up to find several seraphs descending on their ship.

Can you get Cyrus to Briar's ship? she sent down the bond. Cassius needs blood.

She glanced across the water to the ship Sorin and Cyrus were on, a unit of seraphs descending on them as well.

We're coming.

That was all she got back, and she knew it could be a bit before they managed to find a way to make it over here.

Cassius pushed to his feet, pulling his sword from his side. He met her eyes and jerked his chin, telling her to fall into position. They'd fought together hundreds of times, trained for hours together. It was like fighting with the Wraiths at her side.

She didn't question him again, and she pivoted so they were back-to-back.

"Sawyer and I will bring them down," Briar was saying as he began to make his way to one side of the ship. Sawyer was on the opposite side, seeming to wait for something. "You two can take care of them from there."

"How will you bring—"

But her words were cut off as the Water Fae stretched their arms out over the sides of the ship. Sea water shot straight into the air, and as Scarlett watched them work, she realized she *really* needed to practice with her water magic more.

Briar sent ropes of water to the winged men, wrapping around necks, ankles, and wrists, pulling them to the decks of the ships. Some seraphs seemed to know the attack was coming and dodged at the last minute, but three of the seraphs weren't so lucky. As they hit the deck, Scarlett wasted no time using her magic to set wings ablaze and sending shadows down throats, while Cassius severed heads and made sure the seraphs stayed incapacitated long enough for her to finish them with flames.

Instead of using ropes of water, Sawyer sent his water magic pouring down on a seraph like a tidal wave, water-logging the feathers of its wings. The seraph plummeted from the sky. If they didn't hit the deck, Scarlett froze them solid before they hit the water. They bobbed there, and Scarlett

almost laughed at the image of floating seraph cubes. That would hold them until they could finish them off later.

White flames leapt from her hand to another set of feathered wings as Cassius plunged his sword through its chest then severed its head. Cass was pale and breathing hard. So was she, but not like him.

Sorin! Where is Cyrus?

We're trying, Love. He sounded out of breath even down the bond, and Scarlett spared a glance at his ship again. They were holding their own fine enough, and the number of seraphs above Briar's ships was down to three.

She clamped a hand onto Cassius and pulled him through the air, Traveling to Sorin's side. Her boots hit the deck, and she was promptly sending white flames at a seraph diving for her twin flame. Sorin whirled, and relief flashed through his golden eyes when they landed on her. Her chest loosened some at seeing him whole and unharmed.

"Cyrus!" she cried, looking around wildly for him. Cassius had immediately sunk to his knees when they'd landed on the ship. She threw up a shield of shadows to keep them somewhat protected from the chaos.

A moment later, the Fire Second was at their side. He didn't say a word, just dropped down beside Cassius. "Gods, Cass," she heard him mutter, slicing a dagger down his forearm. "We're not bothering with a cup. Drink." He brought his arm to Cassius's lips, and Cass didn't argue with him. Just latched his mouth to his arm and drank deeply. Cyrus lifted his other hand as if he was going to cup Cassius's head before he dropped it to his shoulder instead.

"You should fill your reserves too," Sorin said, pulling her attention away from the males before her. He'd snatched up Cyrus's bow and was sending an arrow flying at an incoming seraph.

"She most certainly should not," Cyrus snapped, glaring up at the Fire Prince.

"Keep out of it, Cyrus," Sorin shot back.

“What do I need to know?” Scarlett asked, sending a pack of shadow wolves to take care of a seraph trying to get through her shield. Her reserves were depleted, and there were still at least a dozen seraphs in the sky, not to mention the ones on the ships. How many were on the other ships? The children?

As if in answer to that question, Rayner appeared amid the ashes of a seraph left burning on the ship to their right.

And he looked pissed.

Cyrus and Sorin both went preternaturally still as they took in the Ash Rider.

“We need you,” Rayner gritted out, and Scarlett’s stomach dropped to her toes. “Not all the children were accounted for when we got there. Several were missing, including Tula.”

No. That little girl had endured enough trauma in her life, just like Eva. She had survived too much. If she was...

A sharp pain along her palm had her sucking in a breath, and Sorin placed her hand over the Mark on his arm, mixing their blood. She sighed deeply at feeling her magic wells fill, and she leaned against Sorin. Heat from his fire magic flooded her, but her eyes stayed on Rayner.

“They are being held until you come and trade yourself for their freedom,” he said. His grey eyes were veiled and stormy, his features sharp and terrifying.

She was already Traveling to the ship Callan and Tava were on, Sorin in tow as she filled as much of her reserves as she could. The ship they appeared on was as chaotic as the others. Drake and Callan were above deck, guarding the door to get below deck. Neve was guarding them and somehow Auberon was here too.

Eliza was currently engaged with two seraphs, her flames and swords moving seamlessly in sync with each other. She sent her flames wrapping around the neck of one of the seraphs, while simultaneously blocking an attack from the other one. The one with her flames reached up and snuffed her fire out, and Scarlett had to assume he had some type of wind magic, able to suck the air from the flames. He moved to

attack her from behind, but before Scarlett could open her mouth to yell a warning, Eliza was pulling a second sword from flames and plunging it through the man's gut, flames still wreathed around the blade.

Well then.

She was going to make Eliza teach her that move tomorrow.

She tried to pull her hand from Sorin's arm, but he held onto her wrist, keeping it there.

"Sorin, you need to keep some magic. I cannot drain you right now," she said in disbelief. This was exactly why she had argued against him becoming her Source in the first place. She couldn't imagine having a Source bond with anyone else, but in the heat of battle, it was rather stupid to be weakening him. Especially when he had recently died.

Gods! He had recently *died*.

She yanked her hand away from his arm at the thought. He needed his magic as much as she did. He gave her a hard look when he met her eyes, and she knew he was feeling her panic and guilt down the bond. She scrambled, trying to block it, but there was too much going on around her. She couldn't focus the way she needed to in order to block the bond. He was already gripping her chin, forcing her to hold his stare.

"Stop. Now. Do not feel guilty for taking what you need from me," he ordered in a low tone.

And somehow, even in the midst of battle, she could feel everything they were. He calmed her soul. His touch made her breathe easier. His words settled into her bones.

"Where are they?" he asked, looking over her shoulder.

She turned her head, Sorin's fingers drifting along her jaw as she did. Rayner was behind them, and he jerked his chin towards the back of the ship. The three of them began stalking that way, and Rayner filled them in on what he knew.

"We have held this ship well. Briar summoned Sawyer a bit ago. I assume that was to aid you," he said, glancing down

at Scarlett.

She nodded. “Alaric said some interesting things we need to discuss when this is over.”

“What else?” Sorin asked as they ran up a set of steps.

“Drake and Callan came up when they realized some children were missing. They haven’t been able to get back below. Tava is still down there with the others.”

“How many do they have?” Scarlett asked.

“From what I was able to gather, three.”

“I don’t understand. Haven’t you seen them?”

“No.”

“Then how—”

But she stopped speaking when Sorin’s voice echoed in her mind.

He tortured a seraph for that information. Likely several until he found out what he wanted to know. Rayner is not in control right now.

Scarlett nodded subtly in understanding. She had been told Rayner rarely lost control, but that when he did, he left carnage in his wake. She could see the truth in that now.

“The last one told me to come to the back of this ship. That we would find them there,” Rayner was saying.

She nodded, and they slowed to cautiously climb the last set of stairs. When they reached the top, they went still. There were at least a dozen seraphs there, wings flared out behind them. The two on the end each had a child, and the one in the very center held Tula. The other two children were crying, tears streaming down their faces. Both were older than Tula by a couple of years, but Tula’s face was set with determination. There were no tear trails down her face despite her entire body shaking. There were scratches and bruises on her arms and legs that suggested she had fought. This tiny girl had fought against her captors.

Her baby blue eyes skimmed over them before settling on Rayner. It was only then that Scarlett saw the girl's lower lip wobble slightly.

The two children on the ends were suddenly shoved towards them, Scarlett and Sorin each catching one in their arms. One seraph stepped forward, his white wings splattered with dirt and blood.

“We released those two in good faith,” he said. “The last one remains with us until we return you and receive word from our Lord to release her.”

“Not an option,” Scarlett bit back, shoving the child she held behind her. She heard Sorin murmuring softly to them, but couldn't pay attention to what he was saying.

“Then she dies and we retrieve you by force,” the seraph said with a shrug.

At those words, a small whimper came from Tula's lips.

“Brave girl.” Scarlett's gaze slid to Rayner, but he was looking intently at Tula. “Do you remember what I told you?”

Scarlett looked back at the little girl, who was nodding slightly. Her tiny body was trembling violently now, and two tears slipped down her face. But her eyes stayed fixed on Rayner. She may have been terrified, but that was pure trust shining there.

“Good. I need you to do exactly what I showed you and close your eyes. Keep them closed until I say. Are you ready, brave girl?”

“Rayner—” Scarlett started, reaching out to stop him from whatever he was about to do. They couldn't risk Tula getting hurt. They couldn't—

But a moment later, her eyes went wide as she watched Rayner unleash hell.

Tula had reached up to the necklace she and Sorin had made when they had traded for the amulet she had worn. The amulet had been one of the Avonleyan keys, but the child had been reluctant to give it up. So Sorin had suggested a trade.

They had created a beautiful necklace combining their gifts, but apparently Rayner had added his own magic to the creation, because there was the smallest trace of smoke wafting from it now.

And that was all the Ash Rider needed.

In the blink of an eye, Rayner had moved from Scarlett's side. He reappeared in front of the seraph to the left of Tula, his blade slicing through his throat. Blood sprayed. But before a drop of it had hit the deck of the ship, Rayner had disappeared again, appearing behind the seraph to the right of Tula.

He didn't use a blade this time.

The seraph's eyes flew wide. He opened his mouth, but all that came out of it was a dribble of blood. The seraph dropped to the deck, and Rayner stood there, the seraph's heart in one hand and another organ in the other. The seraph's liver maybe? Scarlett had no idea. He released the organs, and they turned to ashes that slowly fluttered down to rest over the seraph's still body.

Rayner was already moving through the smoke and ashes again. He was moving so fast, Scarlett couldn't track him. She could swear he was some place else every time she blinked as two more seraphs fell to the ground. In her next breath, the head of the seraph holding Tula was falling from his neck as two blades cut clean through it. The seraph's body went lax, his hands releasing the child. Rayner sheathed the blades down his back before tossing the headless body to the side and scooping Tula into his arms.

The little girl wrapped her tiny arms tight around his neck, burying her face into his shoulder. She still had her eyes squeezed tightly shut, and Rayner was murmuring into her ear. Blood was spattered across his face, and red coated his hands.

Because he had ripped out organs.

Good gods.

Rayner had reached through a man's back and ripped vital organs from his body.

His strange eyes were swirling faster than Scarlett had ever seen as they settled onto her. “Rain hell on these bastards, your Majesty.”

His words snapped her from her awe, because she was seriously amazed by what she had just seen. She was going to need to know exactly what the fuck had just happened, but first, she had her own hell to unleash.

Pulling every last bit of her magic to the surface, she sent shadow snakes slithering across the deck. The remaining seraphs tried to take flight, but she’d already encased their feet in ice, freezing them to the deck. Their wings strained, trying to break them free, but her snakes were winding up their legs, around their torsos. They slithered higher and higher until they reached their mouths. Sorin’s power coiled around hers, making their wings smolder, and when they opened their mouths to scream, her shadow snakes entered. As they slithered down their throats, she turned them to white flames.

Their screams didn’t last long.

An arm slipped around her waist, and she leaned into Sorin. Rayner had disappeared at some point with Tula and the other two children, leading them away from the carnage.

Cassius and Cyrus appeared at their sides, Cassius reaching to tip her chin up. “Are you all right?”

She nodded. “We got here in time.”

Cassius nodded, his eye sweeping over her. It was still a vertical pupil, but it no longer glowed. The amber-red color was dull and muddied, almost back to its usual brown color.

“We checked on the other ships before we came here,” Cyrus was saying to Sorin. “Luan was taking care of the last seraph on our ship. Briar and Sawyer have their ship secured. Eliza and Neve had three left here. Auberon was helping them. We found no signs of them anywhere else. Cassius pressed stronger wards out around the ships once his magic had recovered enough to do so. When he’s fully replenished, we will look through books and find ways to strengthen them even more.”

“How many did we lose?” Scarlett asked, trying to catch her breath. She was bent forward, hands on her knees. Sorin was running his hand up and down her spine.

There was a tense silence before Cyrus cleared his throat slightly. “Other than Nakoa, we do not know for sure. But we did lose some. Normally Nakoa reported that.”

Scarlett squeezed her eyes closed, breathing deep. The Water Commander had not been her biggest fan. In fact, he’d flat out told her he didn’t think she should be leading their Courts, that she hadn’t proven herself to be worthy of such a position. But he’d been loyal to his Court and loyal to Briar. He’d been an excellent warrior and leader. She might not have been close to the Fae, but her Inner Court had been.

“Let’s go talk to Briar. Figure out what we need to do from here,” she said, straightening. Sorin’s hand fell to the small of her back.

“Can you Travel us?” Sorin asked Cassius. “She is too drained.”

Cassius nodded, reaching for her hand, but Cyrus was giving Sorin a dark look. She briefly wondered about that, but there were far more pressing matters that needed to be dealt with now. Because as she looked at her Guardian once again, she realized how Alaric and Balam had likely tracked them down.

CHAPTER 12

SORIN

They trudged into the small dining room on his ship. The smell of sweat and blood filled the air as bodies crammed onto benches around one of the tables. Cassius and Cyrus were sitting close together, Cyrus filling a cup with more blood for Cassius.

Briar and Sawyer looked spent. All the Fae did really. The amount of magic they'd had to use when fighting the seraphs was extraordinary. They would never hold out against an entire army of them, and the grim looks on everyone's faces said they were all thinking the same thing.

Luan had taken up the task of going from ship to ship and assessing casualties, Eliza overseeing him because none of them fully trusted the Earth Prince. Auberon and Neve were helping clean up the ships. The priority was the ship with the children. They wanted it cleaned and fit for them to come back topside as soon as possible. The mortals were tending to them until that was possible. They hadn't seen Rayner since he'd left with Tula and the other two children, but he'd tapped into the greatest parts of his magic. Using it the way he did would have quickly depleted his reserves. He was surely resting somewhere, unable to move among smoke and ashes right now. Using that particular set of his gifts and using so much of it? That would take weeks to refill. He understood why he did it, but weeks without his ability to move among the ashes was not ideal at the moment.

But as exhausted as they all undoubtedly were, Scarlett looked like she was about to keel over. She was pale, her lips

nearly bloodless. The various bruises and cuts she'd received during the fight were taking far too long to begin healing, and those were dull, icy-blue eyes staring down at the table.

She was pulling daggers strapped to various parts of her body and tossing them unceremoniously onto the table before her. And while she looked utterly worn out, she also had her brow furrowed and lips slightly pursed. He knew that look. It was one he both loved and hated. She was trying to work something out. The question was how long would it be before she let them in to help her figure it out.

She stumbled slightly as she swung a leg over the bench to sit, and that was his tipping point. Sorin was reaching for his own dagger to access the Source Mark and refill at least some of her gifts, but before the blade made contact with his skin, his Second opened his godsdamned mouth.

“Sorin couldn't create a fire portal today,” Cyrus announced to the room. “That's why we couldn't get to you when Cassius needed blood.”

Sorin felt every set of eyes in the room land on him, but he was glaring at Cyrus in irritation.

“She needed to know before you give her more of your magic,” he said, not looking remotely sorry about bringing this up now.

Scarlett had stilled, a foot on either side of the bench. She braced her hands on the table, her head hanging down. Much of her hair had come loose from her plait, and it hung around her face, hiding her features from view. He didn't need to see her face to know what she was feeling though. He could feel all of it.

“As concerning as that is, it is not the most pressing matter that needs to be addressed,” she said. Even her voice sounded weak. She couldn't seriously expect him to just let her sit here when he could help her.

You need this right now, he sent down the bond, moving to her side. He reached over and moved some of her hair back, tucking it behind her arched ear.

You let me draw from you when there is something wrong, she shot back. *I am furious with you. I am just too tired to properly fight with you at the moment.*

She swung her other leg over the bench, sinking down onto it, and her attention shifted to Cyrus and Cassius. She seemed to study them for a long moment before saying, “You good, Cass?”

Cassius’s grip tightened around the cup he’d been drinking from, but it was Cyrus who answered her.

“You cannot possibly be suggesting you want to draw from him right now?” he all but spat, glaring at the queen.

“First of all, I do not decide when I draw from him,” Scarlett retorted. “The Guardian Bond does that all on its own.”

Cyrus made a noise of disbelief. “So I didn’t see you draining him of every bit of power with your shadows on a beach weeks ago? Because that certainly looked like you were controlling it, Darling.”

“That was different,” she argued, guilt flickering across her face. “I wasn’t in any more control of it then than I am now.”

“I beg to differ on that. Your shadows latched onto him and stopped anyone from interfering,” Cyrus said, a finger pointing at her in accusation.

Scarlett opened her mouth as if to argue further, but then she snapped it shut. Again she seemed to study the two males, before she said, “If the Guardian Bond was going to draw from him, it would have done so already. It seems to know when it would not be ideal to do so.”

She rested an elbow on the table, propping her chin in her hand, while her fingers on her other hand drummed along the wooden surface. After an extended silence, Sorin asked, “What did Alaric say to you?”

She waved a hand in dismissal of his question. “Before we even discuss that, I need Cassius to remove his shirt and pants. So when he feels recovered enough to do so...”

The entire room went still. Sorin glanced at Cyrus and Cassius before looking to Briar and Sawyer. All held the same confusion and concern he felt.

“Why?” Cassius was the one to finally voice the question.

She drummed her fingers on the table again. “Haven’t any of you wondered how they managed to find our exact location in the Edria Sea?”

“And you think I told them?” Cassius asked, looking both hurt and furious at the accusation.

“Yes. Albeit unknowingly,” she answered.

Cyrus was rubbing his brow between his thumb and forefinger. “Explain.”

“I think there is some kind of Mark on Cassius,” she said. “Like the draining Mark Alaric put on me, only this one is a locating Mark.”

“You think they are tracking us through a Mark on me?” Cassius asked, already reaching to pull his tunic off.

“I do,” Scarlett said, pushing back to her feet. Sorin could feel the effort that took her, and he gritted his teeth at her refusal to draw from him right now. He didn’t have much to give, but what he had, he would gladly give over to her to ease any bit of that strain.

Cassius stood as well, stepping over the bench. He tossed his tunic to Cyrus as Scarlett approached. She gently turned Cass, her eyes searching over every inch of his chest and back. Her hand came up, a finger tracing between his shoulder-blades. “How did it feel?”

“I honestly do not remember, Scarlett,” he replied, his voice raspy with the weariness they were all feeling.

“Are they under your skin?” she asked, her entire hand brushing along his spine now.

“I do not know how it works, Seastar,” Cassius ground out. “I think this tracking Mark is more pressing, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “But we do need to figure out your power.”

“We will,” he returned, unfastening the button on his pants. He shucked them off, tossing them to Cyrus as well.

“Here,” Scarlett said immediately, her finger tracing along the side of his upper thigh.

“I do not see anything,” Sorin said, stepping forward.

“Me either,” Cyrus chimed in. “I’ve never seen any Marks on him actually.”

“Have you seen him in such little clothing on more than this occasion?” Scarlett asked nonchalantly, crouching down to study the invisible Mark.

“No,” Cyrus barked. “I mean once. Back at the Black Halls. He had a compress on his leg when I was in his rooms.” He mumbled the last part of that sentence, his eyes darting to the sea outside the window.

A faint smile was pulling on Scarlett’s lips. “You wouldn’t be able to see it, Darling. Just as you cannot see his Guardian Mark.”

“But I cannot see it either,” Sorin argued.

“You are not *his* Source,” she said, pushing back to her feet. She swayed again, and Cassius was steadying her before Sorin could reach out his arm to do the same. “Even if I were not his Ward though, I could likely see it. I am a full-blooded Avonleyan. This is an Avonleyan Mark, not a Fae one.”

“But you can get rid of it?” Cassius asked, looking down at her. “Like I did with that draining Mark?”

“I think so,” she said hesitantly. “But not right now. I keep that book in a pocket between realms, and I don’t have enough magic left to summon it right now.”

“So we are stuck with the Maraans knowing exactly where we are?” Sawyer asked.

“For now,” Scarlett answered. “We can let them think we don’t know about it. I have...some ideas forming.”

“We all need to rest,” Sorin said, reaching out a hand for her. “No one is of any use being too tired to function.”

“One more thing before we do that,” she said, moving from Cassius’s side to his. “Has Rayner ever accessed fire?”

A crease formed between his brows, and he frowned slightly. “No. You know his gifts are smoke and ashes.”

“That allows him to rip out organs with his bare hands?”

“I told you it was a rare gift, Scarlett.”

“Rare like Traveling among the Fae?”

“Yes, rare like...” He paused, catching on to what she was insinuating. “Rayner is not Avonleyan.”

“Hmm,” was all she hummed, her eyes getting that faraway look again. “I think you’re wrong.”

He leaned down, flicking her nose gently. “I’m rarely wrong, Princess.”

“We will see,” was her only answer before they all departed for their own rooms to rest.



Sorin had a tray of food in his hands when he came through the door of their cabin. He had woken a few hours ago after sleeping for nearly an entire day. Scarlett had still been sleeping, but that was to be expected. Her wells were deeper than his. He wasn’t sure how long she would sleep, but he wanted to have food waiting for her when she did wake.

To say it surprised him to find her sitting up against the headboard was an understatement. Her knees were bent, forearms resting atop them. She was looking down at her hands, and her silver hair was pulled back and tied at her nape. Her eyes lifted to his when he came in, and he immediately set the tray on the desk, moving to the bed.

“I did not expect you to be awake yet,” he said, reaching out to stroke her cheek. “How are you feeling?”

“How could you not tell me about something being wrong with your magic?”

He stilled, his fingertips still on her jaw. “I would have told you, Scarlett. It simply was not the most important topic at the moment.”

“Sorin, you let me draw from you when something is wrong. That is not okay.”

“That is my duty as your Source, Scarlett,” he said, pulling his hand back.

“And your duty as my husband and twin flame is to not leave me alone in the darkness,” she shot back. “Which is exactly what is going to happen if you do shit like that!”

He could feel her trepidation down the bond. An intense clawing at his chest that made it hard to inhale. So much panic and fear. So much manic hysteria.

“When we are fighting for our lives, Scarlett, *you* are my priority. No one and nothing else. If I have to give you every last bit of my magic to ensure you can access your gifts, then that is what I will do.”

“Not if you become the sacrifice! Then it is not what you will do!” she cried.

Her eyes were wide, and terror stared back at him. He reached out, pulling her into his chest. She was trembling, her entire body shaking so much he could feel it in his bones. He said nothing, just held her against him, and she gripped the front of his tunic as if he would disappear if she let it go.

He didn't know how to help her through this. He had helped her face her darkness and walk through shadows. He had helped her find the stars and create new ones when none could be found. But how could he promise this would never happen again when they were on the brink of war? He couldn't. None of them could. But he also couldn't have her paralyzed by fear in the middle of a battle either.

“I was never supposed to become this dependent on someone,” she murmured into his neck after several minutes of silence.

“You depended on your sisters. You depend on Cassius,” he said gently, pulling the tie from her hair. His fingers wound into the strands, cupping the back of her head.

“I depended on my sisters, yes, but we were also trained extensively on what to do if the others fell on a mission,” she replied, face still buried in his skin. “And Cassius...” She let out a long sigh. “I didn’t think I would survive losing him when I thought he was going to die a few months ago. But I would have, Sorin.” She pulled back, her hands coming up to frame his face. “I would have survived that hell because you would have been with me. The only thing I will not survive is a world without you in it.” She paused again, looking over his shoulder and out the window. He let her think, let her gather her thoughts, continuing to finger comb her long strands. “I kind of hate you for it,” she finally whispered.

His fingers paused for a moment before they tightened around her hair, pulling her head back gently so he could look into her face. “You hate me for what, Love?”

“For getting me to let you in. For letting me depend on you,” she said softly, her fingers sliding along the couple days’ worth of stubble he hadn’t had a chance to take care of yet. “I was stronger without a weakness.”

“You may have felt stronger, but you were hardly living, Scarlett. You were not stronger alone,” he replied. “You were dying, little-by-little, until there would have been nothing left. You were a shell of a person when I met you. I would rather have weaknesses and stars to fight for than just be walking catatonically through this life and into the next.”

“I don’t know how to do this, Sorin. I have felt what losing you feels like. It haunts me whether I am sleeping or awake. Even sitting here right now, your skin beneath my fingers, feeling your chest rise and fall, hearing your heart beating... I can still feel the mania of losing you just beneath the surface,

waiting for a chance to slip free and pull me under once more.”

He brought his brow to hers, and she shifted in his lap so that she straddled his hips. “I told you once before I will not let you drown, Scarlett. As long as I am on this side of the Veil, I will keep that promise.”

“The problem isn’t when you are on this side of the Veil, Sorin. It is when you are on the other. On the side where I cannot reach you.”

He brought his lips to hers then, kissing her softly and letting their twin flame bond soothe her soul in a way words never could. She could tease him all day about being an overprotective male, but ever since they’d had this bond Anointed, protecting her at any cost had been as imperative as breathing. He would have given his life for her before, but now, doing whatever was necessary to keep her safe was as natural as breathing. It was why he could give her his magic without a second thought for his own well-being. It was what drove him to comfort her, despite not knowing how to ease the anxiety he could still feel rolling off of her.

He pulled back from her mouth, not wanting to get lost in her until they’d finished this conversation. “Be honest, Scarlett. How are your power reserves?”

She bit her lip, her blue eyes hardening some as she scowled at him. “I am not drawing from you right now, Sorin. Not until we’ve talked about this more.”

“I understand that, but I still need to know. So I know what we are dealing with.”

“How are *your* power reserves?” she countered.

He held out a hand, fire flaring to life in his palm. She reached over, swiping her fingers through the flames, a soft sigh leaving her lips.

A sound that had him adjusting her on his lap.

She didn’t seem to notice as she asked, “And a portal? Can you create one?”

“I have not tried,” he answered, turning so she gently slid off his lap.

“Do your reserves feel normal? Like they usually do?”

“No,” he admitted, nudging her down onto her back.

She frowned slightly. “What are we going to do about it?”

“Right now? Nothing,” he answered, settling his hips between her thighs.

“This is important, Sorin,” she admonished, rolling her eyes when she suddenly realized what he was doing.

“So is this,” he countered, his hands skimming over her hips. She was in one of his shirts, and, once again, wasn’t wearing pants. He wasn’t sure why she always thought he could concentrate on anything else when she wasn’t wearing pants.

His fingers slipped under the shirt. He hooked his thumbs in the hem, dragging it up as his hands moved along her ribs. Her hands slid into his hair. “I’m being serious,” she chided.

“I am always serious when it comes to getting you naked, Love.”

“Sorin,” she sighed. “Please. We need to talk about this. And Rayner. And Cassius’s power. And what Alaric said to me. And I really, really need to use the bathing room.”

He chuckled under his breath. “That is quite the list, Princess.”

Pushing herself up, she gripped the nape of his neck and pulled his lips to hers. She wasted no time meeting his tongue, her knees squeezing his hips. Nipping his bottom lip, she pulled back, and a growl rose in the back of his throat. She smiled coyly as she extracted herself from the bed and disappeared into the bathing room. Sorin rolled onto his back, propping his hands behind his head, trying to calm down. Her list ran through his head, and he got stuck on Rayner.

What if she was right? What if he was Avonleyan? He couldn’t be full-blooded though, right? Maybe he had some

Avonleyan blood like Luan did? That had to be it, if he had any at all.

But he hadn't been born in the Fire Court. He hadn't been born on their continent at all. He had been born on a small island south of the Water Court, an island that no other territory or Royal had ruled. An island that was law unto itself.

An island that Rayner had left desolate and nothing but ash the last time he was there.

He was older than most of them, closer in age to Luan than he was to him or Cyrus. His past was dark, to say the least, and certainly not his story to tell, but she could be right, he realized. Rayner could very well be Avonleyan, considering the kinds of things that took place on that island. None of them would have ever known. *Rayner* would have never known. But damnit, it would certainly explain a lot.

What exactly were they going to discover when they arrived in Avonleya?

Scarlett emerged with a scowl on her face, and she moodily snatched a piece of dried meat from the tray of food, leaning against the desk as she chewed.

When she said nothing, Sorin ventured, "To what do I owe this delightful change of mood?"

She sent him a dry look, taking another bite of the meat. "I want a bath."

Sorin tried—he really did—but the amused smile formed on his lips.

"Do not laugh at me, Sorin Aditya," she snapped, pointing a finger at him. "I like feeling clean, and I like my hair shiny. And I like clean clothes. If that makes me vain, I don't care." She shoved the last bit of meat into her mouth and crossed her arms with a pout.

"You are aware you have water magic, right?" he finally asked, using every bit of self-control not to laugh at her small fit.

"Yes, I am aware," she drawled.

“Then use it.”

“What? I can’t just create a bath.”

“You create fire and shadows out of nothing. Why not water?” he countered.

“I...” Her eyes went wide at the realization. “I have been on this ship for weeks, and you only now suggest this?”

“Sorry. I thought the one with *water magic* would utilize her own gifts,” he said with a huff of laughter.

She snatched a piece of bread off the tray while glaring at him. He thought for sure she was going to throw it at him, but instead she said, “What do you make of Cassius’s powers?”

Sorin blinked at the sudden subject change. “They are gifts I have never encountered, but that is to be expected given they are Avonleyan gifts.”

“He had wings, like a dragon. It was almost as if he’d been halfway to shifting *into* a dragon.” She chewed on another bite of bread. “Can Stellan and Arianna shift into dragons since they are power Shifters?”

“I suppose they would be able to,” Sorin said thoughtfully. “Although I have never seen it.”

She nodded, seeming to mull that over. “One seraph asked what one of Arius’s guards was doing here, and then Alaric said he was only half. That Sargon was very particular.”

Sorin shook his head, trying to make sense of what she was saying. “I do not know, Scarlett. I do not know what any of that would mean, but we should probably speak with Cassius about all of this.”

“I know. Just thinking out loud,” she murmured, picking up another piece of dried meat. “There’s so much in my head right now. It’s so loud.”

How long had he waited for them to get to this point? For her to willingly come to him with all of her thoughts? To talk to him right away instead of letting her thoughts fester and consume her? He wasn’t her last resort any more, and his chest expanded at that realization. Granted, he hadn’t been her last

resort for quite some time now, but he had never had her willingly come to him and just...talk through all her thoughts. It had always felt like pulling teeth and had taken days to get her to this place.

She gave him a perplexed look as she picked up a few grapes. "You are feeling something...odd."

He gave her a soft smile, moving to sit on the edge of the bed. Not wanting to slip out of this moment, he asked instead, "What else did Alaric say?"

"He could drain my power from me."

"What?" he demanded, shooting to his feet. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that is his power, Sorin. He absorbs your power when you're using it. He was draining my power from me, just like he could drain life by crushing a heart," she said, reaching over and pouring a glass of water from the pitcher. "It's how he feeds his own magic. All these years he..."

She trailed off as she took a drink.

"He was feeding off the gifts you did not even know you had," Sorin finished for her.

She nodded, not looking at him. "The only thing I can think of as to why he stopped is that when I got the Mark to fully awaken my Avonleyan gifts, I wasn't staying at the Fellowship so he did not have access to me."

"No, but Lord Tyndell did," Sorin said. "You were living in his house. Do all Maraans fill their reserves that way?"

"I don't know." She pressed her lips together, staring into the glass of water. "He also implied that not all the people he ordered me to kill were deserving of such a thing. That some were innocents."

He stepped in front of her, taking the water cup from her hands and setting it aside. He tilted her chin up, and this time his heart clenched tight at the sight of the thin pools of silver in her eyes. "They have manipulated you and lied to you your entire life. He is likely doing the same now to do exactly this

to you. Make you question yourself, what you stand for. He doesn't get to consume you like that anymore, remember?" He tucked some hair behind her ear before trailing his fingers down her neck. "You are mine, Love. Only I get to consume you."

"So wise in your old age," she murmured, reaching up and brushing back a lock of hair from his brow.

Sorin huffed a soft laugh, leaning down and brushing his lips across hers. "What do you want to deal with first? Go find Cassius?"

"No. I think Cyrus and Cass need some time first," she answered, picking up another piece of bread.

His brow furrowed. "Why would Cyrus and Cassius need some time?"

"Because they are involved."

His brows went from furrowed to arching in shock. "Why in the realms would you think that?"

"For one, I've known Cassius for fifteen years. He's my best friend and I know how to read him. As for Cyrus, he is acting like you," she answered around a mouthful of bread.

"Like me?"

"Yes. Overprotective. Increasingly broody." She waved her hand in his direction as if he were an example of what she was describing.

"I am not broody."

She rolled her eyes. "When we first met, you were broody as hell, especially when it came to me. Demanding information from Cassius. Trying to interfere with my life on the daily—"

"You asked me to train you," he argued incredulously.

"And you were a broody asshole for a long time."

"Because you were an arrogant brat," he shot back.

“Whatever,” she sighed, rolling her eyes again. “The point is, they’re involved. Cyrus needs some time to calm down after he thought I was going to draw from Cass again.”

“You know we have all been sleeping for an entire day, right?”

“Yes, I know that. Which means *they* haven’t had much of a chance to talk yet.”

“I still do not see why you think they are involved. They— Wait.” He paused, his eyes widening slightly at the realization. “Are you telling me Cassius prefers males?”

“I sure hope so, or that will be a very one-sided and awkward relationship.”

“Your sarcasm is as delightful as always,” Sorin muttered.

Scarlett flashed him a sardonic smile. “Yes, Sorin. Cassius has always preferred males.”

“Why did you not tell me this in Baylorin? When I thought you two were together?”

“I told you we weren’t. Both of us did. That should have been enough. His relationships were none of your business, and even if they were, they were not mine to share,” she replied. “Anyway, it’s still new. I don’t think they realize it’s going on yet.”

“If it’s so obvious to you, you think they don’t see it?” Sorin asked doubtfully.

“I tried to ignore us for months,” she answered with a shrug. “They’ll figure it out eventually.”

“If memory serves, an Oracle had to spell it out for you, Princess,” he said with a smirk as she pushed off the desk.

“Because *someone* didn’t tell me I was his twin flame.”

“Fair enough,” he chuckled, following her from the cabin. He did not know where she was taking him, but it didn’t matter. He’d follow her anywhere.

When they reached the main deck, she turned to him. “Make a fire portal to Briar’s ship.”

“What?”

“Make a portal, Sorin. I won’t draw from you until you can make a portal.”

He sighed, the mood from their banter quickly dissipating as irritation took its place. “I can’t right now.”

“Why?”

“If I knew why, I would fix it, Scarlett. But we will figure it out. In the meantime, I do not think you need to stop refilling your reserves. We have no idea when they will show up again, and you need to be prepared,” he said evenly, trying to reason with her.

“Then I will draw from Cass like we did when you were healing.”

“That is not the same, and you know it.”

She pursed her lips, looking past him, and he knew she was debating her options. But he was right, and she knew that too.

“Okay,” she finally said with a harsh exhale. “But you have to swear to be honest with me about what’s going on with your power.”

“Okay? Just like that?” He couldn’t keep the shock from his voice. She never gave in to something this easily.

“I’m working on this whole compromise thing,” she muttered, waving off his comment.

He fought to keep the small smile from forming on his lips. “I swear to be open about what is going on with my magic, Scarlett.” He gently took her chin, guiding her gaze back to his. “We will figure this out.”

She nodded, but he could see the doubt in her eyes. He wasn’t willing to waste this rare occurrence of acquiescence though. He drew a dagger from his side and drew it along the Source Mark. She held up her hand for the same without a word, and when she placed it on the Mark, they both sucked in sharp breaths when their blood and magic merged.

She leaned into him as her empty Avonleyan power reserves began to fill, her head falling to his chest. He gently stroked her hair under the sun, gritting his teeth. Because something was indeed wrong. As she drew more and more from him, that feeling of unease grew. His flames seemed to almost fight against her, and when she pulled back and looked up at him again, he knew she felt it too.

“We will figure this out,” he whispered gently, cupping her cheek with his other hand.

She nodded again, the sentiment comforting her as much as it eased his own concerns.

Not at all.

CHAPTER 13

TALWYN

Talwyn stepped onto the beach of the Water Court near the Black Halls. She'd been to the Underwater Prison a handful of times when necessary, but never by herself. In fact, she'd never been there without Briar and Sorin. Briar to get them in and Sorin to ease her nerves. She didn't like being underwater, even if the prison itself didn't entirely feel like it was below the surface.

She wasn't seeking to release the Sorceress as Alaric had demanded of her, but she did want to speak with her. She wanted to see if what he had claimed was true and what other knowledge she might have. The Sorceress was dangerous. She knew that. It was why she'd never been to see her before. The risk had never been worth it.

It would be worth it this time.

The problem was she needed the Water Prince to access the prison, and he was currently somewhere in the Edria Sea. She was hoping Ashtine would be able to get her in as she was currently the interim Royal of this Court. Talwyn had gone to the House of Water first, only to be told she wasn't there. Then she'd gone up to her Wind Citadel where it'd taken her over an hour to track down Ermir, only to be told she wasn't in the Wind Court either.

But the princess was here. She was standing on the beach in a white semi-sheer gown that hung to her ankles, two straps tied at her shoulders. The waves were rolling gently over her bare feet.

And she wasn't alone.

A stunning white horse stood in the waves beside her. Its tail and mane cascaded down like a waterfall. Abrax. The spirit animal of Anahita, goddess of the sea and water.

Abrax huffed out a snort of irritation, his hoof splashing when he stomped it in the water. Piercing blue eyes that matched the prince he was bonded to seemed to glare at her.

Ashtine turned then, her sky-blue eyes settling on Talwyn for the briefest of moments. Her face was red and blotchy, as if she had been crying, but she appeared to have gained back at least some of the weight she'd lost since Nasima had left her. She turned back to Abrax, her fingers gliding through his mane. Her other hand came up, and he nuzzled his nose into her palm.

Talwyn took a step towards her, but Abrax immediately shifted. He moved so he stood between her and Ashtine, and Talwyn froze. Azrael had told her there was something between Ashtine and Briar, and the scene before her could only confirm his claim. It was the only explanation as to why the spirit animal was so protective of a Fae he was not bonded to.

"I have been looking for you," Talwyn finally said. Ashtine didn't acknowledge her. She just continued to stare out at the turquoise waters, even with the horse moving to her back. "Ermir said you were here," Talwyn tried again.

The only movement was Ashtine's silver hair fluttering on a breeze, whether a natural one or her own, Talwyn couldn't quite tell. She took a deep breath, the scent of the sea and wind washing over her. This was going to be a hard conversation the way it was, but if Ashtine was...

Talwyn didn't know what she was. The princess had always been so mysterious and hard to understand on the best of days, let alone trying to figure out her emotions. But if she was truly involved with Briar, and he was now sailing west while she remained here. It wasn't hard to explain her demeanor.

She stepped forward, her boots sinking into the sand with each step. Abrax gave another snort of warning, shaking his head in agitation. Water droplets splashed from his mane. When she was a few feet from him, she stopped and bowed at the waist. She may not have her own spirit animal anymore, but she wasn't foolish enough not to show respect to those that were willing to be in her presence.

"I would never hurt her," Talwyn said as she straightened. "I need her help."

Abrax eyed her a moment longer before he huffed again, moving to stand at Ashtine's side. Her hand came up, and she stroked his neck, seemingly out of habit, as if she regularly saw the horse. Talwyn moved to her other side, watching her out of the corner of her eye.

"I need to access the Underwater Prison," Talwyn finally said. Because she was a shitty friend and couldn't bring herself to ask Ashtine about Briar or why Abrax was here or what was bothering her. She supposed that's what happened when you no longer had a heart.

"Nakoa is dead," Ashtine said, her usual lilt hushed. Talwyn turned to look at her. Her arms were tightly curled around herself now, and for the first time, Talwyn noticed a piece of parchment gripped in her hand. She could see the looping handwriting and recognized it as Prince Briar's.

"Can I see?" Talwyn asked, nodding at the paper.

"No." Ashtine's fingers tightened around the note. And Talwyn understood. It was one of her only connections to Briar right now. A piece of him she could hold on to, even if it was only a handwritten note.

"How?" Talwyn asked instead.

And Ashtine finally turned to look at her.

Talwyn wished she hadn't. An eerie fury stared back at her — calm and lethal, like Talwyn knew the princess could be. But there was something new there too, and Talwyn couldn't decipher what it was. Protectiveness maybe? Renewed determination?

“Seraphs attacked them.”

“Already?” Talwyn blurted.

“You knew?” Ashtine asked, her head tilting in question.

“It was mentioned, but I did not think it would happen so quickly. I thought I would have more time to...” She trailed off, looking away from her.

“So you could what, Talwyn?” Her tone held more curiosity than accusation.

“So I could... I do not know,” Talwyn snapped, failing to keep the harshness from her voice. “I just did not expect this.”

“You did not expect battles? Fighting? Death? That is not what you thought would happen when you banished our allies?”

Talwyn hated this about Ashtine. How she could make her question everything with simple questions. Her tone rarely changed, rarely accused, rarely filled with anger. It was always this innocent lilt of calm and serenity, whether she was asking about dinner plans or discussing the meaning of life.

She wished she'd rage at her rather than ask her these questions.

“I never wanted them dead,” Talwyn muttered.

“Interesting.”

“I need to access the Underwater Prison.”

“Do you ever wonder about their story?”

“What?” Talwyn shoved the prickle of irritation down at Ashtine again ignoring her request.

“We know our side of the story, but have you ever wondered about their side?” Her hand came up again, stroking down Abrax's shining coat. The horse had been so still, Talwyn had nearly forgotten he was still standing there. “However this war ends, there will be two sides to the story. If you win, will their story paint you as the villain? Will they someday come and seek the same revenge you are seeking?”

“I...”

“Will we even still be alive? Or will our own children be the ones to suffer the consequences of our choices today?” Ashtine mused, absent-mindedly gliding her fingers through Abrax’s flowing mane.

Talwyn shifted on her feet, boots sinking deeper into the sand. Fuck these questions.

“I can only assume I will not live long enough to have any children,” she answered. “We both know Scarlett will come for me.”

“Revenge can obscure so much truth, even when it is right in front of us.”

“Do you speak of my revenge or hers?”

“Does it matter? It is a curse that plagues you both,” Ashtine replied. “As for your children, you are a queen, Talwyn. Your Courts are your children. Your Courts are your legacy. They may not share your blood, but you leave them to live among what happens when your story ends.”

Talwyn took a deep breath, that knot in her stomach tightening with each word Ashtine spoke. Cautiously, she ventured, “Have the winds begun whispering to you again?”

Ashtine whipped her head to her, a gust of wind blasting sand against their legs. “No,” she answered shortly. “They have not spoken to my soul since Nasima left me.”

“Abrax comes to you, but not Nasima?”

“Abrax comes to me for various reasons,” Ashtine replied, her lilt returning and her gaze going back to the sea. “He came to deliver a message. He stays to protect what his bonded cherishes without his knowledge.”

“You continue to communicate with them,” Talwyn said.

“No. Not since the invasion of the Courts.”

“Did anyone else...” Talwyn ground her molars together, trying to figure out the best way to word her question. Because

Azrael was with them, and she had to know. “Was Nakoa the only loss?”

“Many died in that battle,” Ashtine replied.

“Any Royals?” she ground out.

“Are their lives more important than the others who travel with them?”

Again with these damn questions.

“No, but...” She sighed heavily. “Briar is well? Azrael?”

“The princes live,” Ashtine answered, and Talwyn sucked down a breath, her chest expanding some at knowing Azrael was still on this side of the Veil.

“Ashtine, I need to access the Underwater Prison,” she said, turning to fully face the princess.

“You need the water element to gain entry to the prison.” Ashtine didn’t look at her though, continuing to stare out across the sea.

“I am aware.”

“You need Water Royalty,” Ashtine continued as if Talwyn had not spoken.

“I know I need Briar, but I am hoping that since you are currently ruling in his stead, you will be able to access it,” Talwyn said, knowing Ashtine heard the hint of desperation that made her voice falter slightly.

The princess turned to look at her again, studying Talwyn for a long moment before she said, “Briar has not died nor has he abdicated his throne, therefore only he or his royal line can access the prison for you.”

“I know this,” Talwyn insisted. “Can you at least try?”

“What do you seek there?”

“That is not information I wish to burden you with.”

Ashtine seemed to look straight into her soul, her eyes narrowing slightly. It took everything in Talwyn not to shift under that gaze. Finally, Ashtine turned and used her wind

gifts to lift herself gracefully onto Abrax's back, her gown bunching around her thighs.

"Ashtine, what are you doing?" Talwyn asked, shock rippling through her at the princess so casually mounting a spirit animal.

"I will not help you get into the prison until you tell me why," Ashtine said, Abrax moving towards the water.

Talwyn's hand shot out, latching onto Ashtine's ankle. Abrax immediately stopped, a hoof stomping in warning. "You know of another way in?"

"No. I told you who is required to gain entry to the prison."

"You did, but Briar is across the sea."

"And his bloodline is not."

Talwyn's hand slipped from Ashtine's ankle at her words as Abrax moved towards the sea again. His hooves stayed on the surface of the water, and she could only watch as the horse went from a walk to a run atop the waves.

Taking the Wind Princess and the Heir of the Water Court with him.



She should have known. She should have seen the changes in Ashtine. She should have scented it on her the moment she'd stepped onto that beach. Yes, water magic often smelled like the sea, so one could argue that the oversight was understandable, but she knew that wasn't it.

She should have known. If she hadn't been so absorbed with her own...everything, she would have known right away. There was no excuse for missing this, and now Ashtine was alone.

Talwyn had tried to contact her for hours since their conversation on that beach. She couldn't Travel to her because she didn't know where she was. Where had Abrax taken her in the middle of the sea? She'd sent wind messages, but they went unanswered.

Now here she was, pacing her chambers in the White Halls while the clouds obscured the stars and the moon in the night sky. Did Briar know? He couldn't possibly. He would have never left Ashtine if he'd known she was carrying his child. She couldn't be very far along. Fae pregnancies were slightly shorter than mortal pregnancies, magic helping the babe to develop faster, but the extra power took a toll on the mother. Fae pregnancies were brutal and taxing and only got worse as the babe grew stronger.

And Ashtine was doing this alone.

Because of her.

Talwyn raked her hand through her hair, pushing it out of her face where the mahogany strands had fallen during her agitated treks back and forth across the rug. If Azrael were here, he'd have told her twenty times to stop pacing already.

If Azrael were here, he wouldn't have missed all the signs.

She should have known.

She sent another wind message off to Ashtine, knowing full well this one would go ignored too. Should she send a message to Briar? Or send one to Azrael to tell Briar? Did Ashtine not want Briar to know? These were all things she wanted to discuss with Ashtine. She didn't want to overstep, didn't want to strain their relationship any more than she already had.

And while the child could end up with wind or water magic, Ashtine always seemed to simply know things, usually from the winds whispering secrets to her. The way she spoke on the beach about Briar's bloodline... Abrax was there to do more than protect Ashtine. He was there to protect the Water Court Heir too. Which was another predicament. Unless they had another child—which was incredibly rare among the Fae

—the Wind Court would be left heirless. Even then, there was no guarantee a second child would have wind magic. It was why relationships across the Courts were frowned upon and why it *never* occurred among the Royals.

When this news got out, there would be an uproar across the Courts.

Then again, they'd likely be in the middle of a war. Maybe Court heirs would be the least of their worries.

Talwyn cursed under her breath, releasing a gust of wind in the room to siphon off her restlessness. She turned in her pacing as the door to the chambers swung open. She didn't bother to look up, already knowing who it was. Admittedly, she'd forgotten about him. Forgotten he would likely show up here. If she'd remembered, she'd have gone to the mountains to pace. Or the Black Halls. Anywhere but here really.

“I did not expect you to be here.”

Not ceasing her movements, she glanced over at him. Tarek had paused in the doorway, his tunic bunched in his hands and halfway up his torso as if he'd been in the middle of undressing as he walked.

“I live here,” she said coolly.

“I thought so too, but you so rarely grace these Halls these days, I was beginning to wonder,” Tarek replied, coming out of his momentary shock. He released his tunic, letting it fall back down his body.

She ignored him, dragging both hands through her hair this time.

“Did you go to Siofra today?”

That made her feet pause. “What?” she asked, fingers still tangled in her strands.

“Did you go to Siofra today? To speak with Stellan and Arianna?”

She should have, she supposed. After getting into the prison had failed, she probably should have made a trip to the

Shifter territory. That had been her plan until she'd spoken with Ashtine. Now this was all she could think about.

"No, I did not go to Siofra," she replied, stalking to her desk and pouring a glass of water.

Tarek watched her warily, clearly trying to decide what to say next.

"What did you do today then?"

She took a big drink of water, mainly to give herself time to think, before she answered. "I tried to get into the Underwater Prison, but it was futile and a waste of my day."

Tarek's brows rose. "Ashtine could not help you?"

"She would not."

"Would not or could not?"

"Does it matter?"

"Those are two very different things, Talwyn," Tarek answered, moving slowly towards her. He stopped directly in front of her, the tips of his boots nearly touching her bare toes. When she said nothing, he reached out a hand, cupping her cheek. "If it is the first, you can make her. You are the queen, Talwyn. She cannot deny you."

He wanted her to force Ashtine to do this? Even if she wasn't carrying a child, she would have never forced her into this.

Guilt churned in her stomach at the thought, because that was a lie. She would have definitely tried to force her. She'd never used her Court Vow with Ashtine. It had never been needed. It had never crossed her mind to do such a thing. She'd known Ashtine her entire life.

Not that such a thing had stopped her from forcing Sorin to go to the mortal lands with a Court Vow.

"Talwyn?"

She looked up, finding Tarek staring at her, concern etched across his features. He was still waiting for her to reply.

She cleared her throat, taking another sip of water. “She could not. The water element is required to enter the Underwater Prison. It requires the water Royal or his bloodline.”

Tarek’s hand had slipped from her cheek, and he scratched his jaw as he said, “There has to be another way. There is always a work-around.”

“If you figure it out, let me know. Until then, you can tell Alaric to focus on something else,” she retorted, setting the water glass down and pushing past him. She stalked to the middle of the room, turning back to face him. “Did you know he carried out the attack on them?”

Tarek seemed to repress a sigh, bending down to remove his boots. “Yes, I did.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she demanded.

Tarek straightened, giving her a hard look. “As we have already discussed, I cannot keep you informed when I rarely see you.”

“You could have sent an earth message.”

“Because you are always so responsive to those,” he retorted, toeing off his loosened boots.

“You keeping me informed does not require a response.”

“Of course not,” he mocked, pulling his tunic over his head. “Why in the realms would I want to be with you when I gave you news that would likely upset you? Why would I want to help my twin flame?” She tried to hide the flinch, but he saw it, his lips pursing slightly. “Were you this way with him too?” He’d crossed his arms, leaning back against the desk.

It was her turn to purse her lips. “My relationship with Az does not concern you. It is no longer relevant.”

“Oh, I think your relationship with *Az* is still quite relevant, Talwyn. He has you convinced I am not your twin flame.”

“He was there for me when you were not,” she snarled. She took a step towards him, winds swirling along her arm as

she pointed a finger at him. “He was there when no one else was. He was there when it was just me and Ashtine.” She tugged at her scalp again. “You do not get to punish me for how I chose to survive losing you. You do not get to judge me for how I am choosing to survive now.”

“Survive what?” Tarek asked, his head tilting as he studied her.

“Everything, Tarek,” she snapped. “My choices. Being excluded from Alaric’s plans. Azrael being across the sea. Not knowing he could have died until Ashtine informs me they were attacked—”

Tarek’s eyes sharpened at that. “Ashtine is in communication with them?”

Fuck.

“You know Ashtine often hears things on the winds,” Talwyn said impatiently, flicking her wrist in dismissal of his concern.

“Nasima is back, then?”

“No.”

“Then how did she know of the attack?”

“Does it matter? *She* informed me. When it should have been you. Or better yet, it should have been Alaric.”

Tarek was moving towards her now, purpose in his steps. “Talwyn, if Ashtine is passing information to our enemies, you must tell me. We must tell the others.”

“She is not passing them information,” Talwyn scoffed, stepping back from him as he advanced on her.

“No? What did she tell you today then? How did she know of the attack?”

“Enough,” she snarled. “Ashtine is loyal to me. She has proven so over and over. She proved it when she chose me over—”

She cut herself off, not entirely sure how much Tarek knew, but he quickly answered that question.

“You think she chose you over Briar?” Tarek asked, entering her personal space.

She stepped back again, feeling far too crowded in her own godsdamn chambers. “She did choose me over Briar. She is still here while he sails west.”

“And yet she has news of their travels.”

“She is not betraying me,” Talwyn insisted.

“Then she should come to tomorrow’s meeting. Share what she knows. Maybe some of it will be useful to us.”

“What?” The back of her knees bumped against the bed as she scrambled for a reason to deny this request. She couldn’t let Ashtine near any of them. They would scent a child on her the moment she stepped into the room. Clearly they knew she was involved with Briar. There would be no question as to whose child it is, and it would certainly be used against the others somehow. There was no way she would allow Ashtine and that babe to be used as a weapon. Briar may not be here to protect her, but she would do what she could until Scarlett came to collect her debt.

“Ashtine obviously has information on their movements. Maybe we can take advantage of that so that our next attack will be more fruitful,” Tarek was saying, fingering the hem of her shirt.

“The last mission was a failure?” she asked.

“The Solgard heirs still breathe. Scarlett still sails west and has not been returned to her master. So yes, it was a failure,” he replied, crowding into her even more. She leaned away, back landing on the bed. “But if Ashtine has a way to communicate with their company, perhaps she can plant some information of our own.”

“Ashtine does not play such games,” Talwyn snapped, letting him slip her tunic over her head. She needed him to move on from this idea. If she had to use her body to protect Ashtine, she would.

“She would if her queen demands it of her,” Tarek countered, eyes glazing as he took in her bare torso, stepping

between her thighs. “What happened to the queen who would stop at nothing for her revenge?”

His hands came up, fingertips skating along her ribs.

What happened to her?

Talwyn had to hold back her huff of laughter. What had happened was she had faded away along with her soul in that throne room. That queen was finally starting to realize just how much she would be required to sacrifice to have that revenge she thought she was owed, that maybe it wasn't worth everything any more.

Not that it mattered at this point. There was no turning back from the choices she'd made. She had made this bed. It was no one's fault but her own that she was now forced to lie in it. Literally.

She tightened her knees around Tarek's hips, and he looked up at her in surprise. “The only thing her queen is demanding right now is a distraction,” she said.

With a quick movement of her hips, she had Tarek flipped onto his back on the bed. He chuckled low in his throat, quickly losing his pants as she removed hers.

“You always need to be in control, don't you, Moonflower?” he said, hissing as she slid down onto his length.

She did need control.

Except with Azrael.

With Azrael, she'd finally given up that control. With Azrael, she'd had a place to let herself be vulnerable. She could let him make the choices and decisions, giving her freedom from her responsibilities, just for a little while. In those moments, he controlled her world so she didn't have to.

But this, with Tarek, would do nothing for her. It hadn't since he'd returned. It couldn't when she was too dead inside to feel anything. She'd simply gotten annoyed and let him take care of his own needs with her body.

And later, as she lay next to Tarek sleeping beside her for the first time in nearly two months, she decided she would do this. She would do whatever it took to keep Ashtine away from them. It would in no way atone for any of her sins. It wouldn't save her from the torment Arius surely had in store for her. But she wanted Ashtine to know she saw what she had sacrificed for her. She wished she hadn't. She wished she'd left with Briar, left her to her self-inflicted demise, but she'd repay this debt with a sacrifice of her own. Perhaps the only real sacrifice she had ever made for someone other than herself or in the name of revenge.

CHAPTER 14

SCARLETT

Scarlett hoisted herself up the rungs as she climbed the main mast of the ship. They had spent the morning on Briar's ship paying respects to the fallen. She had learned that Fae are not entombed the way the mortals entomb their dead. No, the Fae give their bodies back to the element that ran through their veins when they crossed the Veil to the After. The body is burned, and then the ashes are offered up to the god of their element in a ceremony they call The Farewell. And while she had watched as the Fire Fae had worked to carefully burn the bodies of the thirty-two Fae warriors they had lost, she hadn't been able to help. Panic had wrapped its icy claws around her chest, leaving her unable to move, scarcely able to breathe as she watched them continue to burn those of the fire element until even their ashes were nothing. Because that had almost been Sorin. She'd nearly lost the contents of her stomach as Azrael carefully stored the ashes of the Earth Fae to be scattered among the soil whenever they reached dry ground again. And when Briar had released the ashes of the Water Fae, of Nakoa, back to the sea, she couldn't keep the tears from spilling over any longer. She'd paid homage and respect to those Fae who had given their lives to protect her own, to protect the innocents, to protect their home.

She wanted to go and hide in her quarters with Sorin beside her, escape to the place where it was just him and her, where everything going on around them couldn't seem to touch them. She wanted to lose herself in him, remind herself that she wasn't watching his ashes burn away to nothing to

return to Anala. But as much as she wanted to do that, this needed to be done more.

She reached the top of the mast, climbing onto the lookout platform where a female sat with her legs dangling over the edge. Her red-gold hair was unbound, blowing in the breeze, weapons discarded on the small platform beside her. Her grey eyes were fixed on the sea, the same direction Briar had released the ashes of the Water Fae.

Scarlett moved silently, lowering down beside her. She reached over, grasping her hand and intertwining their fingers. Eliza rested her head against her shoulder without a word. Scarlett reached up with her other hand, smoothing her friend's hair back before resting her cheek against the top of her head.

The Farewell was the first time she'd seen the general since the battle. She'd watched Eliza through her tear-filled eyes. Watched her keep her composure as she used her flames to light the pyre around Nakoa's shrouded body, the Water Court at her side. Watched her bottom lip tremble the smallest amount. Watched her fight back the tears but didn't let a single one fall as she said her goodbye to a teacher, a fellow general, a friend, a lover.

She didn't know how deep her feelings went for the Water Commander. She knew that when Eliza had surpassed all the instructors in the Fire Court, Nakoa had taken over her training, helping her hone her skills into what they were now. She knew they often trained the Fire and Water Court armies together. She knew they often shared a bed, that Eliza had spent more nights on Briar's ship with him than she did on their own ship these past few weeks.

Knew she'd been in his room since the battle that day.

"What do you need?" Scarlett asked softly.

"Just this."

She squeezed Eliza's hand, then settled in beside her, to sit in her darkness for as long as she needed.

CHAPTER 15

SCARLETT

It was hours later, the sun setting over the water and casting the sky in oranges and pinks, when Eliza said, “The first time I finally bested Nakoia in sparring was the first time I’d ever seen him smile.”

Scarlett hummed. “I am quite certain you are the only person Nakoia ever smiled at.”

A soft huff of laughter came from Eliza. “That’s not true. They just had to be earned.” There was another long stretch of silence before she added, “He never went easy on anyone. Always demanded your best. Always demanded excellence.”

“I’d say his teaching style rubbed off on you a little bit,” Scarlett teased gently.

Another small breath of laughter came from her friend before the quiet settled over them again.

Need anything, Love?

Sorin had done this periodically throughout the day, seeing if they needed anything. They’d agreed to talk to Cyrus and Cassius tomorrow, that everyone needed this day to...do whatever they needed to do to grieve and process everything that had happened.

Most of the Fae had gone back to rest more, still nursing depleted power reserves. Everyone had looked exhausted—both from the battle and the emotions of the day. She knew Sorin had slept for a few hours, but she hadn’t asked about his power reserves yet. That was something she wanted to ask him about when she could see his face. She knew he wouldn’t lie

to her about it, that they'd agreed to that, but she still wanted to be with him when they discussed it.

To be safe, she had checked him for a draining Mark. She knew it wasn't likely, that there was no point in time someone could have given him one, but she was at a loss. What else could be affecting his power? They hadn't told the others yet, again agreeing to tackle that tomorrow. Today needed to be about grieving and healing as much as they could before jumping back into war preparations.

"I know Briar claimed Haniel's death, but I am the one who killed him," Eliza said suddenly, her tone so low Scarlett barely heard her.

She stilled, thinking over her response before she said, "I am sure Briar understands."

"He does. He saw it. When he came to get Sawyer to help you."

"Did it...help?" Scarlett asked, finding herself desperate for the answer. Would it help this mania that crawled beneath her skin to get the revenge she was aching for against Talwyn?

"No," Eliza said simply. "Don't get me wrong. It was satisfying, but it did not... It still hurts." Her voice cracked on the last words, and Scarlett was pulling her hand from Eliza's and sliding her arms around her shoulders.

"I told myself I would not cry today," Eliza whispered, her tears soaking into Scarlett's white tunic. "When I stepped out of his cabin today, I told myself that was it. There would be no more."

"Grief doesn't listen to ultimatums. Life would be so much easier if it did," Scarlett answered.

"This isn't who I am, Scarlett."

"You can remember to be strong tomorrow, Eliza. And if not, that's okay too. I'll be here either way. We all will be. You are not alone."

Scarlett didn't know how long they sat like that. All she knew was that the night sky covered them when they finally

climbed down from the lookout platform. Sorin was waiting for them at the bottom, immediately reaching for Eliza and pulling her into him.

He was speaking low into her ear when Scarlett brushed her hand down his back, retreating to their cabin to give them a moment. When she got there, she went straight to the bathing room, stripping off her tunic as she went. She froze in the doorway, finding an oversized barrel taking up nearly the entire bathing room. It was so large, she could easily sit fully submerged in the thing. There was a fire message floating beside it, and Scarlett reached up, plucking the note from inside.

It's the best Luan could do on a ship, Love.

Enjoy.

Scarlett looked up, staring at the makeshift tub. He'd gone to Azrael for this, asked the Earth Prince for help to get her this.

She wasted no time using her water magic to fill the barrel, then sending her fire to heat it. She left her boots and the rest of her clothing strewn about the main room of the cabin. She had to use the sink to boost herself up high enough to climb into the thing, but the moan that left her lips as she sank into the steaming water would have been embarrassing if anyone else had been in the room. She went below the surface, creating a pocket of air so she could breathe and just sit in the warmth.

Gods, she would sleep in here if she knew her magic would keep her breathing all night.

She knew she was using her magic unnecessarily to keep the water heated and to allow herself to breathe under the water, so she indulged another few minutes before she washed her hair for the first time in weeks. It took everything in her to climb out of the make-shift tub, carefully stepping down off the sink and wrapping herself in a towel. She wiped the condensation from the mirror with her hand and stifled a scream as two dark eyes glared back at her from over her shoulder in the reflection.

“He is quite unhappy with you, my pet.”

“The feeling is mutual,” she retorted, tightening her grip on her towel.

Sorin...

“Mordecai returned with a fraction of the units he had with him.”

“Guess they didn’t like fire after all,” she simpered with a pout.

“Do you think you are going to find aid in Avonleya, Scarlett?” Mikale asked, his hand coming up and fingers tracing along her neck, her bare shoulder.

“Who said anything about Avonleya?”

His hand clamped around her throat. “We are not fools, Scarlett. We know why you sail west, what you seek. You will not find it.”

Sorin!

She tried to suck in a breath around the grip on her throat, but the phantom fingers flexed, squeezing tighter.

The Mikale in the reflection leaned closer, and she could feel him behind her. She could feel his chest pressing against her back. She could feel his breath feather across her cheek as he spoke quietly into her ear. “Since you ignored his last message, you can expect future messages to be more persuasive.”

Sorin! I need you!

Mikale smirked at her, as if he could hear her screaming down her twin flame bond. His next words were a whisper. “When you get his next message, remember, my pet: you brought this down upon these innocent people. You cannot escape the curse you are on them.”

Then he was gone, and Scarlett was gulping down air. Her hands were gripping the sink, her towel falling to the floor. She didn’t hear the door to their quarters open over the roaring in her head.

“Love, if you are still in the bath—”

There were hands on her shoulders, spinning her, and she flinched, Mikale’s phantom touch still lingering. Then hands were gripping her face, frantic golden eyes searching hers. “Scarlett? What is wrong? What happened?”

He was brushing wet hair off her brow, and her nose scrunched in confusion. “I called for you, Sorin,” she whispered. “I called for you down the bond, and you didn’t answer. You did not come.”

“You...? No. I did not hear you, Love. I didn’t...” He was stumbling over his words, trying to process what she’d said, tugging her naked body into his chest.

She could feel his confusion and panic down the bond, mixing with her own trepidation. First there were oddities with his fire and magic, and now this? It couldn’t be a coincidence. It had to be connected.

She felt numb as he held her, arms at her sides, freezing despite the warm bath she’d just soaked in. He was tugging her into the main room, and she followed automatically, letting him slip one of his shirts over her head.

“Scarlett?”

She looked up to find his face pale, worry etched along every feature.

“Why couldn’t you hear me, Sorin?”

She watched his throat bob with a thick swallow before he said, “I do not know.”

“Mikale was here. In the mirror.”

She felt rage and guilt and terror flood down the bond, his fingers digging into her upper arms where he still gripped her.

“Where?” Sorin demanded.

And she knew what he wanted to know. Where had Mikale touched her? What did he need to erase?

Her hand drifted up, fingers brushing along her throat. Calloused ones followed hers, trailing along the path she

made.

“Sorin, he said their next message will be worse.” She looked into his golden gaze. “How could it possibly be worse than dismembered bodies of innocent people from our Courts?”

But they both knew the answer to that.

Alaric could and would do so much worse. And with Talwyn working with him now? Would she protect her own Courts? Would she protect Ashtine? Would the Witches and Shifters be able to stand against them on their own until they could return with help? Would Avonleya even hold the answers they were seeking? What if this was all a giant waste of their time and resources?

“Hey, Love.” His voice broke through her spiraling, his hand on her cheek drawing her back to him, grounding her. “We will figure this out. One thing at a time.”

“And if we don’t? If what we are doing is not enough?”

“We deal with things as they come, Scarlett. We do not worry about things that have yet to pass. There is no control or value in that, and it is a waste of our time and energy to fret about what ifs,” he replied, tucking wet hair behind her ear. A moment later, the strands were dry.

“What are we going to do, Sorin?”

“We are going to keep planning. We are going to keep preparing as best we can. Right now, we are going to go to bed. In the morning, we are going to talk to Cassius and Cyrus. One step at a time, Love. That is what we are going to do.”

She nodded, her fingers curling around his forearm where his large palm was cupping her cheek. “And your magic?”

“We will speak with Beatrix tomorrow.”

She nodded again. Sorin bent, brushing his lips across hers before he led her to the bed. He undressed before climbing in beside her, and as he tugged her back into his chest, she asked, “Eliza?”

“Is grieving, Scarlett,” he said gently, another kiss pressing to the top of head as he tucked her under his chin. “We all are.”

She fell quiet, but her mind wouldn't stop. No matter what she tried. Her thoughts were a whirlwind, cycling over and over.

“Sorin,” she whispered into the dark of their cabin.

“Mmm?” he hummed.

“How long have you known Rayner?”

She felt him tense for a brief moment before he said, “My entire life.”

“He is older than you?”

“He had been in service to my father for a decade when I was born.”

“Where was he before that?”

Sorin was quiet for so long, she thought he may have fallen asleep, but then he said, “He was hunting, Scarlett.”

“Hunting? For what?”

“Not what. Who. And that is something you will need to ask him. His past is his story to tell.”

“Where is he?”

“Not right now, Love,” Sorin sighed. “Sleep.”

“I can't.”

“Scarlett...”

“It's too loud right now. Everything is too loud.”

He shifted slightly behind her, his head dipping to speak into her ear. “Are you asking me to consume you, my Love?”

Was that what she needed right now?

His hand brushed her hair off the back of her neck, lips brushing across her nape. His other hand was already on her hip, slipping under the hem of the shirt, fingers brushing across her torso.

“I don’t think that will work tonight,” she sighed. “I have too much on my mind.”

“Oh, Scarlett,” he chided, a low chuckle rumbling through his chest. “After all this time, you underestimate my distraction skills?”

“No, but—”

“You think if I buried my face between your thighs, you would be thinking of anything else?”

Gods.

Said thighs squeezed together under the blankets, wet heat instantly pooling low in her belly.

“No, but—”

“You think if I licked you until you couldn’t speak, you wouldn’t be thoroughly distracted?”

By Saylah.

“That’s not what I’m saying, Sorin—”

“You think if I flipped you over.” His hands slid to her hips, and she found herself on her stomach. “Hauled your fine ass into the air.” His shirt was shucked up over her hips, the cool air sliding over the bare flesh and making her skin pebble. “And consumed you until you screamed, you would not sleep well afterwards?”

She opened her mouth to protest again, but what came out was a moan as she felt his hot tongue slide along the entire length of her center. His response was a dark laugh against her skin as he found that bundle of nerves and sucked hard. She gasped, arms stretching out in front of her, fingers curling into the bedding.

“How am I doing so far, Love?” he whispered, dropping kisses along her ass.

“Could be better,” she replied breathlessly.

Sorin laughed before she felt his teeth replace his lips, and she yelped.

“You are not thinking of anything else now, are you, Love?”

And she wasn't. She was only thinking about the pleasure ratcheting up in her body as his mouth moved back to her center, and he did exactly what he said he was going to. While his tongue and lips consumed her, he slid two fingers in her wet heat, and her hips were thrusting back, grinding against his hand, desperate for the release that was coiling tighter and tighter.

And then his hand and lips were gone, and she whimpered, burying her face in the pillow in frustration, already knowing how this was going to go.

“Love, I promised to consume you, to drown out all other thoughts,” Sorin said, his voice low and raspy as he climbed up her body, lips and tongue taking turns along her spine. “If I let you come now, I don't think I would be delivering on that promise.”

“You would be,” she said, not caring how needy she sounded. “Please, Sorin.”

“Those beautiful manners,” he crooned, hands sliding the shirt she was still wearing over her head. “Tell me, Scarlett, what is consuming your thoughts now?”

“You,” she panted. “You are, Sorin.”

“Mmm,” he hummed, whispers of touch skating along her ribs, her torso, her bare breasts. “You are going to need to be more specific.”

“What?” she asked in confusion, trying to understand what he was asking of her, but his finger was drawing slow, taunting circles around her nipple. His thumb and finger suddenly tweaked that same nipple, and the sound that came out of her was half-groan, half-yelp.

“Specifics, Scarlett,” he ordered. “What specifically is consuming your thoughts?”

“Right now it's that you are being an ass,” she snapped, her body immediately writhing against him when he draped

his body over her, his hard length pressing against her ass. His hands gripped her hips, holding her still.

“Tell me what you want, Scarlett,” he said, and she could feel him smiling against her skin as he kissed her shoulder before he nipped at the skin there. He continued that torture along her arms, shoulders, across her back. Kiss and nip. Bite and suck, and gods, she was a trembling mess beneath him as he held her still, not allowing her to seek out what she truly wanted.

“Scarlett,” he encouraged, low and sinful in her ear. “I am waiting.”

“Sorin, please,” she begged, feeling him shift against her again.

“Please what, my Love?”

“Gods, Sorin,” she finally snapped when his lips found their way to that spot behind her ear. “Just fuck me. *Please.*”

“How?” he breathed, pure lust dripping from that one word.

“Hard. Fast. Just like this,” she demanded, jerking her hips free and grinding back against him.

“That’s my queen,” he murmured into her ear, and then he slid inside her in one hard thrust.

“Gods, yes,” she gasped, propping herself up on her elbows and giving herself over completely to him. His fingers dug into her hips as he gave her exactly what she’d asked for, slamming into her over and over until the scream he’d promised her came from her lips. He consumed that too. Pulling her up onto her knees, back flush against his chest, he gripped her jaw, turning her head so he could capture her mouth. His tongue plunged in, tangling with hers, devouring every sound as she went weightless in his arms.

He pushed her back down, his hand pressing to her spine and holding her to the bed as he thrust into her a few more times before a deep guttural groan came from him, and she knew he’d found his own pleasure. He rolled off of her,

gathering her into his chest, soft kisses peppering her brow, her eyelids, her nose.

“And now, my Love? What is consuming your thoughts?”

“You. Only ever you,” she sighed before sleep finally claimed her, just as he’d said it would.



“Why are you awake before the sun?” Sorin groaned, his fingers grazing over her bare flesh as she slipped from the bed.

“I want to talk to Rayner before we find Cass and Cyrus,” she answered, pulling on undergarments and pants before slipping a tunic over her head. This one had ties that crisscrossed along the top, and she quickly pulled them tight.

“He is still sleeping, Love. Like you should be,” Sorin grumbled. “Like everyone else is. Come back to bed.”

She was working a braid into her hair. “Then let’s go spar.”

He lifted his head, golden eyes seeming to glow in the darkness of their room. “It is still dark out, Scarlett. We are not sparring in the dark.”

She was slipping her feet into boots, but she paused as something occurred to her. “Get up, Sorin. I want to do something.”

“We did something last night,” he grumbled again, his face falling into the pillow. She smirked at him, sending her shadows to glide along his body, and he groaned. “Keep that up, and I am pulling you back into this bed, Princess.”

Her smirk turned to a scowl. “Come on, Sorin. I have an idea.”

He looked up at her at the words, and she could just make out the look of resignation on his face as he pushed to a sitting position along the edge of the bed.

“What idea?” he asked, scrubbing a hand down his face.

“It involves Traveling,” she said, more and more of the details of this plan falling into place.

Sorin was on his feet, reaching for pants on the ground. “And where are we going?”

“Right now, we’re going to look at some maps.”

“Maps,” he repeated.

“I told you what I learned about the tracking Mark, but until we figure out the details of that, we should use this to our advantage.”

“So we are scheming again?” Sorin asked, brushing by her to get a fresh tunic from the armoire.

“I never stop scheming, Prince,” she returned sweetly, getting a little lost in the ripple of his muscles as he shrugged on the shirt.

He smirked at her. “I am getting mixed messages this morning, Princess. Are we scheming, or am I taking you back to bed?” She bit her lip, seriously contemplating her life choices at the moment, and Sorin laughed, slipping on boots. “Too late, Love. You already got me up and out of bed.”

“Oh, I will get you up all right,” she muttered.

“Such a dirty tongue before dawn,” he tsked, dropping an arm around her shoulders and leading her to the door.

“Which is what I would use to get you up,” she returned, stepping out of their quarters.

“You are going to make this a very difficult day, aren’t you?” he sighed.

“One could say it will be very hard,” she agreed nonchalantly.

He spun her, pressing her up against the wall. He bent down, speaking softly into her ear, “I want you to remember this moment, Scarlett. Tonight, when you are begging me to make you come, and I hold you right on the edge of bliss, my cock buried deep inside you, I want you to remember this

exact moment in time. Because tonight, my Love, more than begging will be required of you and that tongue.”

He pressed a hot kiss to her mouth, nipping sharply at her bottom lip, before he pulled away from her and continued onto the main deck.

Fuck. Me.

CHAPTER 16

CYRUS

“Scarlett is coming,” Cassius murmured.

They sat on a bench that ran along a portion of the quarterdeck. Cyrus had his head tipped back, eyes closed, basking in the sun that had finally decided to shine on them. His legs were stretched out in front of him, ankles crossed, and his tunic was off. Because fuck, he just wanted to absorb some sun. He had fire in his veins, sure, but he still wanted to feel as much of the sun’s heat as possible on his bare skin.

“It’s weird that you know that,” Cyrus answered. He understood it was part of the Guardian Bond and everything, but it still took some getting used to. He’d always known where Thia was because of their twin flame bond, but even that seemed different from Cassius’s bond with Scarlett. Maybe their Guardian Bond was enhanced by the fact that they were also soulmates.

Or maybe this was simply how a Guardian Bond worked.

He kind of hated it.

He wasn’t entirely sure why, but it grated on him that she would draw from Cassius. That he was always at her side. That he was so quick to put himself in danger for her. Which was stupid really. He would do the same for her. Not only because she was his queen or his prince’s twin flame, but because she was family. It didn’t bother him when Rayner or Eliza did it. It didn’t even really bother him when Sorin did.

So why did he get this irrational prickle of anger when it came to Cassius?

“See, they have their shirts off.” Scarlett’s words carried to him as Sorin and the queen reached the top of the stairs that led up from the main deck.

“For the love of Anala,” Sorin muttered.

“Anala would approve. She is the goddess of the *sun*,” Scarlett quipped. “She would understand my desire to feel the sun’s warmth on my bare flesh.”

“No, Scarlett,” Sorin said, a low growl sounding in his throat.

She sighed dramatically. “And here I thought the Fae weren’t as prim and proper as the mortals.”

A shadow fell over him, blocking the sun they were arguing about, and Cyrus opened his eyes to find the king and queen standing before them. “You’re blocking access to the bright and fiery blessing of Anala, Darling. Move your royal ass.”

Scarlett scowled at him. “If I can’t enjoy the sun’s warmth, then it hardly seems fair you two get to.”

“For fuck’s sake, Scarlett,” Sorin barked. “You cannot honestly expect me to be fine with you walking around this ship without a shirt on.”

Cyrus blinked slowly. “Come again?”

“The sun is out,” Scarlett said, gesturing to the sky with her hand. “For the first time in weeks it is not cold and dreary and godsdamn miserable. I just wanted to take full advantage of it.”

“By walking around topless?” Cyrus repeated.

Cassius chuckled beside him, drawing Cyrus’s attention to the male. He hadn’t even opened his eyes, clearly so used to Scarlett and her antics he just went with them at this point. “Imagine what he will do when he learns of your time at the beaches during the summers in Baylorin, Seastar.”

“I could never. They’d be scandalized,” she said with mock horror, bringing her hand dramatically to her chest before she plopped down next to Cassius on the bench. Sorin’s eyes narrowed on his wife. “And *no*,” she said, her attention turning back to Cyrus. “I do not wish to walk around the ship topless. I simply wanted to lie in the sun for a while.”

Cassius chuckled again. “I am assuming you did not seek us out to discuss the matter of your being seen so immodestly on this ship?”

“No,” Scarlett sighed. Then she added, “We have several things to discuss.”

Cyrus and Cassius both turned to her at the tone of her voice. It had an edge of anxious nervousness about it, and she was worrying her bottom lip. He rarely saw the queen uncertain, but then again, she had been making an effort to be more transparent with them.

“I hope the first thing on that list is taking care of that fucking tracking Mark on Cass,” Cyrus said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“That is something we need to discuss, yes,” she said, the hesitancy increasing.

“What is there to discuss? Do you know how to remove it or not?” he demanded.

“I think I found the way to nullify it, yes. There are a few details to work out, but...”

“What are you thinking, Seastar?” Cassius asked gently when she trailed off. His arm slid around her shoulders, her head falling against him.

“That maybe we should leave it for now?”

She voiced the idea as a question, clearly uncertain of the idea.

And she should be. Because fuck no.

“We are not leaving a Mark on him that allows them to know his exact location at any point in time,” Cyrus snapped, shooting to his feet.

Scarlett sent a look at Sorin, who was looking back and forth between him and Cassius, a furrow in his brow.

“Right now, they do not know that *we* know about the Mark,” Scarlett said. “We have an advantage here. The minute I nullify that Mark, we lose that advantage.”

“And you think it is better to have the Maraans know exactly where we are?” Cyrus asked in disbelief.

“No,” she countered. “I just think we should be strategic about when we remove it.”

“So you want to, what? Leave it on him until we get to Avonleya?”

“No,” she said again, her tone tightening as he wore on her patience. “I don’t want to wait too long. I don’t want to lead them directly to Avonleya. I just think this could be a potential opportunity, and we would be stupid to not at least consider ways to use it while we figure this out.”

Godsdamnit. She was right. The strategist in him knew that. The part of him that knew how to play on people’s weaknesses and use them against themselves knew she was brilliant to think of things like this. She made a damn good point about using this to our advantage, letting the Maraans think they had one up on them. They’d lost an immense advantage when they’d been surprised and the Maraans had learned that Sorin lived. This was an opportunity to gain a surprise of their own. They needed to be smart about this.

He just wished that Mark was on anyone else.

He pushed his hand through his hair. “What are you thinking?”

“I was hoping you and I could toss around ideas after we discuss a few other things,” she answered tentatively. Cyrus met her gaze, and he could see it in her eyes. She felt guilty about this. She didn’t like leaving this Mark on Cassius any more than he did. This choice was being made as a queen rather than as a friend, and it was agonizing for her.

“Yeah, we can do that,” Cyrus answered, rubbing at the back of his neck. “If Cass is fine with that.”

“Whatever you need, Seastar,” Cassius answered, his arm tightening around her shoulders.

Cyrus gritted his teeth in annoyance, because of course he wouldn’t argue about this with her. He held no regard for his own well-being when it came to her.

And why the fuck did it bother him so damn much?

“Have you two discussed your power?” Scarlett asked him, shifting on the bench so she was facing Cassius.

“Not much,” Cassius answered. “Cyrus just woke up a bit ago.”

“You haven’t slept?”

“I have, but not as much as the rest of you.”

“He fed, Scarlett,” Sorin chimed in. “He likely did not need the couple days’ worth of restorative sleep the rest of us did. He does not have Fae magic.”

“That makes sense,” she said. “Your power reserves are full then?”

“They feel as they normally do after Cyrus gives me blood.”

Scarlett was shaking her head, pushing to her feet. She turned, resting her hands on the ship railing, looking out at the sea. “That’s not enough, Cass,” she finally said. “Not anymore.”

“What does that mean?” Cyrus asked.

She turned back to face them. “He needs a Source.”

“I am only half-Avonleyan,” Cassius argued. “I do not think a Source is necessary.”

“You are wrong,” she replied simply. “Your Witch gifts may not require a power Source, but that other half? Cassius, you sprouted wings. You produced some type of flames. Your eyes changed. That is powerful magic. You will need a Source.”

“I think we should be sure before we jump to that conclusion.”

“And what will you do when Cyrus isn’t nearby to give you blood? You already fought me about feeding from another Fae.”

He had?

Cyrus looked at Cassius, but his gaze was firmly fixed on his Ward.

“That is no different from a Source,” Cassius was countering. “In fact, a Source is worse. Then I have only one option, and I do not have a Guardian as a back-up plan.”

Scarlett winced. It was slight, but Cyrus saw it. He could only assume Sorin did too.

“Stop being an ass,” she spat. “You’re not a godsdamn back-up plan, and you know it.”

Gods, these two bickered like siblings.

“This isn’t a big deal,” Cyrus cut in. “I can be his Source. Isn’t that basically what I am anyway?”

“No,” Cassius said in a tone that said he wasn’t arguing about this any more.

Too bad for him the female beside him was as stubborn as they come.

Scarlett seemed to inhale deeply, as if she were trying to calm herself, before she said carefully, “I understand the hesitation, Cass. I get it. When Sorin wanted to—”

“This is nothing like you and Sorin, Scarlett,” Cassius snapped, getting to his feet.

“I think it might be, Cass,” she said quietly.

“I said no,” he snarled, before snatching up his discarded tunic and stalking away from them.

“Cassius!” Scarlett called, starting to go after him, but Sorin gently gripped her arm.

“Give him some time, Love. You struggled with this too.”

“He needs this, Sorin. Not having a Source makes him vulnerable.”

“I know. But I also recall fighting with you for weeks about simply feeding.”

“That was...different,” she grumbled, her arms crossing.

“Mhmm,” he murmured, bending and pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “You can talk to him again about it later. Tomorrow perhaps.”

“Perhaps,” she muttered in a mocking tone, rolling her eyes, and a small smirk pulled at Sorin’s mouth. Then she turned to Cyrus. “You have not discussed his power at all?”

“No,” Cyrus replied. “There were The Farewells yesterday, and afterwards... Well, you know how we were all feeling. When I woke this morning, I washed up and changed. I found him in the dining room. We ate a little bit, then came up here. We really haven’t had much time to talk.”

“Any ideas? I don’t know how much of his magic you saw...” She trailed off, looking up at him, and there was hope in her eyes. Hope that he had answers for her.

“One minute he was fighting beside me, the next he was yelling your name and was in the sky,” Cyrus answered, wishing he could give her more. “Sorin and I both tried to keep an eye on you two, but we had our own seraphs to worry about. Cass went to protect you, and I stayed to protect Sorin.”

Scarlett swallowed thickly. “Thank you.”

Cyrus nodded as Sorin tugged her into his side.

“What thoughts do you have on his gifts?” Sorin asked.

“Wings. Fire. It almost appeared as if he were going to shift into a...”

He trailed off because that wasn’t possible.

“A dragon,” Scarlett finished for him. “He was partially shifted into a dragon. I could see his eyes, Cyrus. They looked like Ranvir’s. And his wings were exactly like Ranvir’s, only smaller.”

Cyrus rubbed at the back of his neck. “Not much is known about Sargon. I tried to look into it some at the Black Halls, but ran out of time. I was hoping to look into it more once we get to Avonleya.”

He gave them the brief rundown of what he knew, things he’d already shared with Cassius.

“He needs a Source, Cyrus,” Scarlett said, a soft plea in her tone. “He doesn’t understand yet, but feeding the way he is now and drawing from a Source are very different. It will make it easier to access and master his gifts.”

“I will talk to him,” Cyrus said, not really sure he was going to be able to sway the male, but he’d try. For Scarlett and for Cassius.

“Before you do, you should know what being a Source entails,” Sorin cut in.

“I know all of this,” Cyrus answered. “We discussed it extensively when you told me you were going to become Scarlett’s Source.”

“It’s a lifelong thing, Cyrus,” Scarlett said, stepping towards him. “You will never be able to be separated from him. And it...” She bit her bottom lip, watching him carefully.

“It is intimate,” Sorin supplied. “Not necessarily in a physical way. But it is implicit trust and knowing each other’s needs. It is the essences of vulnerability in every way, Cyrus.” Sorin’s golden eyes were boring into his as he spoke. “You need to make sure you are ready for something like that again before you offer this to him.”

“I wouldn’t have offered if I wasn’t aware of what I was getting into,” Cyrus replied.

“Really?” Sorin asked, a harsh edge to his voice. “You think I have not noticed, Cyrus? You think I do not know why you asked to go to Solembra every night when we were staying at the Black Halls? You think I do not know what memories have likely been dragged up at watching Scarlett go through nearly losing me? At having to help her through that?”

Scarlett was looking at her boots, hair falling forward to hide her face. They'd clearly discussed this before coming to speak with him and Cassius.

"I think those things are none of your business," Cyrus finally ground out. "If anything, I'd think you'd be grateful I did those things for her."

"Of course I am grateful, Cyrus," Sorin said. "Gods, I can never repay you for putting yourself through all of that to be there for her and helping her."

"It wasn't enough though, was it?"

Scarlett's head snapped up at his words. "What do you mean?"

"We wouldn't have been enough to help you survive it, would we? Me, Cass, Eliza? There is nothing we could have done to keep you... I wouldn't have been able to do enough."

"Cyrus," Scarlett said softly, her tone full of agony and pity.

"No," Sorin cut in, stepping in front of Scarlett as if to shield her. "You do not get to do this to her, Cyrus."

"Do what exactly?" he sneered. "State the truth?"

"You do not get to turn this around on her. You always do this when Merrik or Thia get brought up. You spin things and twist things so it is no longer about you, but this needs to be about you."

"Spare me the self-righteous bullshit, Sorin," Cyrus scoffed. "I'm fine. I'll convince Cassius to do this, and then it will be over and done with."

"No," Scarlett said, leaning to the side to look at him around Sorin. "I won't give you the Source Mark until you both agree and understand what it means."

"For fuck's sake, you just sat here and told me how much he needs a Source," Cyrus said. "Now you're telling me you won't do it until *you* decide we're both ready? That's rich. *You* couldn't even decide you were ready to take a throne until a godsdamn Oracle told you."

“Enough,” Sorin snarled, stepping up to Cyrus. He knew he was pushing him, that Sorin was about to take a swing at him for talking to Scarlett like that, and he wanted him to. Then he’d have an excuse to unleash all this aggression he suddenly found writhing beneath his skin.

But Scarlett was squeezing herself in between them, shoving Sorin back. There was a hardness to her features that Cyrus was certain he’d never seen directed at him. He probably deserved it.

“Tell you what, *Darling*,” she said, a cold smirk tilting on her lips. “You convince Cassius to do this, and I’ll give you the Source Mark.”

“Just like that?” he asked, watching her carefully. He knew this for what it was— some kind of trap. It was never this easy with her.

“Just like that,” she said, turning to walk away from him. She stopped at the top of the steps, looking over her shoulder at him. “But Cyrus?”

“What?” he growled, because here was the catch.

“Cassius can detect bullshit a mile away.”



“You look sad.”

Cyrus looked up to find a beauty with dark red hair smiling down at him. He hadn’t heard her come in, too lost in thoughts of a town that sat at the edge of the sea. He reached for her, wrapping an arm around her waist and tugging her into his lap. She laughed softly, nestling against his chest where she fit perfectly against him.

“I could never be sad with you around, Red,” he said, nuzzling into her neck, planting small kisses along the column of her throat.

“Eliza has red hair too, you know,” she said breathily, her head tilting to give him better access.

“Thia, if I called Eliza ‘Red,’ she’d string me up by my balls,” he deadpanned, pausing to look into her hazel eyes. The flecks of gold in them reflected the setting sun from the balcony of their room. “Besides, hers is more of a red-gold. Yours is true red. The color of flames.”

“You’ve put a lot of thought into the shade of my hair, Cyrus,” she said, amusement in her tone.

“I put a lot of thought into everything about you,” he murmured onto her skin.

She hummed in response, letting him move down her neck to the hollow of her throat. Her fingers dragged through his hair, and he felt her curl them, gently tugging him back by the scalp.

“It is okay to miss him, Cyrus.”

“I don’t miss him,” he said quickly. “How could I miss anyone when I have you? You’re all I need, Red.”

“I know what day it is,” she replied quietly. Her fingertips skated along his jaw, nails gently tilting his face up to hers. “It’s okay to miss him. It’s okay to be sad sometimes.”

“What could I possibly have to be sad about when the Fates have gifted me you, Thia?” he whispered, pulling her down to taste her lips.

“Being happy doesn’t mean we’re never sad,” she murmured back against his mouth. “You don’t have to hide the sadness from me.”

He gave her a soft smile, reaching up to thumb her bottom lip. “I think the Fates made a mistake.”

“What?”

“I think the Fates made a mistake,” he repeated. “I don’t deserve you, but they gave you to me anyway. What if they realize their error and try to take you back someday?”

“I think we decide what we’re deserving of,” Thia answered. “We chose each other, Cyrus. Not the gods, not the Fates. And if I’ve decided I’m deserving of you, then who are you to say you are not deserving of me?”



A pounding on his door jerked Cyrus from sleep, and he ran his hand down his face, trying to clear the dream from his head. He'd taken the night watch again and had sat alone for hours under the stars. Cassius hadn't come to keep him company last night. He hadn't seen him since the conversation with Scarlett and Sorin. Cyrus had looked for him but hadn't been able to find him. He could only assume he had Traveled to another ship and didn't want to be found. But that had left him alone with nothing but his thoughts. Thoughts about Cassius's power. Thoughts about things Sorin and Scarlett had said which eventually had turned to memories surging up from the depths of his soul.

Which explained the dream.

The pounding on his door came again.

“Unless we're under attack, fuck off,” he growled to whoever was on the other side. He didn't want company right now.

There was a pause, and then his Fae hearing picked up a small voice saying, “He said a bad word, Rayner.”

“You are right, Tula. He should not say that word.” Cyrus could hear the amusement in Rayner's voice.

“He does *not* get a cookie.”

Godsdamnit. Now he was swearing at a child.

Cyrus pushed himself out of the small bed, stumbling towards the door still not fully awake. He wrenched it open to find Rayner standing there holding Tula in his arms. The little

girl was giving him a disapproving look, her tiny lips pursed and baby blue eyes narrowed on him.

“You said a bad word,” she immediately chided.

He tried to hide his sigh. “I know. I’m sorry, Tula.”

“I’m eating your cookie.”

“That sounds fair.” His eyes flicked to Rayner. His grey eyes were barely moving, the normal swirling of them minuscule, which told Cyrus his power was still nearly depleted. “Is there a reason you brought her with you to wake me up?”

“I thought you would be a little more cooperative if she tagged along,” Rayner answered, not bothering to hide his smirk.

“What do you want?”

“Eliza is... Well, she does not want to take her watch on the ship with the children today.”

“And?”

“And I do not know what you did to piss off Sorin, but he insisted you be the one to take her place. He said if you resisted to tell you that he is pulling rank,” Rayner said.

Of course he did. That fucker knew he’d been on night watch only a few hours ago, and he was making him pay for speaking to Scarlett like he did yesterday. He could say no, but that would just make this all worse, and he couldn’t blame him. He’d be pissy too if someone had spoken to Thia like that.

He sighed again. “Fine. How am I getting over there?”

“He said to be on the main deck in ten minutes.”

Cyrus shut the door, cursing under his breath as he hunted for a tunic among the clothes strewn about the small quarters. He shared it with Rayner, but the Ash Rider rarely slept here. He kept his clothing in here. That was about it.

He was shoving daggers and knives into place as he trudged to the main deck. He wasn’t surprised to find Sorin

waiting for him, but he was surprised to see Briar there as well. Great. A double dressing-down from the princes. Just what he needed today.

“Neve will be there to relieve you before the afternoon meeting,” Sorin said by way of greeting. “Scarlett wants to discuss strategy with this tracking Mark among other things.”

“Fine,” Cyrus muttered. Sorin studied him for a long moment, before he nodded at Briar and a water portal appeared. Cyrus straightened. “Can you still not create fire portals?”

Sorin’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Scarlett and I are working on it.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“We would have if you hadn’t been such a godsdamn asshole yesterday.”

“What about Rayner? His magic is going to take weeks to fully replenish,” Cyrus said.

“Later, Cyrus.” Sorin jerked his chin to the portal.

Cyrus ground his molars together but didn’t say anything else, stepping through the portal to another ship. The sun had disappeared behind clouds again today, which was fitting, he supposed. Sawyer spotted him and waved. Obviously that’s who he was relieving. He rarely took watch on this ship, mainly because he’d never been needed. With the loss of Nakoia and so many others after that battle though, he imagined he’d be taking more watch duties until they reached Avonleya.

Despite the overcast sky, there were children everywhere. Tava and Lynnea were busy trying to get them all rounded up for lunch, herding them towards the food tables that Lynnea had set out. When Tava’s gaze skimmed over him, she offered a little wave, moving his way.

“Lady Tava,” he greeted with a nod.

“Cyrus,” she replied. “How are you?”

“As good as I can be still stuck on a ship,” he muttered. Tava tilted her head at the response, her golden braid slipping over her shoulder with the movement. “Where’s Drake? He’s rarely away from your side.”

“He is off with Cassius somewhere,” Tava said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

He murmured something in response, trying not to be annoyed by that statement. When the silence became palpable, she added slowly, “I am sure they will be back shortly. Cassius was practicing his Traveling and wanted to practice while carrying someone with him”

“That’s a good idea,” Cyrus answered, eyes moving over all the little people running around the deck.

Soft fingers grazed his forearm. “They are friends, Cyrus.”

“What?” he asked, swinging his gaze to her.

“Drake and Cassius,” she said. “They are just very close friends. He lived with us for many years.”

“I know that.”

Her turquoise eyes seemed to see into the depths of his being. She saw everything in the background. It made her an asset. It was how he’d operated for decades, how he’d conned so many. Which is why he knew she was seeing far more than he wanted her to.

He cleared his throat. “And Callan?”

It was Tava’s turn to stiffen, but she recovered quickly. “I have not seen Callan since the battle.”

“That was four days ago.”

“I know that,” she answered softly, parroting his words from moments before.

“Aren’t we a pair?” Cyrus said with a harsh laugh, sliding his hands into his pockets.

“That we are,” the Lady answered with a small smile. “I need to go help with the children...”

“Go. I’m on watch. Let me know if you need anything.”

Tava nodded again, giving him another quick smile that didn’t meet her eyes before moving to help two young kids with plates as they moved through the food line.

It was a few hours later when Cyrus was leaning against a railing out of the way, rolling flames along his knuckles, that Cassius and Drake appeared out of the air across the deck. Cass was laughing, slapping Drake on the back as the man doubled over, hands on his knees. Cyrus could only assume he was having a rough reaction to Traveling.

As if on instinct, Cassius’s eyes snapped to him, and Cyrus stood up straighter, his flames winking out. A slight frown appeared on Cassius’s mouth, and he said something to Drake. Drake nodded, heading towards his sister, while Cassius moved in his direction.

“What are you doing on this ship?” Cassius asked once he was close enough.

“Sorin has me on watch duty.”

“Didn’t you have night watch?”

“Yep. I pissed him off a little bit,” Cyrus said with a bitter laugh.

Cassius didn’t smile. “Have you slept at all?”

“Rayner woke me up to come on duty. Neve should be here any moment though.”

“Then you are sleeping?”

“Then we have a meeting.” Cassius nodded, but didn’t look happy about it. “What about you? You slept last night, I assume?”

He tried not to sound bitter, but he heard it in his tone. Cassius gave him an odd look. “I was with Scarlett working on something. She did not tell you?”

Cyrus shook his head. “You two made up, then?”

He wasn’t sure why that bothered him. That they had already gotten over their little spat they’d had while he was

still nursing his pride.

“Scarlett and I argue like that all the time. There has only been one time we have truly fought.” He paused before adding, “It did not end well.”

“So you haven’t slept either then?” Cyrus asked.

“Scarlett and I slept for a few hours in the evening, but I assumed you would be sleeping after the night watch. It is why I did not come find you to practice Traveling,” Cassius said.

And something in Cyrus calmed at those words. Not by much, but it loosened enough for him to breathe a little easier.

Before he could respond, a water portal appeared, and Neve stepped through. Her dark skin seemed pale, and sad, grey eyes met his. The Water Court was still grieving Nakoa. They all were, but to lose an Inner Court member like that... Cyrus didn’t want to think about it.

Neve nodded once in greeting. “Briar said to send a message if you need a portal.”

“I’ve got him,” Cassius answered, and Neve gave a sad smile before she turned away from them. Cassius’s brown eye fixed on him, his patch in place over the other one. “I need to grab something from my room before this meeting.”

Cyrus nodded, and Cass’s hand landed on his shoulder, pulling him through the air. He was impressed when Cass landed them inside the hallway between the cabins instead of on the decks.

“You’re getting skilled at that,” Cyrus said while Cassius pushed into the room he shared with Drake. It was much tidier than his and Rayner’s. Clothes were folded and either in the armoire or stacked neatly on the desk chair. There were two beds, both made, and a few small personal effects were scattered across the desk.

“We have been practicing it nearly every day. I should hope so,” Cassius replied, moving to the armoire.

“That magic of yours will be much harder to control,” Cyrus commented, moving to the desk. He was a nosy asshole;

he could admit that. It was habit. Even the smallest thing could give you leverage over someone.

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about that,” Cass said, slipping his tunic over his head in favor of another short-sleeved one. “I know I need to practice with it, but one would think practicing with some sort of fire gift on a ship would be a bad idea.”

He made a valid point, but if he could somehow isolate the wings from the fire, he could at least practice with that part of his power. Having someone who could be in the sky with Scarlett would level the field at least a little bit.

He was about to respond when his eyes fell on a drawing. The woman was beautiful. Golden hair. Turquoise eyes. Stunning features.

“This yours?” Cyrus asked, picking it up.

“What?” Cass asked, moving to his side and peering over his shoulder. “No. That is Drake’s. His mother.”

Cyrus had always thought the Tyndell siblings looked oddly familiar, but he could swear he knew this woman. He couldn’t quite place her, and it was going to bother him until he figured it out. Lord Tyndell had been right when he’d said Tava looked nearly identical to her mother. The question still remained though: why did Lord Tyndell care so much for them?

He placed the sketch back onto the desk where he’d found it, following Cass from the room. As they made their way to the dining room, he said cautiously, “How are your reserves after all that Traveling?”

“The Traveling with Drake was not what drained them,” Cass answered.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the scouting I was doing with Scarlett is what drained them.”

Cyrus reached out, gripping his arm to stop him. “What scouting? Why were you Traveling with depleted reserves?”

“I’m sure we will talk about the scouting shortly, and like I said, I thought you were sleeping this morning. I did not want to bother you for blood.”

“Bother me for...” Cyrus trailed off, his brows knitting together. “You needing blood isn’t a bother, Cass. It’s a necessity. Speaking of which, we need to discuss this Source business.”

“No,” Cassius said, his eye instantly darkening, features hardening.

He pulled his arm from Cyrus’s grip and continued on his way to the dining room, leaving Cyrus to hurry after him. “Why? I’m already giving you blood daily. How is this any different?”

“It is very different, Cyrus,” Cassius replied, not bothering to look at him.

“How?” Cyrus insisted.

Cassius stopped so quickly, Cyrus nearly ran into him. The Queen’s Hand rounded on him, hissing low, “It is a lifelong commitment, Cyrus. Until one of us dies. I would never ask you to tie your life to mine in that way.”

“You’re not asking. I’m offering,” Cyrus countered.

“And I am declining the offer.”

“Why? You need a Source, Cass. Are you going to ask some other Fae?”

“I do not need a Source.”

“Scarlett says otherwise.”

Cassius scoffed. “Despite what she seems to think, she does, in fact, not know everything.”

Cyrus arched a brow, his lips quirking up on one side. “I don’t know, Cass. She’s rarely wrong. Not when it comes to this kind of stuff.”

“We will wait until we get to Avonleya. Until we can learn more about it,” Cassius said, turning and continuing on the way to the dining hall.

“What more do we need to learn? Scarlett and Sorin have a Source bond. They can answer any questions we might have,” Cyrus argued.

Cassius stopped again outside the make-shift dining room. “Scarlett and Sorin are different.”

“How so?”

“They are twin flames for starters, and she is full-blooded Avonleyan.”

“And yet you willingly tied your life to hers to be her Guardian.”

“Again, different,” Cassius said, his arms crossing over his chest.

“How is tying your life to hers different from this?” Cyrus demanded.

Cassius studied him for a long moment before his arms dropped to his sides. “You are not ready for this, Cyrus.”

“And you think you know me well enough to make that call?”

Cassius’s hands came up on either side of his head, caging him against the wall. He was an inch taller, forcing Cyrus to tilt his head up slightly as Cassius brought his face inches from his. “That’s the problem, isn’t it? Either I do not know you well enough to make that call, which means you should not be my Source. Or I do know you well enough to know that you are not ready to do this, and I would be a bastard to let you.”

He pushed off the wall, leaving Cyrus standing there staring after him as he walked into the dining room.

Cyrus turned to find Sorin and Scarlett making their way to the room. As she passed by him, Scarlett met his gaze, batting her lashes, as she said far too sweetly, “Looks like Cass just smelled some bullshit.”

CHAPTER 17

CALLAN

Callan looked up as Scarlett and Sorin entered. Scarlett was looking back over her shoulder where Cyrus was scowling at her, flipping her off. She smirked at him, a sneering curl of her lips, and Callan wondered at the display. He'd never seen those two upset with each other, but there was clearly some tension now.

Cyrus moved and climbed onto the bench next to Cassius where he usually sat, while Sorin ushered Scarlett to the head of the table to Cassius's left. Drake was on the other side of the table from Callan, down a few seats. He was speaking in a low voice with Eliza and Rayner. Tava wasn't here yet. The Ash Rider had Tula curled up on his lap. The little girl was sleeping, blonde curls falling into her face. Rayner brushed them back as he nodded at whatever Drake was saying. The general's features were hard, a mask of unreadable emotion. He hadn't seen Eliza since the battle other than at The Farewell ceremony when they'd honored their fallen. Fae send-offs were beautiful. There was no other way to describe them. There had been words spoken, but he didn't know or understand the language. He didn't need to though. The words seemed to settle in his soul, as if his very being understood them even if he didn't.

And as he had watched the Fae release the ashes of their fallen, all he could think about was that he would not get to do this for Finn and Sloan. There had been a big procession for his parents after the "tragedy" of their death. Mikale had given a grand speech at the funeral, praising his parents for how they

had ruled Windonelle. He hadn't been able to attend, of course, but at least there had been something for them.

There would be no funeral, no goodbye, no sendoff for Finn and Sloan. There would be no honoring his friends for giving their lives in an effort to protect him and his family. There would be nothing. Nothing to remember them by. Nothing to pay homage to them for being with him every day for years, training specifically to be his personal guards. There would be nothing.

What did Alaric do with their bodies? Were they simply dumped into a mass grave like they'd done with all those innocent children? Already forgotten? Everyone moving on as if they'd never been in the first place?

Auberon and Azrael sat next to him. They were both silent, faces hard as stone, but their posture had shifted over the weeks they'd been at sea. They used to be stiff and tension-filled at these meetings. Now they seemed almost relaxed, if not bored. They were part of the conversations more rather than just sitting on the fringes.

His gaze moved back to the head of the table. Scarlett and Cassius were leaning in close, murmuring to each other. Sorin was speaking with Briar on his left, and Callan saw this for what it was. Somehow, this group of mismatched bloodlines, former enemies, and longtime allies had become a Court all of their own, and it made him wonder what their world was going to look like when they went back if they managed to win this war.

"Where is Tava?" Callan asked Drake when a few more minutes passed and she did not appear.

Drake glanced over at him, frowning slightly. "She is not coming."

"What? Why?"

Tava was always at these meetings. She rarely spoke, but that didn't surprise him. The Lady observed more than she participated.

“I have not had a chance to talk with her yet. She informed me when I was heading this way,” Drake answered, his frown deepening.

“Where is she?”

“She was heading up to the main deck.”

Callan was already standing, unsure why he felt the need to go see her at this very moment, but Scarlett stopped him.

“Callan, I have some questions for you before you go.” He paused, a leg on either side of the bench, meeting her gaze. “How was Windonelle’s relationship with the other kingdoms? Particularly Rydeon?”

He sat back down on the bench. “That is an odd inquiry.”

“It is, isn’t it?” she agreed with a small smile. Her chin was resting in her hand as it often did at these meetings. Her fingers tapped along the tabletop, and he could practically see thoughts and ideas swirling in her mind as she planned and plotted.

“I rarely heard much about Toreall,” Callan answered. “Our relations with them were so fortified, it was never a question.”

“And Rydeon?” Scarlett pressed.

“We did not necessarily have strained relations with Rydeon, but their leadership was newer. There had been a change of power there more recently than there had been in Toreall,” Callan explained. “Of course, now we know that Maraans occupy the thrones, but apparently that happened more recently in Rydeon than it did in Toreall.”

“That’s true,” Cyrus said suddenly, sitting up a little straighter. “We cared little about mortal politics, but we always knew who sat on the thrones. The current Toreall king has been on the throne for several decades, but Rydeon...” His gaze swung to Callan. “When did the current Rydeon king take the throne?”

“Maybe two decades ago?” Callan said.

“Twenty-one years ago if memory serves,” Cyrus said.

“I do not recall exactly, but that sounds right. Why exactly does it matter?”

“Exactly when doesn’t matter,” Scarlett cut in, giving Cyrus an odd look, but the Fire Second didn’t appear to be listening anymore, lost in his own thoughts now. “But what you’re saying is they’ve had control over Toreall longer than they’ve had control over Rydeon, yes?”

“Yes,” Callan answered. Scarlett appeared to be mulling this over. “Is that all your questions?”

“No,” Scarlett said, beckoning him over to her. When he got to her side, he found a map of their continent spread out before her. She pointed to a spot in Rydeon a little southwest of the capital. There were a few small villages scattered about the area. “Is there anything here? Aside from the towns?”

“Well, yeah,” Callan said, hand rubbing along his jaw. “That is where the Eternal Necropolis is.”

“The what?” Scarlett asked with a slight frown.

“The Eternal Necropolis,” Callan said again, pointing at the spot she had asked about. “That is where the Rydeon royalty entomb their dead.”

“It is a mausoleum?” Sorin asked.

Callan shook his head. “No. It is far more than that. There is a network of stone pathways and chambers there. It is ancient. The Rydeons believe the gods blessed the area, and maybe they are right. The gods’ symbols are carved all over the stones.”

“You have been there?” Scarlett asked in surprise.

“A couple times,” Callan answered. “In the center is a chamber where the Royal families are entombed. It is a large, circular chamber with mirrors between the tombs.”

“Mirrors?” Cyrus asked.

Callan nodded. “There is a table in the center of the chamber.”

“Let me get this straight,” Scarlett said, sitting back in her chair and looking up at him. “There is an ancient network of the dead in the center of the continent?”

Callan grimaced. “Not the best wording, but yes, I suppose there is.”

Scarlett turned to Sorin. “And *none* of the centuries old Fae in this room knew about this place?”

They all grumbled something, Scarlett looking annoyed.

“Anything else?” Callan asked when she didn’t immediately ask any more questions.

Her head tilted, a knowing look entering her silvery-blue eyes. “That is all for now.”

He quickly made his way out of the room. He wasn’t exactly needed in those meetings. Sure, he learned a great deal from listening, but he wasn’t really paramount to any of the battle strategies. Scarlett had said he wasn’t ready, and while he hated it, she was right. He wouldn’t have survived if he’d been in the thick of battle a few days ago. Drake would fill him in on anything he needed to know.

He stepped out into the daylight, the sun obscured behind clouds. They’d had one day of sunshine and warmth yesterday, and he’d spent it with Eva, reading to her all afternoon.

He scanned the deck, immediately spotting Tava. She was leaning on the side of the ship, her forearms braced on the edge. She still wore dresses most days, the attire likely ingrained in her. Today was no different with a teal gown fluttering around her ankles in the breeze. Her golden hair was swaying gently, half tied back with a ribbon.

Callan made his way towards her, and when he leaned on the edge beside her, she didn’t look at him. He suddenly was unsure why he’d even sought her out. Why had he felt this need to speak with her only to find himself unsure of what to say now that he’d found her?

That had been the problem for weeks now. He didn’t know what to say to her because he didn’t know what he was doing.

He didn't know what his future looked like. He just didn't know.

"I wanted to check on you," he finally said. "When Drake said you were not coming to the meeting... I wanted to check on you."

Her eyes flicked to him for the briefest of moments before she looked back out at the horizon. She remained quiet for so long, Callan began to wonder if she was going to speak at all.

"I never had a desire to travel," she said, her eyes staying fixed on the water. She could be talking to the sea for as much as she acknowledged his presence. "When I was a child, I can remember my father—" She stopped, seeming to think on that term before continuing. "He would prepare to go on these extended trips away, once again leaving us with a nursemaid. I would cry and beg to go with him, not because I wanted to travel, but because I wanted to be with him. He would always tell me he needed me home, safe and tucked away under Drake's watchful eye. Even when I was scarcely walking, Drake was always watching over me." She smiled softly at the memory. "As I got older, I would ask to go along because I was lonely, not because I wanted to see beyond Baylorin. I simply wanted to be with him instead of always being left behind. His answer changed, telling me I did not want that, that I wanted the quiet life provided by staying behind. Eventually, I stopped asking to travel, convinced I was content with what was expected of me.

"But I never really had any genuine desire to travel," she said again. "Other girls would speak of wishing to see the other kingdoms. Some would whisper of secret desires to see the Fae lands, to experience some kind of adventure. But I have always been content with the serenity of being in the background, the comfort of home, and the familiarity of my family."

She fell quiet, and it took a moment before Callan said anything, uncertain of what she was looking for. "There is nothing wrong with that, Tava."

“There is nothing wrong with that,” she agreed, and he had to wonder why she was telling him any of this, until the next words came from her mouth. “I was content, Callan.” She finally turned to look at him, and the weight of her stare had him nearly flinching back. “I did not go to the meeting today because for just a moment, I wanted to remember what it was like to be in the background. I wanted to remember what it was like to be...happy.”

Her eyes went back to the water, hair fluttering across her face.

What was he supposed to say to that? Tell her everything would be all right? He couldn't promise that. Tell her he was sorry she had been dragged into this? The sentiment wouldn't change anything.

“I know life is not always wonderful. My father...tried to shield us from the harshness of it. Even Drake. He did not want him taking over his position as the leading army commander. How does that stack up against the man who is a Maraan Lord?” she asked. “How am I supposed to reconcile any of that in my mind?”

“I do not know, Tava,” he answered gently, wanting to reach out and offer a comforting touch, but he didn't know if that was his place anymore.

She pushed off the edge, turning to face him fully, wrapping her arms tightly around herself. “I am not one to avoid uncomfortable situations.”

“I know,” he replied, unsure of where she was going with yet another sudden change of subject. A wry grin lifted the corner of his mouth. “As I recall, you are painfully candid when we are alone.”

“Painfully?” she questioned, a slight frown pulling on her lips.

He slid his hands into his pockets as his fingers twitched again to ease that tension he could see on her features. “For my pride, yes, but it was needed and deserved.”

“We are both trying to process hard things right now,” she continued, her eyes darting to the side, back to the water. She sucked in a deep breath, her arms squeezing herself tighter before she said, her words a rush that told Callan just how rattled this conversation was making her. “I need to know if while I am processing the loss of my father, if I need to be processing the end of this as well, because I would rather do so all at once rather than drag it out one after another. And—”

Her words were cut off as his arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her flush against his body. His mouth landed on hers, and she stiffened in surprise, but that only lasted a few seconds as his lips gently coaxed her to relax. Pure light. That’s what she tasted like. Just like the one and only other time they’d kissed that night in the conservatory. That kiss had been a ruse, a plot by Tava to catch Veda in her conniving acts, but this kiss? This kiss was real and went beyond anything he’d imagined. Her soft mouth moved against his, and when his tongue swiped across the seam of her lips, she opened for him immediately, a low rumble sounding from his throat. At some point, he had moved them, and she was up against the side of the ship, her back arching slightly around his arm at her waist.

A soft sigh from her had Callan gently ending the kiss, brushing his lips over hers once more before resting his brow against hers. “I am sorry,” he murmured, searching her turquoise eyes. One of her hands was on his shoulder, the other fisted in his shirt. “I should not have done that.”

“It is all right,” she said breathlessly. She reached up, touching her flushed cheek. “I just need a moment...” She cleared her throat, pulling away from him and smoothing her hands down her skirts. He still had her caged against the side of the ship, and her gaze dipped down to the floor. “That did not clear anything up.”

He placed his fingertips under her chin, titling her face back up to his. This time when her eyes met his, they were shuttered, clearly trying to prepare herself. “I do not know what the future holds for me anymore.”

“None of us do.”

“I know, but... There are so many changes happening so fast. And now I have Eva to worry about...” The more he spoke, the more her eyes hardened, shutting him out. “I do not know who I will be when this is over.”

“I understand.”

And the tone of her voice nearly broke him. It was pleasing and demure. It was the voice of a Lady of the Court.

He moved his hand up to cup her cheek. “Litte Fox—”

“You do not get to call me that anymore, Cal— Your Majesty.”

He shook his head, fierce denial coursing through him. “Don’t. Don’t do that, Tava.”

“I never wanted to travel, Callan,” she said, her voice cracking the smallest amount. “I was content. *You* asked me to travel. You asked me to stop the ruse, knowing full well it had stopped being a ruse long before that night. I tried to keep the boundary. You asked me to step over it to explore unfamiliar territory. And I thought...” She inhaled sharply, a harsh shudder coursing through her. “I understand that what happened, the losses you have faced, are hard. That you have found yourself shoved into roles you did not expect to fulfill for years. But when you asked me to... I thought it meant we would face those things together, learn who we would be on the other side of all of this together.”

“Tava,” he sighed, reaching up to cup her face, relieved when she let him. “It would be wrong of me to ask you to wait for me.”

“I would not, even if you asked me to,” she returned simply. “But as I have said, I was not looking for any adventures in the first place.”

“You do not belong in the background, Tava,” Callan said. “This is not what I intended. It is not what I want.”

“And what is it you do want, Callan?”

What he wanted was to go back. He wanted to go back to when he’d thought his life was so damn complicated, but it

was simple compared to this. He wanted to go back to the moment she had agreed to all of this, before everything had changed. When he thought he could be what she needed. When he was a different person, and she was a different person. But maybe she was right. Maybe he'd been looking at this all wrong. Maybe he didn't need to be put together, have it all figured out.

“What do you want?” he countered.

“I did not attend the meeting today because I wanted to remember what it felt like to be content,” she said, reaching up and gently pulling his hand from her face. “And I find I am no longer content not to travel.”

“You still want this?” he pressed.

“I would consider it,” she agreed. “But you need to be sure, Callan. I am not a thing that you can pick up when it is convenient for you, and push aside when times get hard.”

“I know. I am sorry if I made you feel that way,” he said. Her eyes were still hard, keeping him out.

“I am not pushing you, Callan. That would be cruel after everything we have experienced, and I understand if you need time. I do. But I cannot be stuck in this in between. I cannot sit here and be uncertain of what is expected of me or what my role is now. I simply can't.” He opened his mouth to say something, but she held up a hand. “Please, let me get this out. I want you to think about it, Callan. I want you to take the time and make sure you are truly ready for this before you ask it of me again.”

Callan swallowed hard, understanding what she was saying. “And in the meantime?”

She gave him a sad smile, pushing up onto her toes. Her lips were soft against his cheek. “In the meantime, I guess we try to figure things out on our own instead of together.” She took a step away from him before halting and looking back at the water once more. “Can you tell Scarlett the waters are getting darker? I think she will find that interesting.”

Then she walked away from him, and he didn't stop her.

CHAPTER 18

SORIN

“You cannot seriously be considering this,” Cyrus said, disbelief clear in his tone. The dining room had cleared out, leaving only Sorin and his Second. Scarlett had gone to see the children, Cassius going with her, and everyone else had left to go on various watches.

He’d stayed behind to hash things out with his Second. There was too much going on to have this kind of tension among his family, but he knew Cyrus’s objections to this were based on more than the danger it put their queen in.

Because Scarlett had been right.

Again.

And now he was wondering how he’d missed it when it was so obvious.

“You can certainly try to change her mind,” Sorin said, settling back into his chair as he relaxed with just Cyrus in here.

Cyrus scoffed at him. “Do not act as if you are fine with Scarlett proposing this.”

“You have to admit, it is a rather brilliant plan.”

“Of course it’s fucking brilliant,” Cyrus muttered.

“And since they are the only ones who can Travel, they sort of need to be involved in the thick of it.”

Cyrus’s jaw was so taut, Sorin was surprised he didn’t crack a molar. “So she and Cassius have already been doing

this?”

Sorin nodded. “Scarlett and I chose a random location on a map. She and Cassius have been Traveling back and forth from there all night. They made random stops along the way to make it appear as if they were looking for a specific location.”

“Alaric isn’t stupid. He’s going to realize they are stationary here in this spot the longest.”

“That’s not the point. We want them to think we are looking into something. If Cassius repeatedly returns to the same spot, they are going to think we have discovered something.”

“Why not just go to Rydeon and remove the Mark? Get it over with?”

“Cyrus,” Sorin sighed, rubbing his brow with his thumb and forefinger. “I know you understand the strategy behind this. You know we need the exact center of a continent, which is where this Eternal Necropolis sits. None of us know Pyry well enough to even begin to calculate where the exact center of that continent would be located. Why don’t we discuss what is really going on here?”

“There is nothing to discuss.”

“No? We are not going to discuss the increased drinking at the Black Halls? The nights in Solembra? Why you are volunteering for the night watches all the time these days?”

“Your point?”

“My point is that you get this way when you are trying to fight things you cannot.”

“So philosophical lately,” Cyrus sneered. “Is this some ‘I-almost-died’ thing?”

“You also become a bigger asshole when you cannot keep thoughts of Merrik and Thia shoved down instead of actually dealing with them.”

“You have *no idea* what it is like, Sorin,” Cyrus snarled, his finger jabbing in his direction. “None. Do not sit and preach at me about dealing with repressed emotions when you

spiraled into some sort of pity-party when Eliné left, threw your relationship with Talwyn out the fucking window, and then wallowed in the mortal lands for three godsdamned years, even if it was Talwyn who sent you there. Forgive me if I do not find any wisdom you have to impart on the subject particularly enlightening.”

Sorin kept his features impassive, despite the mental flinch at his words. Cyrus had said much worse things to him in the years immediately after Thia’s death. This mood of his was nothing compared to some of the pits his friend had spiraled into then, but he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t worried about this one. It’d been a good decade since he had gone this far. He was good at hiding it. Good at laughing and joking, using it to hide his grief. He seemed to believe the rest of them were convinced he’d moved on, but they knew better. Just like they all knew Eliza was taking the loss of Nakoa far harder than she’d ever let on. Just like they all knew the reasons Rayner had become so attached to Tula.

“Perhaps I do not understand, but Scarlett has some idea ___”

“I knew this was really about that. I will apologize to her,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“Do not do me any favors, Cyrus,” Sorin said coldly. “She will recognize it for the false apology it is anyway.”

Cyrus didn’t respond, turning to look out the windows running along the back of the room, and Sorin waited. This was going to go one of two ways. He either wanted to have a conversation about this, or—

“Scarlett doesn’t have any idea either,” Cyrus snapped. “She was able to save you. The Fates decided she was worthy of keeping her twin flame. I had to give mine back. The two people I have loved so deeply... They found me unworthy of both of them. So no, Sorin, she does not have any idea. None of you do.”

And what was he supposed to say to that? It wouldn’t matter right now anyway. Sorin had learned over the decades that sometimes Cyrus just needed to put voice to all his

thoughts. He didn't want a response from anyone. He just needed them said aloud. Eventually they would speak of the things he was saying now, but it would not be today. If Sorin tried, Cyrus would shut down completely.

His friend fell silent, eyes going back to the window, to the sea. Several minutes passed before he said, "I'm so tired of the godsdamned sea."

"I know, Cyrus."

He sighed heavily. "I will talk to Scarlett."

"I know."

"You should have hit me for speaking to her like that. I know you wanted to."

"I am sure she will."

Cyrus huffed a laugh, a hand coming up to rub at the back of his neck. "Tell me about your power. What's going on with it?"

Now it was Sorin's turn to clench his jaw. "We do not know. I still cannot create fire portals, and it feels...less than."

"Explain."

Sorin tapped a finger on the table, irritation and anxiety warring in his gut. "My magic reserves are full, but they feel...smaller."

Cyrus was silent for a moment, letting that sink in, before he said, "You are not as powerful."

Sorin nodded once. "And every time I tap into them, it is as though they shrink even more when I have given them time to refill."

"She knows?"

"Scarlett knows."

"And you still let her draw from you?"

His finger tapped a little faster. "I am her Source, Cyrus. If only one of us can be at full strength, it needs to be her. But we have an agreement about the issue."

Cyrus leaned forward, bracing his arms on the table. “What are you going to do?”

He pushed out a long breath. “I do not know. I was going to see Beatrix after this. See if she has any insight.”

Cyrus was already getting to his feet. “I’ll go with you.”

Sorin nodded, standing, and they fell into step beside each other as they went in search of the Witch that was bound to the Fire Court.

“Has Scarlett spoken to the Night Lord or whatever he calls himself? Maybe he would know something,” Cyrus said as they moved across the deck.

Sorin shook his head. “As far as I know, she hasn’t seen or spoken to him since he told her how to bring me back. And she cannot simply summon him. Especially not here, without a mirror gate nearby.”

They fell into silence, and Sorin’s mind circled around the Lord of Night as it always did whenever he was mentioned these days. He felt like there was something he should know, some memory he should be recalling. It seemed to hover just out of reach, and it irritated him to no end. It felt important, like something that could change everything if he could figure out what exactly it was.

“So where exactly have Cass and Scarlett been Traveling too during the night?”

“To the northern continent.”

“To Pyry?”

Sorin nodded in confirmation of the icy tundra of a continent north of their own. “We figured as far away from where we are actually headed would likely be best. Scarlett and Cass think Alaric will become paranoid that they figured something important out and split his focus.”

“Yeah, that could work,” Cyrus said, scratching at his jaw. “From what she’s told me, Alaric is going to become obsessed with trying to get one up on her again.”

Sorin nodded again. “He already is. Mikale came to her the other night.”

“In a dream?”

“No,” Sorin bit out. “In the godsdamn mirror. Like he did that night of the Samhain ball. And as concerning as that is, more so is the fact that she called for me down the bond, and I did not hear her.”

“What?” Cyrus asked, gripping his arm and pulling him to a stop.

He had told no one else about this part. Eliza, Rayner, and Briar knew there was something going on with his power, but no one else knew about the bond. He had failed her yet again when he couldn’t hear her calling for him. What if Mikale hadn’t only been in the mirror? What if Alaric had come for her again himself? He hadn’t heard her down the bond, but he also hadn’t felt her. There had been no jolt of panic or rush of fury. He had walked Eliza to her room before checking in on Rayner one final time, taking care of his Court like he always had, while his wife was facing down one of her demons alone.

“That shouldn’t be possible,” Cyrus was saying. “Your bond is Anointed. Nothing supersedes that anymore. There is nothing more powerful. Nothing should be able to come between you two.”

“Nothing should be able to, and yet something has,” Sorin said, hands sliding into his pockets, staring out at the waves over Cyrus’s shoulder. “Something has felt...off since I woke up at the chateau. My power is different. The bond... Well, I attributed the bond being different to the fact that we had completed the Trials, and that we’d had it Anointed. I did not realize it was different in an unfavorable way until that moment.” He finally met Cyrus’s gaze. “I do not know what to do, Cyrus.”

Cyrus reached out, squeezing his shoulder. “We’re going to figure it out. We’re going to figure everything out. What is that shit Scarlett is always saying? Hope even when it’s pointless?”

“Hope is for the dreamers, you asshole,” Sorin said, shoving his hand off his shoulder.

Cyrus grinned that sarcastic smirk at him. “Same thing. Let’s go find Beatrix.”

They checked her cabin first and then the back of the ship before systematically working their way towards the front.

“What about Rayner?” Cyrus asked as they descended a set of stairs to the main deck.

“What can we do? There is no way to make his reserves fill faster unless...” Sorin sighed. “Unless Scarlett is right about him too.”

“Go on.”

“You heard her after the battle. She thinks Rayner has Avonleyan blood, and it all godsdamn fits,” Sorin sighed.

“Rayner is not Avonleyan. We would have known.”

“Like we knew Scarlett was Avonleyan?” Sorin countered. “Like we knew Luan had Avonleyan blood?”

“Shit,” Cyrus muttered. “She’s going to ask him about his past, isn’t she?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think he’ll tell her?”

“I honestly do not know. Rayner did not share his past with me until I was the sitting royal, and I had known him for decades before that.”

“Let’s be honest. We all waited for Rayner to tell us instead of asking ourselves. None of us were brave enough to do that,” Cyrus said.

“But it all fits, right?” Sorin said. “He does not have any actual fire gifts. He can Travel in a way. His gifts take weeks to refill when he uses their full extent like he did to save Tula.”

“You’re thinking if he drank Fae blood, it would feed his gifts? Like I do for Cassius?”

“It all fits, Cyrus,” Sorin replied, finally spotting Beatrix at the bow of the ship. “And to be honest, a part of me wonders if he has known all along.”

Cyrus seemed to stumble a step at his words. “No. I don’t believe that. I know he’s more aloof than the rest of us, but he wouldn’t keep something that big from us. He wouldn’t.” Cyrus was shaking his head, echoing the fierce denial ringing in his tone.

But Sorin wasn’t so sure. And it had gotten him thinking: all the Courts had rare gifts that seemed to favor a single bloodline. The Fire Court had Ash Riders. The Wind Court had Wind Walkers. The Water Court had Water Gazers. The Earth Court had Artists.

But what if those gifts were rare because they weren’t Fae gifts at all?

He’d posed the question to Scarlett last night, and all she’d done was give him a small smile that told him she’d been toying with those thoughts for a while now.

Beatrix was standing at the front of the ship, bundled in a cloak. She looked tiny and frail. The Witch was anything but. Sorin had known the female his entire life, and she still looked the same. Witches didn’t have a Staying like the Fae did where they stopped aging, but their aging process slowed way down when they reached maturity. Scarlett had once asked him how old Beatrix was, and Sorin truly did not know.

She turned to face them, sensing their approach. She smiled that smile that reminded him of elderly mortals, her violet eyes warm and bright— a stark contrast to most Witches. He had always imagined Beatrix encompassed what having a mortal grandmother was like.

“Prince,” Beatrix said, reaching for his hands.

Sorin grasped her fingers in his palms, bending and pressing a kiss to her cheek. “How are you, Beatrix?”

“Fine, fine,” she said, reaching up to pat his cheek. “But you, on the other... Something troubles you, young king.”

“I do have a question or two for you,” Sorin said, straightening.

She nodded knowingly, turning to Cyrus. “And you, Fire Second? Your soul is troubled as well.”

Cyrus stepped forward, bending to press a kiss to her cheek as well. “I will be fine, as always, Beatrix,” he replied with a grin.

“Mhmm,” she hummed, eyes narrowing on him. “Someday you will have to face the past you run from.”

“I don’t run from the past. I just choose not to dwell on it,” Cyrus countered, his tone light.

“And yet it dwells in you.”

The smile faded a touch, a muscle feathering along his jaw, and Sorin cleared his throat. “I need to ask you if you know anything about my magic, Beatrix.” Her attention turned back to him, her hands folding inside her cloak. “Since I...came back, my magic has...lessened.”

“How so?” she asked, a grey curl falling forward from beneath the hood of her cloak.

“Whenever I use it, it is as though my power well shrinks a little each time.”

“We sail for a land full of secrets, and yet you ask me a question of something you already know the answer to,” Beatrix replied.

Sorin’s brow furrowed. “Why do you assume I know the answer? I assure you, if I did, I would already be working to rectify it.”

“Do you remember when you were a youngling? You would come to my alchemy room and sit for hours, watching me mix potions and tonics, and asking me all manner of questions,” she said, her gaze going to the sea as she reminisced.

Sorin chuckled lightly. “I do, Beatrix. You were incredibly patient with my incessant curiosity.”

“You were never a bother. I enjoyed the company,” the Witch said, a fond smile appearing on her lips. “But sometimes you would ask questions far beyond your years. Do you remember what my reply would be to those questions?”

He could see it, sitting in Beatrix’s alchemy room. It had always been warm and cozy, several fires always going. A perk of living in the Fire Court, he supposed. He would perch on a stool, his legs swinging while he watched her toss various ingredients into cauldrons and bottle up tonics for the Court. His father would often send him there when he was getting too unruly. Beatrix would just click her tongue when he would show up at her door, dragging his feet and pouting. She’d set him to work chopping herbs, and soon enough he’d be chattering away while she worked.

One particular afternoon he had been sent there for being obnoxious during his lessons. He’d been seven and had been summoned in from outside to complete his afternoon studies. His private teachers had tried for nearly an hour to get him to cooperate before they summoned his father— who had given him the option of spending the rest of the day helping Beatrix or helping in the kitchens. It had been an easy choice. The one and only time he’d chosen the kitchens, the lead cook had made him scrub every pot and pan twice to make sure they were properly cleaned. He hadn’t been served dinner until all the dishes were cleaned. It had been well into the night.

“Why does it matter, Lady Beatrix?” he whined, plucking petals from the flowers she’d pushed his way when he’d clamored up onto the stool at her work surface.

“That is a big question for a small child,” the Healer replied, tapping his hand in disapproval when he ripped a petal off too harshly and it tore down the middle.

“I am not a small child,” he cried indignantly, slowing down to make sure he did not ruin any more of the pink petals.

“Only a small child would throw a fit over learning. A small child does not yet understand what a gift knowledge is,” she said, nodding when he looked up, seeking approval at his newly plucked petals.

“It is not a gift. It is boring,” he groused, picking up the next flower.

“Knowledge is not boring, young prince. Knowledge can make you powerful.”

He scoffed. “How can knowledge be powerful?”

She plucked the flower he was working on from his hand. Pulling a small knife from a basket on the table, she cut a thin line down the entire length of the stem, liquid seeping out and dripping onto the table. “Do you know how to collect the life-force of this plant? How to bottle it? Use it to heal or to harm?”

Sorin shook his head, watching it drip to the table.

“I have that knowledge,” she continued. “Does that not make me powerful? That I can use that knowledge to heal someone or end their life?”

“That is not power, Lady Beatrix,” Sorin argued, watching as she used a dropper to move the liquid into a vial. “My father’s fire is power.”

“And when I tell you I have knowledge that could keep your father from his flames? Then who is more powerful?”

Sorin frowned. “You cannot do that.”

“I will not do that,” she corrected. “That does not mean I cannot.”

“Then why don’t you?” he asked, leaning forward to peer into the cauldron that was bubbling on the table.

“For many reasons, but for the sake of simplicity, your father has knowledge that would protect him.”

“So he is more powerful,” Sorin said, his brow furrowing as he tried to understand.

“Power is a matter of perspective, young prince. Much like history and truth,” she answered. “Power is knowing when and how to wield the knowledge you possess, but if you do not have any knowledge, then you are powerless. Do you wish to be a powerless prince when you rule this Court?”

“No,” Sorin answered quickly.

“Then what must you do?” she pressed, tapping the table by the flowers.

Sorin sat back, picking up a yellow blossom and resuming plucking the petals. He sighed. “Pay attention during my studies.”

“Yes...and no.”

“No?” he asked, fingers stilling on a petal.

“You should always seek any knowledge you can, Sorin, but there is not enough time to learn everything there is to know, even in our seemingly extensive years. So you also seek out those who possess knowledge you do not,” she answered, handing him small satchels to fill with the petals.

“That is why you work for my father?”

“We work together,” Beatrix countered. “We share our knowledge with each other.”

“But you answer to my father.”

“Do I?” When Sorin’s brow bunched in confusion at her response, she said, “Knowledge can be power, and it can also be a curse. Sometimes, young prince, it is best not to seek knowledge until you are ready to bear the weight of what you will learn.”

As he got older, he’d find himself making sure he set aside time in his week to spend time in her alchemy room with her. His studies got more intense, his magic training became rigorous. His physical training became grueling, and he began traveling more. But when he would return home, he would find himself wandering into her alchemy room. She was always there, as if she were waiting for him, even in the middle of the night. It wasn’t until he was in his adolescent years that he realized she had more gifts of the sight than she let on.

So when he would ask questions and she would answer with, *‘Are you ready to bear the weight of the answer to that?’* he knew she had likely glimpsed some future event.

Sometimes he would press for the answer, and other times, he would leave it for another day.

But today, as he saw that question in her violet eyes, Sorin said, “I will bear the weight of the knowledge, Beatrix.”

“You are sure?” When he nodded, she looked back out to the unending sea. “Did you think there would not be a cost to your returning from the After?”

“What?”

“The High Witch said something about this,” Cyrus said, stepping to his side. “But she did not know what the cost would be.”

Beatrix gestured in Sorin’s direction. “I believe you have just learned the cost.”

“My magic? But why that?”

And the words she said next made Sorin still.

“Fire and shadows. Light and dark. Beginnings and endings.”

He wasn’t breathing as he stared at the Healer, the Witch he had known his entire life, echoing words spoken by a being imprisoned beneath the Black Halls.

“In all things there must be balance, Prince,” she continued, meeting his gaze once more. “It is the way of the gods.”

He nearly choked on the air he managed to suck down. “Are you saying my power wells will continue to shrink? That my payment for life is the death of my gifts?”

Her violet eyes were filled with a sad truth. “Sometimes knowledge is a curse, young prince.”

“Did you... Did you know this would happen?” Sorin asked, stepping towards her. “Did you see it?”

“No,” she said softly. “But a great power crossed the Veil. It would stand to reason that the cost to bring you back would be just as great.”

“There has to be a way to fix this,” Cyrus insisted. “There is always a work-around.”

“Was this not to rectify the prince’s crossing of the Veil?” Beatrix countered. “Perhaps it would be prudent to evaluate the cost to *fix* this, Fire Second. At what point will the cost become too great?”

“I need my magic, Beatrix,” Sorin said, his mind whirling with thoughts and possibilities. “I am Scarlett’s Source. If I do not have any magic to fuel hers...”

“My teachings from when you were younger have not changed, Sorin. Magic is always a give and take, to maintain the balance.”

He knew that. He understood that, but this was not an option. To win this war, Scarlett needed to be at full-strength, which meant he needed his full well of gifts. There had to be something he could do, and he knew of at least one being who would likely hold answers for him.

As if she could see the path his thoughts were beginning to go down, Beatrix spoke again. “I would think long and hard before seeking help beneath the Black Halls again, Sorin. She will not lose twice.”

“I worked around her price once before, I can do it again,” Sorin argued, thinking of his previous exchange with the Sorceress. She had demanded the blood of a god in exchange for helping him get to Scarlett in the mortal lands.

Something flashed in Beatrix’s eyes. “You did not outsmart her, Fire Prince,” she chastised. “She underestimated your twin flame. She will not make that mistake twice.”

Sorin stared back at her. All the Witches had some shade of those violet eyes, but Beatrix’s eyes had always been more vibrant. More of her dark grey hair slipped free of the cloak and fluttered around her face, and he suddenly felt as if he were staring through bars, looking into eyes just as vibrant but cold instead of warm.

“Beatrix... How do you know the Sorceress?”

She reached for his hand, squeezing his fingers gently.
“You have enough to bear the weight of this day, Prince. Save
this knowledge for another time.”

CHAPTER 19

TALWYN

Talwyn followed the Shifter guard ahead of her as he led her up the path to the Alpha's home. Tarek was with her. She'd had little choice on that matter. He had insisted on accompanying her anyway, saying a queen should not be traveling without guards, especially into potential enemy territory. She had wanted to argue, but before she could, he had mentioned going to speak to Ashtine after their visit to Siofra. She'd decided to save her arguments for that fight. The whole pick-your-battles strategy and all that.

And she had to wonder at what point that had become her mentality. She had never backed down from anything before. She'd controlled and commanded every situation, Azrael and Ashtine at her sides. That's when it changed, she supposed. She had never realized how much she was a part of a unit until she found herself standing alone.

The guard stepped off to the side, gesturing through a set of gauzy curtains. "The Beta is through here."

"Thank you," Talwyn said tightly, stepping into the room. They'd only taken a few steps when they both faltered.

Arianna Renatus, Beta of the Shifters, was sprawled across a settee. Her gold dress was bunched at the waist, her chest bare. Her head was tipped back while her personal guard and lover, Jamahl, knelt between her thighs. Her fingers were threaded into his tight curly hair that was cut short and close to his head, his wide shoulders keeping her thighs spread wide for him.

Her olive eyes slid to Talwyn, a mixture of lust and challenge churning in them. Her fingers tugged at Jamahl's hair, and his mouth moved from her center to the inside of her thigh, trailing along her flesh.

"Queen Talwyn," she greeted, her sultry voice breathless.

"Arianna," Talwyn replied. "I would greet Jamahl, but he appears rather busy at the moment."

"Mmm," Arianna hummed as Jamahl moved to her other thigh. "That he is." She gestured lazily towards an opening across the room. "Stellan is on the veranda. I will join you all momentarily. Unless you and your... Well, unless the two of you wish to join us first?"

"With all due respect, Beta, I would not put myself in such a vulnerable position without a concrete understanding of where you and the Alpha stand on the matters we have to discuss today," Talwyn answered, watching Jamahl make his way back to the apex of her thighs.

"Wise words for someone whose wisdom has been called into question as of late," Arianna said, her tone going icy.

"She is the Fae Queen," Tarek cut in sharply. "You will show her the respect you always have."

A dark laugh rose from Arianna's throat that had Talwyn inwardly flinching. This was going to be a difficult visit the way it was. She didn't need it complicated by Tarek's lack of knowledge on how to deal with the Shifter siblings.

"Oh, puppet," the Beta purred coldly, locking eyes with him. "Look at you. Thinking you are in a position to speak to me in such a way." Her gaze slid back to Talwyn. "Maybe the Witches have had it right all along, hmm? Maybe males are only good for one thing?" Her fingers were back in Jamahl's hair, and she jerked his mouth back to her center, a moan sounding as he slid his tongue along her sensitive skin.

"He meant no disrespect, Arianna," Talwyn ground out, her fingers twitching in anticipation of the Beta's next move, wind fluttering at her fingertips. That male between her thighs

could be Shifted into a giant tiger in less time than it would take Talwyn to blink.

“We both know that is not true. Do not try to placate me, *your Majesty*,” she returned. She jerked her chin towards the veranda. “I will be along momentarily.”

Talwyn nodded, grateful for the reprieve, even if she had essentially just been dismissed.

“Oh, and puppet?” Arianna called after them as Tarek reached to move the curtains out of Talwyn’s way. He looked at her before looking back over his shoulder at the Beta. “If you think my brother is the one you need to bow before here, think again. He may be the Alpha, but consider who he will rip the world apart for.”

Talwyn saw Tarek’s jaw clench tighter, but he said nothing in reply to Arianna. They stepped out onto the veranda and walked along a small path, rounding a corner when they again both came to a standstill.

“For the love of Silas,” Tarek muttered. “Did we not send word of a meeting time?”

Stellan was seated in a large chair, his dark skin glistening in the summer sun. His head was tipped towards the sky, a female with golden skin perched on the arm of the chair, her lips on his throat, while a male was on his knees before him with his lips wrapped around his cock, head bobbing in his lap.

“It is a statement,” Talwyn answered, her voice low.

“A statement,” he scoffed.

“She set them free, Tarek,” Talwyn said simply as Stellan groaned, his hand holding the male in place as he finished, his hips thrusting deeper into the male’s throat. “They will no longer be controlled by those who can no longer contain them.”

The male on his knees sat back, Stellan trailing his fingers along his jaw for a moment, before there was a flash of light and a large, tawny wolf sat before him. The wolf turned, hazel eyes settling on the Fae.

“Ilyas,” Talwyn greeted before lifting her eyes to Stellan, who was slipping into linen pants, and the female. “Alpha. Sariah,” she added in turn.

“Drink, your Majesty?” Sariah asked. Her fingers ran along Stellan’s bare chest as she pushed to her feet.

“Yes, please,” she answered, stepping further into the space.

“Arianna?” Stellan asked, settling back into his chair. Although, to be honest, it would be better described as a throne. It had elegant armrests, the entire thing gilded in bronze with various animals engraved into the metal. The seat and back were draped in plush purple fabric, providing comfortable padding while he sat. An equally extravagant seat was set beside his.

A “Here, Brother,” came before Talwyn could answer, and she looked over her shoulder to find Arianna striding along the path, the gold beads at the ends of her dark braids clinking with each step. A tiger padded along at her side.

The Beta moved gracefully to the chair set next to her brother, taking a chalice off the tray Sariah brought over, serving the Shifters before offering the final two glasses to Talwyn and Tarek. There were no chairs for them. Another statement being made.

“To what do we owe the insistence of a meeting?” Stellan asked after taking a long drink from his chalice.

“I will not insult your intelligence if you will do me the same courtesy,” Talwyn returned, her fingers tightening around the chalice she held.

“Then I suggest your puppet keeps his mouth shut for the duration of this conversation,” Arianna replied lazily, swirling the liquid in her chalice. “Seeing as I have already been insulted by his words once since your arrival.”

“Is that so?” Stellan growled, a deep rumble sounding from his chest as his olive eyes glared daggers at Tarek.

“It will not happen again,” Talwyn answered quickly. “He does not understand how things have changed in the last

decade. He does not know what kind of alliance we now have.”

Arianna’s brow quirked up, her lips tilting into a small, amused smirk. “An alliance? Is that what you think we had, your Majesty?”

“Yes,” Talwyn answered, lifting her chin.

“Interesting,” Arianna said, her chin coming to rest on a manicured hand. “Apparently we recall things differently. Brother?”

Godsdamnit. The last time she had seen the Shifter siblings, they’d been squabbling about Arianna going with Sorin to the mortal lands without Stellan’s knowledge. They had clearly made up, and the siblings, as a united front, were a formidable pair. Even when they had been under more of her control, she had proceeded with caution with them, always tried to stay on their good side. She had always known they would be invaluable when it came to getting revenge on Avonleya, and now that the time had come, she found all the effort wasted unless she could get them to reconsider.

“I recall being secluded and contained behind wards, called upon when needed to further others’ agendas,” Stellan answered, his body rigid despite the release he’d just experienced.

“We recall things differently then,” Talwyn replied, resisting the urge to curl her fingers into fists at her sides. “I had no part in the creation of the wards that bound you to these lands, but I corresponded with you often, sometimes for business and sometimes for pleasure.”

The siblings fell silent, olive eyes watching her intently.

“And what do you desire from us now?” Stellan finally asked.

“Your aid in the coming war with Avonleya.”

A laugh fell from Arianna’s lips. “You wish us to aid you against the one who gave us freedom?”

“Did you forget the ones who trapped you in the first place?” Talwyn demanded.

The small smirk formed on Arianna’s lips again. “Of course not, your Majesty. Did you forget we fought in that war centuries ago?”

“No.”

“Were you there?”

“No,” Talwyn answered again.

“So one could then conclude that my recollection of events is likely more accurate than the ones you have read, yes?”

Talwyn’s lips pursed, and she struggled to push down the power clawing to be released as her irritation rose. She cleared her throat. “Yes, I would imagine that would be the case.”

“Then let me tell you what I recall, hmm?” Arianna’s arm fell, both hands curling around the ends of the chair she sat in. She leaned forward slightly, braids sliding over her shoulder. “We were forced behind those wards by the very people you have aligned yourself with, and now you are asking us to side with those who imprisoned us? Us. The Shifters. Who favor Temural, god of the untamed and wild. Those you now align yourself with *caged* us, your Majesty. Did I leave anything out, Brother?”

“I believe you covered everything, Arianna,” Stellan replied, his hand moving to her arm and gently squeezing in an attempt to calm his sister.

Talwyn moved forward one step. “Your people lost much as a result of the Great War. *You* lost much as a result of that war,” she said, her voice strong and unwavering. “You think I cannot relate to what you have suffered? I have watched friends grow up without parents. I have watched entire races of people be repressed and trapped within lands,” she said, gesturing to the siblings. “Did you think I was doing nothing in the White Halls?”

“Oh, you were doing something,” Stellan cut in. “Plotting and planning revenge against those who did not confine us. Do

not forget, Talwyn, we have our gifts because of those you seek revenge against.”

“You have your gifts because of the Fae, not the Avonleyans,” she spat.

“Think again, young queen,” Arianna said, sitting back in her chair, fingers gliding into Jamahl’s fur beside her. “Perhaps it would be prudent of you to learn and understand your own history before coming to us for aid against the wrong kingdom.”

Talwyn stepped forward again, pointing her finger at the Shifters. “It does not matter who gave you those gifts. You were given them for the sole purpose of fighting for Avonleya. If they had not needed your aid, you would not have them now.”

“Can the same not be said for the Fae?” Stellan countered.

“Yes. I recognize that my people were used and discarded when Avonleya fled back across the sea,” Talwyn answered. “It is for them I want Avonleya to answer for its actions. It is for you. The Witches.”

“The Night Children?” Arianna asked, crossing her legs, and the slit of golden dress parting to reveal her entire thigh. “Do you seek justice on their behalf as well?”

“Yes,” Talwyn said confidently. “They have been wronged as much as the rest of us. The only difference is they recognized it before the rest of us and tried to fight back against them.”

Arianna glanced at her brother, a look passing between them, and Talwyn pushed forward, intending to capitalize on whatever this flicker of indecision meant.

“We have always had a good relationship, have always worked for the betterment of my people and yours. My desire was always to see you free to roam and not trapped in these lands.”

“And yet you are not the one who relieved us of our shackles,” Stellan said.

“Just because she accomplished the task first does not mean I did not intend for and desire the same outcome,” she replied.

“And yet actions still speak louder than words,” the Alpha countered.

“So I am the villain because she had access to resources I do not?”

“You are asking us to align ourselves with you when you openly admit you do not have access to the same resources she does?” Arianna replied, her head back in her palm. “That does not seem in our best interest. Being on the losing side of this war will likely find us confined once more.”

“So loyalty means nothing?” Talwyn demanded. “You now decide who to throw your lot in with based solely on resources and power?”

“Sweet child,” Arianna simpered with a low laugh. “It is a commendable effort. The puppet can report back that you truly did make a decent argument and a good attempt at manipulating our incredibly tender sensibilities. But open war? Of course we will take into account resources and power. You would be wise to do the same.”

“What makes you think I have not?”

“You stand on one side, and we stand on the other,” Arianna answered, gesturing to the ground.

Talwyn looked down to find the toes of her boots at the edge of a large crack along the pave stones. Looking back up, she met the Beta’s eyes. “So that is it, then? You have chosen? War lines are being drawn. Soon you will not be able to change sides.”

“You would do well to remember that, young queen,” Arianna agreed. She pushed to her feet, Stellan rising beside her. “The light and the dark are intertwining, and you choose the side of neither. The side that will be left with nothing.”

“What exactly makes you certain that we will lose?” Talwyn challenged.

“Because the light and the dark have everything to fight for.”

“*I* have everything to fight for,” Talwyn snapped.

“You did at one point in time,” Arianna agreed. “Now it appears all you have is a puppet, and someone pulling both your strings.”

CHAPTER 20

SCARLETT

The sun was out. There was not a cloud to be seen. Just clear blue skies and a sun so bright she had to squint against the light.

Thank Anala, Saylah, Arius. Fuck, she'd even thank the Fates at this point. Spending so much time in the freezing northern continent had her willing to sacrifice anything they demanded of her to just have this moment in the sun.

She propped her hands behind her head, basking in the warmth on her face as she stretched out atop a bench on the navigation deck at the back of the ship. Other than climbing the main mast to the lookout platform, this was the closest she could get to the burning ball of fire in the sky.

Her power levels were fine, not full, but fine enough. She was trying not to take too much from Sorin, especially after Beatrix's cryptic warning a few days ago about his magic being the cost of crossing the Veil back to their realm. She had too many other things to worry about before she could deal with the other thing Sorin had learned.

Apparently Beatrix knew the Sorceress.

But she was going to need full reserves tonight. And so was Cassius. Which meant they were both going to need to top off their power wells.

For four days, she and Cassius had been Traveling back and forth between here and Pyry. And with each passing day, the waters they were sailing in seemed to get darker and

darker. Callan had told her what Tava had said, and the Lady was right. The waters were slowly turning black.

Or they had been.

For the last two days she could swear they were hardly moving even though the Fae captain of the ship assured her they were still making progress west.

A shadow fell across her face, blocking the sun, and she opened her eyes to find golden ones staring back at her, chestnut hair falling into them.

“You’ve been avoiding me, Darling.”

“I tend to avoid assholes when I can.”

“I deserve that.”

“You deserve to be punched in the godsdamn face,” she muttered.

Cyrus sat on the bench, lifting her bare feet and placing them in his lap. “I’m sorry, Scarlett.”

“It’s fine.”

“When females say ‘it’s fine,’ it rarely is.”

Scarlett lifted her head just enough to look at him. “I know you’re hurting, Cyrus. I get it. I was giving you your space until you were ready. I know what it is like to need some time to breathe.”

She let her head fall back to the bench, something in her soul settling back into place now that she and Cyrus had worked this out. She hadn’t been mad at him. Not really. Had his words stung at the time? Like a bitch. But she really did get it. She lashed out at the ones she loved most when she was in dark places.

“You know, the first time you ever spoke of Thia to me, you got ‘drunk off your ass’ is I believe how Sorin worded it,” she said, breaking their comfortable silence.

“You were such a storm of shadows and rage back then,” Cyrus said, his fingers moving soothingly up and down her shin. “And that night... Gods, Scarlett, that night you were so

hopeless. You just wanted someone to hurt with you, to not be alone in the torment. So I dove into those dark waters, willing to drown with you if that's what it took for you to know you were not alone."

Tears were stinging at the back of her eyes, and she pushed up to a sitting position. She pulled her legs to her chest, wrapping her arms around her knees, and Cyrus angled his body to face her. "You barely knew me then," she said softly.

Cyrus reached out, stroking a finger down her cheek. "Darling, darkness knows when it has found its own."

"You told me that most do not understand that the darkness is not something to be survived but to befriend."

"I did."

"Do you still feel that way?"

Cyrus paused, his eyes darting away for a moment, before settling back on her. "I do, but just like we change, so does our darkness. And sometimes..." He sighed, clearly trying to find the right words. "Just because we've found the beauty in the darkness does not mean it does not still hurt at times."

"Some days are just hard," she whispered.

"Some days are just hard," he repeated, his arms coming around her and pulling her into his chest. She wound her arms around his middle, hugging him tight.

"I'll drown with you, Cyrus," she whispered. "On the hard days, I'll dive in with you."

"I know, Darling," he said, his voice thick with emotion.

After a moment, she added, "And so will he. If you'll let him."

"That's what's so godsdamn terrifying."



She pressed her sliced palm to Sorin's forearm, her shadows and white flames flaring under her skin as they swelled with the magic she was drawing from him. She held his gaze under the night sky, neither of them saying a word as she took far more than she should right now.

This is necessary, my Love.

His voice echoed in her mind as he cupped her cheek, thumb stroking along her cheekbone. She nodded, relieved that their bond was working as it should once more. There hadn't been any more disruptions in their twin flame bond.

Cyrus and Cassius appeared then, having come from the direction of the other cabins. They were both in black, just as she was, swords and daggers strapped to their bodies and slid down boots.

"You all fueled up, Cass?" she asked, withdrawing her hand from Sorin's arm, her palm already knitting itself back together.

"All set, Seastar," he answered, coming to her side, eyes sweeping down her body. "No vambraces tonight?"

She rolled her eyes, lifting her palms and splaying her fingers. White flames sprung to life, casting them all in a flickering glow. "I think I'll be fine." She glanced up at Sorin. "He can be more of a mother hen than you can sometimes."

"Careful, Love," he replied, reaching out and flicking her nose, his eyes darkening a touch when she stuck out her tongue at him.

She was bouncing from foot to foot, adrenaline already coursing through her in anticipation of what they were about to do. Memories of the same feeling when getting ready for jobs with Nuri and Juliette flitted to the forefront of her mind,

and she let them linger for a moment before banishing them so she could focus.

Azrael appeared next, his black hair tied back and two scimitars at his waist. Callan was the last to appear, Briar and Eliza with him. Scarlett didn't really want to bring the Windonelle King, but he was the only one who knew the way around this Eternal Necropolis. They needed to be in and out as quickly as possible. They would need him.

"We will send messages as we are able," Sorin was saying to Briar and Eliza. "If all goes well, we will be back in a few hours. If it doesn't... No matter what happens, you keep sailing west."

Briar and Eliza both nodded grimly. They'd all gone over this plan extensively the last couple of days. Everyone knew it inside and out. She and Cassius had spent extended periods of time in Pyry, planting the seed in Alaric's mind that they had found something. They'd known it had worked when they'd found extra sets of footprints at their usual spot the last time they'd Traveled there.

There were six of them going. She and Cassius, for the obvious reason that she was going to remove his tracking Mark. Sorin and Cyrus, in case they needed to refuel their magic. She was also certain she would have had to bind them and lock them in the brig to keep them from accompanying them. The Earth Prince was coming in case she and Cassius could not Travel at the end of this.

Which led her to say, "We need to have a chat, Azrael."

She had purposely saved this conversation for right now. Putting him on the spot would make his answers more believable, not giving him time to formulate an articulate response. The Earth Prince's muddy brown eyes narrowed on her.

"How do I know you will not seek out your queen when we set foot on the continent again?"

His brows shot up in surprise. "You cannot be serious?"

“Oh, but I am,” she said sweetly. “You think I have forgotten where your loyalties lie?”

“You think I am loyal to her while I sail towards those whom she considers the enemy?”

“Heads and hearts can be so conflicted when it comes to split-second decisions, Prince.”

The others all remained silent, letting this play out between them.

“I do not know what you want from me, Scarlett,” Azrael finally said, and a grumble of warning came from Sorin at his casual use of her name.

“What I need, *Azrael*, is some sort of proof that should Talwyn somehow show up, you will not go to her and fuck up our entire operation.” She took a small step towards him. “I need to know beyond a doubt I can trust you before I entrust you with our lives.”

Azrael’s jaw tightened before he drew a knife from his side, slicing his palm open and holding it out to her.

Scarlett’s nose scrunched as she looked at it. “Showing me you can bleed proves nothing.”

“It is a Blood Vow, Scarlett,” Sorin explained beside her.

“Like the Blood Bond? I do not want that,” she said immediately, shaking her head and backing away.

Sorin’s hand came to her lower back, the touch immediately soothing. “No, Scarlett. The Blood Bond forces eternal submission. A Blood Vow is a promise, an agreement made between two people. If either party breaks it... Well, the result is unfavorable.”

“What happens?” she asked curiously, eyeing Azrael’s still outstretched bleeding palm.

Sorin shrugged. “The gods decide, I suppose.”

“Do you know anyone who has broken one?”

“For fuck’s sake,” Azrael suddenly cut in. “This is not the time to assuage your curiosity, your Majesty. We have a

mission to complete.”

“No need for a tantrum, Azzy,” she clucked, and the Earth Prince’s nostrils flared at the nickname. She just smirked back at him.

Sorin was handing her a knife, and she sliced her palm for the second time that night as she said, “So what? We do a super secret handshake now?”

“You are insufferable,” Azrael muttered.

“Oh, Azzy,” she taunted, her voice going sultry. “Keep talking like that, and Sorin will have a tantrum.”

Azrael heaved an exasperated sigh, reaching for her wrist and slapping his bleeding palm to hers. “I vow and swear my loyalty to you, Scarlett Aditya, Queen of the Western Courts.”

The entire ship went still as a flare of white light emitted from their palms, and Scarlett felt the vow settle in the depths of her being. She stared at the Earth Prince, unable to form words as he still held her hand in his.

“Is that proof enough for you?” Azrael asked, his voice pitched so low she was sure only she could hear him.

“I only... It only needed to be for tonight, Azrael,” she said hoarsely, unable to look away from him.

His fingers squeezed tighter around her own before releasing them, and he stepped back from her.

She swallowed thickly, looking up at Sorin, who was staring at Azrael with a mixture of shock and suspicion on his features. They didn’t have time to analyze it though. They needed to get going.

She cleared her throat before looking at everyone gathered around her. “Tonight we strike back. For all those lost.” Her gaze settled on Callan. “For Finn and Sloan and your parents.” It moved to Briar and Eliza. “For Nako.” She looked up at Sorin. “For Eliné and your parents.” Her eyes locked onto muddy brown ones again. “For your parents too.” And then they landed on golden ones. “For Thia,” she whispered.

Because all those deaths? Every single one of them could be traced back to Alaric in one way or another.

“Tonight we start another fire,” she said darkly, holding out her hands on either side of her. Sorin took one while Cassius took the other. When the six of them were connected, she Traveled them to Rydeon, to the center of the continent.

It had been cloudy on the ship, but here the sky was clear, the stars having a clear view of what was about to take place.

She reached behind her, pulling up her hood, and Cassius did the same beside her, instantly falling into old habits as they went back-to-back and slowly scanned the area. She breathed deep, sinking down to the place where Death’s Maiden dwelled, and when she peered up at her husband, she found his golden eyes burning bright as they watched her. The Prince of Fire stared back at her, a grin as dark as her own lifting on his lips.

“Let it burn, my Love,” he purred, bending down and brushing a brief kiss against her lips.

Azrael and Cyrus were flanking Callan, keeping him between them, while Cassius and Sorin flanked her. She took in the towering stone around her, eyes falling on the square archway that was the entrance to the Eternal Necropolis.

“You ready to lead the way, your Majesty?” she asked, looking at Callan.

His chin was high, back straight. He cut a glance at her, and she sucked in a sharp breath at the king that stared back at her.

Callan said nothing, walking to the archway, and she fell into step beside him.

She sent shadows slithering before them as they climbed the long, flat steps, and when they reached the top, ten guards already lay dead. She immediately recognized the black suits and cloaks they wore.

“They were from the Black Syndicate,” Cassius murmured beside her.

“Good,” she replied coldly. “Then they were not innocent, and their deaths will be another message to him.”

She pulled her shadows back into herself, then flicked her wrist and incinerated the corpses before turning her attention to the symbols etched around the archway. The symbols of the gods. Some of them anyway. There were other symbols she didn't recognize among the ones she did.

“Gods, what I would give for my magic here,” Cyrus was grumbling, standing beside one of the burning bodies, his arms crossed as he waited to move ahead. The Fae had taken tonics to stave off the effects of not having access to their magic, but Beatrix had not had the necessary ingredients to make the one that would allow them to access those gifts here.

Scarlett reached out, tracing three inverted triangles with her gloved finger. The symbol of Arius. “What *would* you give, Darling?”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Cyrus's arms drop to his sides. “Do not fuck with me, Scarlett,” he growled, stalking towards her.

“I'm working on it,” she said. “There is something I'm still trying to work out, but if I can, then I will be able to do it. Cassius first, though. I will free him, and then I will free you.”

Her head was tilted back as she stared up at him, his expression full of disbelief. “If Sorin wouldn't make me bleed for it, I would kiss you right now, Darling.”

She laughed. “Let's make sure I can actually accomplish it before we risk that pretty face of yours.”

Cyrus smirked, and they both turned back to the archway. She found Callan waiting patiently for all of them at the entrance to the stone network. “Ready?”

Scarlett nodded. “Everyone stay on alert. They likely already know Cass is here, and they know he wouldn't come alone.”

As soon as they stepped through the archway, the path began to narrow until they were following Callan in a single file line. Various passageways led off of the main path, the

stone walls towering so high, they nearly blocked out the sky. She'd tossed small flames in the air above them to light their way, and the only sound was their footfalls echoing off the walls.

They'd been walking for nearly an hour before the path widened again, and a few minutes later, they emerged into a large circular chamber. Callan hadn't been exaggerating. There were mirrors embedded between every tomb. The magic-wielders fanned out, moving among the chamber.

"How did none of us know this was here?" Azrael asked, examining a mirror across the chamber.

"We took little interest in mortal customs," Sorin answered, studying some writing on the tomb he stood in front of.

Scarlett was stopped in front of a mirror, the chamber reflected back to her, but something was off. The reflection didn't seem to match up perfectly. The stone walls were... almost darker than the ones here. She stepped closer, as if she could get a better viewing angle, which was ridiculous considering it was a reflection.

"That one always seemed different to me," Callan said. "I have only been here twice, but I remember, even as a child, this mirror feeling...different."

He trailed off, and Scarlett knew what he meant, her head tilting as she studied it more.

"Why would you have been here as a child?" Cyrus asked from their left, standing in front of another tomb. This one appeared to have more than the usual birth and death dates etched into the stone.

"For the burial and entombment of the last of the Middell bloodline. The king, queen, and prince," Callan replied, moving to stand next to Cyrus. "The crown went to one of King Dalton's dukes when the young prince died."

"They died the same day?" Cyrus asked.

"The king died of a wasting disease. When they learned what he was sick with, it was too late to contain it. Everyone

who'd been in contact with him died within days. The queen and his son died only a few days after him. The prince was only four." Callan paused, rubbing his hand over his jaw. "At least, that was the story we were told. Obviously now we know it was..."

"Alaric," Scarlett supplied simply.

The chamber fell silent again, each lost in their own thoughts as they examined the room. She really needed to get that Mark off of Cassius. It was a miracle no one else had shown up yet. She was about to turn away when movement in the reflection caught her eye.

Scarlett looked back over her shoulder; expecting to see one of the others, but there was nothing. She turned back to the mirror and froze.

A male was staring back at her, eyes of the deepest emerald green she had ever seen. Raven black hair fell forward onto his brow, and his hands were in the pockets of pants that looked like they had been tailored to fit him perfectly. He wore a white shirt with buttons up the front and some sort of cloth was tied around his neck, hanging down the front of the shirt. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and his head was cocked as he studied her the way she was studying him.

And she suddenly realized why this mirror felt off, felt so different.

It was a mirror gate.

So where was this male? In Avonleya with the Lord of Night? In one of the Courts? Another territory? Another continent?

She raised a hand, slowly reaching towards the smooth expanse of the glass. Emerald eyes darted to the movement before he slowly drew his hand from his pocket and brought it up to meet hers.

Then he smirked wickedly, and darkness seemed to seep from his fingertips.

She watched the darkness, pooling like ink on his side of the mirror, and she gave him a smirk of her own as shadows

coiled up from her palm. Then she brought up her other hand, placing that palm against the glass too, and letting white flames flair from the tips of her fingers.

The man's eyes narrowed, a frown pulling on his full lips. Suddenly his eyes went wide, his lips forming around a warning, and Scarlett whirled just in time to wrap her shadows around the wrist of Death's Shadow as she cocked a dagger back.

"I was wondering when you would show up," Scarlett sneered, her lip curling as she stared into honey-colored eyes.

"Sorry I'm late, Sister," Nuri replied, her usual mania shining in her eyes. "My invitation seems to have gotten lost."

Her shadows wrenched Nuri's hands down and behind her back where Scarlett bound them, the dagger clattering to the ground. Cyrus and Azrael had moved to her side, each clamping a hand onto her upper arm.

"Who brought you here?"

Nuri tsked at her. "Gods, Scarlett, you know I can't tell you that."

"How long have you been following us?" Sorin demanded from where he'd made his way to Scarlett's side.

"I saw you enter the archway," she answered.

While the others continued to ask her questions, Scarlett glanced back over her shoulder; but the male in the mirror gate was gone, just the reflection of the chamber looking back at her once more.

"He sent me to see what you are looking for," Nuri was saying in response to one of their questions, and Scarlett turned back.

"Then why did you let yourself get caught?"

"I wanted to catch up."

"And if we take you as our prisoner?" Azrael snarled, his grip tightening around her arm.

Nuri looked up at him, batting her lashes. “Your queen is so lost without you, plant prince.”

Azrael’s eyes shuttered for a moment before they became hard and unreadable once more.

“He has some sort of insurance in place on her,” Cassius said, answering Azrael’s question. “What is it?”

His arms were crossed, a dagger in one hand. He’d pulled his hood back, brown hair framing his face, patch over his eye.

Nuri sighed in her usual dramatic fashion. “If you try to keep me, I have to kill myself. You know, Blood Bond and all that.”

Scarlett and Cassius stared back at her.

“Why would that be insurance?” Azrael asked. “You are bound to the enemy? What will we care if you can no longer serve him?”

But as Scarlett held Nuri’s gaze, she knew exactly why this was insurance. Even with everything Nuri had done—the betrayal, the hurt—Scarlett wouldn’t kill her. Couldn’t kill her. And she wouldn’t be able to watch her kill herself either. It was why she had never answered Auberon when he demanded to know what she planned to do with Nuri.

Because she had no idea.

“What were your orders?” she asked quietly.

And something on Nuri’s face softened a fraction, as if she had been holding her breath to see what Scarlett would say to Alaric’s collateral.

“Leave you alive. Do not attempt to secure you. Kill any of the others I can. Report back everything I see and hear. Figure out what you’ve been doing in Pyry and what you are looking for here,” Nuri answered, her usual arrogance gone from her voice.

Scarlett nodded once, reaching for the hem of her cloak. Cassius passed her the dagger he was holding, and she cut a long strip off the bottom. He took it, moving behind Nuri and

reaching around her to tie it in place over her eyes. Nuri almost seemed to sigh in relief.

“What did you see?” Scarlett asked, reaching down to scoop some dirt into her hand.

“Not much. I heard you speaking of the past royal line, and... I saw the man in the mirror.”

Sorin went rigid beside her. “The Lord of Night?”

Scarlett shook her head, bringing her finger to her lips. They couldn’t speak of anything important now. It would all be reported back to the Maraans. Water pooled in her palm, mixing with the dirt to create mud.

She stepped up to Nuri. “Without the keys, we cannot get into Avonleya. We are trying to find another way in. I found a book that spoke of hidden portals on the continents. We found one in Pyry, but I can’t figure out how to activate it. There were rumors of another here.”

Nuri swallowed. “And the man?”

“I do not know who he is,” Scarlett answered truthfully. “Perhaps on another continent? Perhaps in Avonleya? I do not know.” Nuri nodded. “Anything else?”

Nuri shook her head, understanding what Scarlett was asking. Was there anything else Scarlett needed to say to cover her tracks?

“Thank you, Scarlett,” Nuri said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“The children are safe and doing well,” Scarlett replied, as she brought the mud to Nuri’s ears. Her fire hardened it into soft clay that she molded into Nuri’s ears before hardening it further. She tapped her ear when she was finished, and Nuri shook her head in confirmation that she could hear nothing.

“Let’s get this done and get the hell out of here,” Scarlett said. “Azrael, keep a hold of her.”

The Earth Prince nodded, escorting Nuri off to the side, while the rest of them moved to the center of the chamber. A stone table stood there, the gods’ symbols carved along the

edges. Six in the center formed a circle. At the top were three-interlocked triangles. It looked like Arius's symbol only in reverse. Instead of being inverted, these triangles pointed up. Two on the bottom, one on top. Scarlett knew the other symbols in the circle: Falein, goddess of wisdom and cleverness; Celeste, goddess of the sky and moon; Arius, god of endings; Serafina, goddess of the stars and dreams; and Anala, goddess of day, fire, and the sun.

"There were six Firsts," Scarlett murmured, running her fingers along the circle of symbols. She paused at the set of triangles at the top, looking up at Sorin. "Achaz?"

"That would be my guess," he replied, studying the symbols as well.

Something to ponder later, she supposed.

Scarlett patted the top of the table for Cassius to sit. "Take your pants off, Cass," she purred sensually.

Cassius rolled his eyes at her, removing his boots and shucking his pants down his legs. Cyrus reached to take them from him as her Guardian hopped onto the table in the exact center of the continent. The center of the cardinal directions exactly as the spell book instructed.

She reached down, taking the book from the shadow panther she had conjured and flipped it open to the page she had marked, reading through the Mark one final time. She pulled a knife that was strapped to her thigh, reaching for Cassius's hand.

"Ready? It's a strong one," she warned.

"Don't really have a choice, Seastar," he replied with an encouraging smile.

"I suppose not," she muttered before quickly cutting a gash in his palm.

She dipped her finger in his pooling blood and began drawing a Mark on the back of his hand. Then the other. His brow. The top of his feet.

North. South. East. West.

That was the easy part.

The tracking Mark on his thigh began to glow faintly.

She dipped her finger in his blood once more before drawing the Mark atop the tracking Mark. She had scarcely finished when Cassius's entire body tensed, his lips clamping down on a grunt, as the tracking Mark flared brighter.

She took a deep breath before plunging the knife into the Mark.

The grunt was a bellow this time, and Cyrus was on the table behind Cassius faster than Scarlett could blink. She couldn't look at him though. She knew if she met Cass's eye, she wouldn't be able to keep going with this.

She pulled the knife out, sending her shadows into the wound, pulling the magic of the Mark towards the four Marks she'd drawn. She could feel Alaric's magic fighting with hers. His draining powers latched onto her shadows, and she gritted her teeth, pouring white flames in to battle his power while her shadows pulled on the edges of the tracking magic— fraying it, dismantling it, drawing it up and down, right and left.

She felt an arm wrap around her middle, holding her up. She could hear voices, but she couldn't give any focus to what they were saying. She kept her eyes shut tight as she followed the shadows she was controlling in Cassius's body.

She was burning through her reserves. Between guiding the magic to the exit Marks and fighting against Alaric's power, she could already feel them siphoning too fast. His magic was draining her white flames, but they were stronger than her Fae gifts. His magic would break though the Fae fire and water with ease. It had to be the white flames.

She gasped when she finally shoved some of the tracking magic out of the Mark on Cassius's left hand, Alaric's magic seeming to scream against her white flames, a shrieking sound clawing at her soul.

Her shadows yanked on the magic, drawing it up, the drag a little less as she forced it to the Mark on Cassius's brow. A whimper of relief escaped her when she finally made it there.

She opened her eyes and wished she hadn't. Cyrus's hands were on Cassius's shoulders, holding him down. Cassius had doubled over, fingers curled around the edge of the table, knuckles white. Sweat was dripping down his face, and he was pale.

"Keep going, Love," Sorin was murmuring into ear. "Keep going."

She nodded, focus going back to her shadows that were herding Alaric's tracking magic to the Mark on the other hand. Her white flames stuttered, and Alaric's magic lunged at her, latching onto her shadows.

"No!" she gasped, her knees buckling as she tried to regain control. A sting on her palm and then heat was pouring into her.

Sorin's fire.

It collided with hers, the white flames instantly flaring brighter, and Alaric's magic recoiled.

She sucked in a sharp breath. Stronger. Her flames were stronger with Sorin's. She yanked on his magic, and she heard Sorin curse, but then she was shoving the tracking magic into the third Mark.

One left.

She rallied her shadows, wrapping them tightly around the last of the tracking magic. There would be no dragging this time. She bound it tight and sent those shadows hurtling for the final Mark on Cass's feet.

Light flared, sending her and Sorin stumbling backwards. He still held her tight around the middle, which was good because there was no way she'd be able to stand on her own right now.

Her gaze fell to Cassius's thigh where the tracking Mark was fading to nothing. She made to move back to him, but Sorin's grip tightened, keeping her in place. Cyrus was bringing his arm to Cassius's lips, blood already welling. Cass immediately latched on, leaning back into Cyrus's chest where he had shifted behind him.

She watched them as her reserves continued to pull from Sorin. She really needed to stop. Azrael could Travel them all home, but her magic was still so empty.

Take what you need, Scarlett, Sorin said down the bond, clearly having felt her internal dilemma.

She sighed at his permission, leaning back into his chest just as Cassius was doing against Cyrus. Until—

“Scarlett!”

She started, turning to find Callan looking up, and when she followed his gaze, she saw why.

Two figures were falling from the barely visible sky.

Seraphs.

“Azrael, get everyone else back to the ship,” she called. “Leave Nuri.”

She tightened her grip on Sorin’s arm over the Source Mark. She looked up at him as she whispered, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he answered, shadows merging behind them. “You want to set the world on fire? My flames are yours to do so.”

“Then let’s make some ashes, Prince,” she answered, her shadow dragon releasing a roar as she climbed onto its back, Sorin with her.

Then they were shooting for the sky, meeting the seraphs in mid-air. Another roar from the dragon had flames spewing from its mouth, immediately incinerating the closest seraph. The other had swooped beneath them, firing an arrow up through the shadows.

She shoved Sorin to the side while she leapt for the other, her connection to the Source Mark broken. The seraph smiled darkly as it watched them plunging back to the stones below, but it was nothing compared to the wicked smirk she sent back. With one hand, she sent shadows spearing for Sorin, wrapping around his torso and pulling him back to her. Her other hand had white flames tightening around the seraph’s

neck, his wings turning to ash behind him as they burned away to nothing.

The minute she felt Sorin's flesh touch hers, she Traveled them out of there, but with so little magic left, she couldn't be as accurate with where she took them. They emerged in the air above the ships, dark waters swirling beneath them.

She scrambled to get her shadows under them, to at least slow their descent, but it was useless. She had nothing left, and neither did Sorin.

They hit water so hard it forced the air from her lungs. Her lips parted on an involuntary gasp, water flooding in. She was trying to get an air pocket around her mouth while simultaneously searching for Sorin beneath the water.

No! They were not going down like this. Not in the Edria Sea so close to Avonleya. Not after they'd just pulled that off. Not like this.

Sorin! she screamed down the bond, her chest burning with the need to cough up the water she'd swallowed down.

Where was he? She wasn't going to the surface without him. They would go together. Always together.

Sorin!

Then she was being wrapped in an icy bubble, rising to the surface. When it broke through the surface, she saw Sorin in a bubble already hovering over the nearest ship. Briar was there, saving both their asses.

She was deposited next to Sorin on the ship deck, already choking on the water in her lungs.

"I've got it, Sunshine," Briar said, lowering down beside her. He brought his hand to her mouth where his magic pulled all the water up from her lungs. She heaved, sea water and bile splashing onto the deck, but she was already crawling toward Sorin where he was sitting against the side of the ship.

He pulled her into him, cradling her head against his chest, fingers combing through her wet hair. The bond immediately began calming the hysteria mauling every nerve in her body.

“I am here, Scarlett,” he murmured. “I am all right.”

“I’m sorry,” she rasped into his neck, clinging to his wet frame, sure if she let him go he would disappear from beneath her fingers.

“You fall, I fall, Scarlett,” he replied. “I will follow you up to the stars and down to the depths of the sea.”

She wasn’t sure when exactly she’d wrapped her legs around his waist, but she didn’t move when a hand landed on her shoulder, heat pulsing through her. She glanced up to see Eliza crouching beside them, a hand on each of their shoulders, drying their clothes, hair, and skin.

“Everyone else made it back fine,” Eliza said quietly, soft flames flickering in her eyes. “Cyrus is looking after Cassius.”

“He is all right?” she asked, her cheek pressing harder into Sorin’s chest where he’d tucked her head under his chin.

Eliza nodded. “Beatrix was checking him over, just to be sure. Do either of you need healing?”

She shook her head and felt Sorin doing the same. Eliza gave a small nod before standing and giving them some time alone.

It was some time later when she finally pulled back from Sorin enough to see his face. His eyes were closed, breathing deep and measured, as if he were trying to regulate it.

“Sorin?” she asked cautiously, bringing her fingers up to run along his face.

His eyes fluttered open, a weak smile pulling on his lips. “I finally got to ride that damn shadow dragon.”

She huffed a laugh, leaning forward and softly brushing her lips across his. When she sat back again, she said, “I took too much from you.”

“You took what you needed, Scarlett. If you hadn’t, we would be dead, or you would be back with Alaric.”

She nodded, fighting back the tears burning at the back of her throat. How many more times were they going to be able

to do this before his magic didn't refill at all? How many times before his magic reserves shrunk so much they could no longer hold even an ember?

"No," Sorin said firmly, his fingers flexing where he still had his arms wrapped around her. "We are not doing that right now. We are not panicking about this. Not yet. Understand?"

His tone was all alpha and order and command, and she wrinkled her nose at it.

"I'm sorry. Did you think since you almost died, *again*, that meant you could give me orders?"

He sighed, his eyes falling closed once more. "Wouldn't dream of it, Princess."

"Queen," she whispered, nestling back into chest. They were clearly sleeping here tonight, too tired and spent to move at this point.

"Queen," he agreed, a kiss pressing on the top of her head.

CHAPTER 21

SCARLETT

“Wake up, Lady of Darkness.”
Scarlett started, her eyes flying open.

Then she sighed when she realized where she was.

“Just so you are aware, I find you awfully annoying,” she groused, pushing herself up from the too soft grass. The Lord of Night was sitting beside her, knee bent and elbow resting atop it. A gentle breeze ruffled her hair. The full moon shone down on them, casting them in a soft glowing light.

His lips twitched at her words. “One could say that is a family trait.”

“Why haven’t I seen you lately?”

“It takes a toll on my magic to dream-walk like this,” he answered, his fingers flexing as if in anticipation of something.

She clicked her tongue in annoyance. “Vague, as always.”

“Not for much longer,” he replied, leveling a silver gaze on her.

“And why is that?”

“You need to wake up. You are almost here.”

“Here? You mean...” Her eyes went wide. “We are almost to Avonleya.”

“You have been close for days. Surely you noticed the waters darkening?” When she stared back at him, he added,

“I could not let you in with that tracking Mark still on one who travels with you.”

“How do you know of that?” she asked, her eyes narrowing with suspicion.

The Lord of Night got to his feet, ignoring her question and reaching for her hand. “Unlock the wards. You will find me waiting.”

“How? I do not have the keys. Or the lock. I do not even know what the lock is,” she argued, letting him pull her to her feet.

“Altaria will find you. He has a vial. Tip it into the black waters,” he answered.

“That’s it?” she asked, her nose wrinkling. “It seems very anticlimactic.”

He barked a laugh. “Have I ever mentioned I find you awfully annoying?”

“Funny,” she deadpanned.

“All your questions have answers. I hope you are ready for them.” He smiled broadly then, taking a step back from her. “It is time for dreams and stars to meet.”

PART TWO

WHEN STARS & DREAMS
COLLIDE

CHAPTER 22

SCARLETT

Her eyes fluttered open. The rocking of the ship calmed her in the dark quarters. Sorin was curled around her, his knee pressed between her thighs and an arm draped over her middle. She attempted to slip from the bed without disturbing him, but—

“Where are you going, Love?” His voice was thick with sleep, and his grip tightened around her middle. She wasn’t sure when or how they’d been moved to their room. The last thing she remembered was being curled in his lap on the ship deck after falling into the black waters. It had been night then too. Was it the same night? The next? A few days later? She still wore the same clothing, but her cloak and boots had been removed, along with the weapons she’d had on her.

“I think we’re here,” she said, her voice sounding harsh in the quiet of their room.

Sorin stilled for a moment before pushing out a long breath. “And the reason you think we have suddenly arrived at Avonleya in the middle of the night is because...?”

“The Lord of Night told me.”

He sat up at that, golden eyes flickering with embers finding hers in the dark. Staring down at her, he said, “He was in your dreams again.”

“Mhmm,” she hummed, slipping from his hold easily this time. She began pulling off the old clothing, finding new pants and a heavy tunic before slipping her feet into her boots. Sorin was doing the same across the small space. He met her near

the door a moment later, swinging a cloak around her shoulders. It was the fur-lined one he'd once brought her in the Fiera Mountains. How he'd known she was freezing down to her bones she didn't care. She was just grateful for the extra warmth.

"He told you we were close?" he asked, his fingers making quick work of the buttons.

"He did. He told me Altaria would be waiting for me. That he would have something to unlock the wards by dumping it into the waters," she replied.

Sorin had been reaching over her shoulders for her hood, but he froze at her words. "He said you can unlock the wards?"

"He said whatever Altaria has will let us in."

He nodded, continuing his movements and pulling the hood of the cloak up over her hair. "Like a key, Princess?"

Scarlett clicked her tongue. "Still a queen."

"My apologies. Like a key, your Majesty?"

She rolled her eyes, moving through the door to the main deck of the ship. She headed for the front of the ship, passing Cyrus and Cassius on the night watch as she went. They called out to her, but she didn't slow. If they were both on the night watch it had to be a few days after they'd been to Rydeon, especially if Cassius had recovered enough to be sitting up with Cyrus.

She didn't stop until she was standing at the bow of the ship, hands curling around the edge of the side. The water was as black as the night, and hovering above it all was a heavy mist.

No.

Not a mist.

Shadows.

Like her shadows.

She lifted a hand, releasing her darkness from beneath her skin, and her shadows swirled around her. She could feel them vibrating, reaching for the shadows above the waters, and she fought to hold them back.

“Seastar...,” Cassius ventured, his tone hushed as though he thought he would disturb the darkness.

“They know where we are,” she answered, her own voice just as faint. She cut a quick glance at Cass. “You are all right?”

He nodded, moving to stand beside her. Sorin and Cyrus were a few steps behind them, giving them this.

This was their homecoming. This was their moment, at long last, of seeing where they came from. Where they should have called home. Her heart was hammering to an unsteady beat in her chest, and Cassius reached over, intertwining his fingers with hers.

“I’m good, Scarlett,” he rasped, his voice thick with emotion.

She could only nod as they stood and waited, watching the shadows move and drift along the dark waters. If she had felt like they’d come to a standstill in the days before going to Rydeon, she didn’t feel that way anymore. Their ship was cutting through the water at a quick pace, and the closer they got, the more she felt her magic thrashing inside of her. It was stretching, pushing at the edges of her being. She was fighting to control it, not wanting to let it free. They still didn’t know what to expect when they finally got there. She might need it to protect them, but there was no denying her power knew where she was. Cassius’s fingers flexed around hers, and she knew he was feeling it too. Perhaps not quite as intensely, but without having any control over his gifts? She could imagine it was unsettling.

“Breathe, Cass,” she ordered softly. “In and out. You control it. It does not control you.”

He nodded, and she heard his next inhale. Cyrus and Sorin were murmuring behind them, and she heard Sorin ask Cyrus

to go get the others, wanting to be prepared for anything. The Fire Second had only been gone a few minutes when an eagle's cry pierced the night. It rang out loud and clear, and Scarlett couldn't help the grin that spread over her face.

She lifted her arm, barely making out the dark shape against the inky sky, and a moment later, Altaria's talons closed around her forearm. He clicked his beak, and Scarlett reached up, stroking her hand over his black feathers. His head tilted, a bright amber eye peering at her, and she stroked his head again. The eagle's feathers puffed up, ruffling slightly, before it stretched a leg out towards her.

She tugged on the twine tying the vial to his leg, closing her fingers around the smooth glass container. With another piercing cry, Altaria took back to the sky, disappearing into the dark.

And she couldn't move. She couldn't believe they were finally here. It was too surreal, and for the briefest of moments, she questioned if it was real. Was she dreaming? Had Lord Tyndell found his way to her? Gotten into her mind?

Hands were turning her, fingers gently grasping her jaw and turning her head. Golden eyes grounded her, their bond soothing every fear and worry.

"Hey, Love," he said, a soft smile lifting on his lips. She let out a shuddering exhale, her eyes falling closed, and when she reopened them, he asked, "Ready?"

She nodded, and Sorin pulled the cork from the vial, holding it out to her. She knew in her bones it was blood, could smell the coppery liquid. The Lord of Night's blood.

She looked at Cassius one final time, his features mirroring all the emotions she felt warring inside of her, before she held her hand out over the black waters and emptied the vial.

She heard it drip quietly into the sea, a soft splash of liquid on liquid. She was holding her breath, and then she was unable to contain her shadows. They tore free of any restraint she had on them, spearing out into the darkness. White flames swirled above her head, settling above her hair like a crown.

And the dark, shadowy mist was parting, clearing a path for the ships. Minutes later, it cleared completely, and Scarlett's eyes widened in wonder. Towering buildings stood with flames of various colors in the windows. The fire reflected off the buildings, lighting up the harbor that stretched out before them. She couldn't see beyond the buildings. A dark veil of shadows was beyond them, obscuring anything else from view.

It took nearly an hour to get their ships to the docks, the others arriving during that time. As they got closer, people appeared, preparing to receive them, but she was searching for a head of silver hair like hers.

It wasn't until the gangplank was being lowered from the ship to the dock below that she saw him. He stepped from the air at the base of the ramp. His silver hair was hanging past his shoulders, and eyes just as silver were pinned on her. He looked exactly as he always had in her dreams, dressed in black, from his tunic to his pants to his boots.

Another male stood to his right. He had messy brown hair that brushed his cheekbones and piercing blue eyes. He was as tall as the Lord of Night but broader. His head was tilted, watching them all intensely, and Scarlett couldn't tell if it was curiosity or annoyance that flickered across his features. But those features... They looked familiar somehow.

Sorin's hand pressed slightly along her lower back, and she looked up at him.

We are all right behind you, Love.

She looked past him, seeing her Court, her *family*, standing behind her. All of them—Cyrus, Cassius, Eliza, Rayner, Briar, Sawyer. Her gaze shifted from the Fae to Callan, Tava, and Drake standing next to them. Callan's head dipped slightly in acknowledgement and encouragement, and Scarlett swallowed against the burning in her throat as tears stung her eyes.

She turned back, meeting the Lord of Night's eyes once more. Lifting her chin, she took the first step towards him.

“Cethin Sutara,” the beautiful man said, reaching for her hand as she neared the end of the ramp and helping her over the small lip at the bottom. “My name is Cethin Sutara. King of Avonleya and your brother.”

“My brother?” she blurted, jerking her hand out of his. She bumped into Sorin’s hard chest behind her.

“Brother?” Sorin repeated.

Cethin nodded. “Everything about our kingdom is a secret. I could not tell you outside of our wards,” he replied, apology shining in his silver eyes. “I wanted to tell you, Scarlett. Gods, did I ever.”

“You are the king?” Sorin asked.

“I am,” Cethin replied.

“So that would make Scarlett an Avonleyan...*Princess*.”

She whipped her gaze to Sorin’s. “So not the time,” she hissed.

“Just making an observation,” he said innocently.

“Observe this,” she snapped, lifting her middle finger in front of his face.

“How unprincess-like of you.”

“Oh my gods,” Scarlett moaned, dragging a hand down her face. “Why are you choosing now to be an intentional pain in my ass?” When his only answer was an arrogant smirk, she rolled her eyes, gesturing vaguely in his direction. “This is my husband, Sorin.”

“I know who he is,” Cethin said, eyes glittering with amusement. “Prince of the Fire Court, husband, King of the Western Courts, and twin flame.”

Her nose wrinkled. “It is unsettling that you know all of that.”

Cethin chuckled, then jerked his chin over her shoulder. “That is your Guardian?”

“It is even more disturbing that you know *that*,” she said, her brows knitting together. “Seriously. How do you know that?”

“A hunch. Based on the way he is hovering protectively.”

“You are a liar,” Scarlett purred, stepping closer to who was apparently her brother.

Cethin’s lips twitched again. “A hunch, among other things. To be discussed when we are not on the docks.” He looked past her to the water. “How many more ships accompany you?”

“A few,” she answered. “Many with Fae and children who were not safe to stay behind.”

“We will find accommodations for all of them,” Cethin assured her.

Scarlett nodded, watching all the people move about the docks. “And where exactly are we staying?”

“There are quarters being prepared at the castle as we speak,” he answered.

“Fancy,” she quipped, eyeing the male at his side. “Who is this?”

“Razik Greybane. Hand-to-the-King, among other things.”

Razik flashed her a tight smile but didn’t say anything, continuing to watch them all closely.

“Other things,” she echoed dryly.

“Again, something that would be better discussed away from the docks,” Cethin said.

“You are awfully worried about being overheard on the docks,” Sorin observed. “Do you not trust your people?”

Cethin sent him a flat look. “Implicitly. However, I assumed your wife would want some time to process everything before alerting the entire kingdom that an unknown princess has returned home, and like any other docks, there are eyes and ears everywhere. We rarely receive ships from the east. There will already be rumors swirling.”

That all seemed logical enough, but—

“You do not truly expect me to leave my people here while I go off to a castle?” she asked.

“I have people on their way to escort them to accommodations,” Cethin explained.

“I cannot just leave them here,” Scarlett insisted.

“I will stay with them,” Briar said from behind them. “Sawyer too.”

“And I can stay,” Rayner added.

Scarlett glanced up at Sorin, who seemed as conflicted about this decision as she did.

“Not a very trustworthy thing, are you?”

Scarlett’s lip curled up into a sneer as she glared at Razik. “Says the male who has spoken a whole seven words since we arrived and is watching us as if we were thieves.”

A small, dark smile pulled at his lips, but Cethin spoke first.

“Stop being a prick, Raz.”

“I want to know where they will be housed before I leave them,” Scarlett said.

“There are several manors near the castle.”

“Noble households?”

“Something like that.”

“I seem to remember you saying there would be no more vague answers when I arrived.”

“She is certainly as annoying as you are,” Razik said.

“Shut up, Raz,” Cethin snapped. He exhaled sharply. “What would you propose then, Scarlett?”

“Well, *Lord of Night*—” She paused as Razik snorted a laugh at the term, blue eyes landing on Cethin, mirth shining in them. “I would like to see where my people are going to be housed, to make sure they will be safe there.”

“I can do that. We will pass by on our way to the castle.”
He gestured to the right. “There are horses waiting.”

“Horses?”

“I assumed you would not trust me enough right away to
Travel us all somewhere.”

He was right about that.

“However, I underestimated the number of people who
would be in your company. How many will be staying at the
castle with you?”

Scarlett glanced behind her, quickly tallying in her head.
“Fourteen, including myself and Sorin, but some can share
space if needed.”

“It is a castle, Scarlett,” Cethin drawled. “They can each
have five chambers if they wish.”

“If you have so much extra space, then perhaps *everyone*
with me can stay there.”

“If that is what you wish.”

She was about to say yes, that is exactly what she wished,
when Tava spoke softly behind her.

“Scarlett, if I may?”

She turned in surprise. “Of course, Tava.”

“I think it would be easier to keep an eye on the children if
they were in a more confined space rather than a large castle.
Not that I know how large the castle is,” she continued on in a
rush. “But I assume it is much larger than a manor house.”

“The Fae would likely be more comfortable in the manor
houses as well,” Briar agreed. “Rather than feeling on edge in
another kingdom’s royal space.”

“If that is what you all feel is best,” she said. “But you will
stay at the castle?”

Briar nodded. “After we get everyone settled, someone can
escort us there. We will send messages if we need anything or
there is any trouble.”

She looked at Sorin, who nodded once in agreement. “Well, I guess that is settled then,” she said, unease still making her stomach tighten at leaving her people with those she didn’t know.

“I assure you they will be taken care of, Scarlett,” Cethin coaxed. “Shall we?”

They followed Cethin and Razik down a road and around a corner, where several horses stood, tied to various posts. Cethin made his way to a large black stallion, running his hand down his nose as he said, “A few of you may need to share.”

“I can ride with Sorin,” she said, already calculating in her head.

“And I can ride with Drake,” Tava chimed in. “Then everyone else should be fine.”

“Everyone set then?” Cethin asked, eyes scanning over all of them.

They all murmured agreement, moving to horses and getting settled.

How are you holding up, Love? Sorin’s voice echoed down the bond as she slid back into the cradle of his hips atop the grey spotted stallion they were on.

I don’t know. I don’t think I’ve quite...processed what he said.

You have a brother.

So he says.

You doubt him?

He knows a lot of things, Sorin. It is a little suspicious.

“Will you introduce the others in your Court?” Cethin asked, moving his horse to walk beside theirs.

“On the docks? I thought we were worried about that,” Scarlett said, taking in the buildings on either side of the cobbled road they were traveling down.

There was a snicker from Cethin's other side, and she leaned forward to peer around him at Razik.

"Technically, we are no longer on the docks," Cethin said.

"How long will it take to get to the castle?"

"Riding at this pace? A good hour or two."

"Can you both Travel?" she asked.

Cethin barked a laugh. "Out of all the questions you surely have, that is what you ask?"

"She is sizing up the threats," Razik said, sounding utterly bored.

But he wasn't wrong. She wanted to know what gifts they had because she didn't trust them. Not in the slightest.

"Well?" she pressed. "You want me to trust you, right?"

There were lamps atop posts as they moved, flames in each of them lighting the way. Did they stay lit all the time? Who lit them?

But in the faint glow of those lamps she could see Cethin's lips twitch. "Yes, Scarlett, Razik and I can both Travel."

"And you are my brother?"

His head swung her way. She could feel him watching her, but her eyes were fixed straight ahead. Sorin's arm was looped around her waist, his thumb stroking soothing circles on her hip.

"Yes, Scarlett, I am your brother."

"Full-blooded?"

"Yes."

She hummed in acknowledgment. She was sure he was expecting a question about who their parents were that he was claiming they shared, but she just...wasn't ready for that yet. It didn't take a genius to figure out that if he was the king, their father, and likely their mother, were both dead. Assuming he was truly her brother.

So instead she asked, "Are there Fae here?"

Cethin and Razik exchanged a look before Cethin said, “We were separated from the Fae when the Wards went up.”

“I know that, but then how do you fill your magic reserves?”

“The same way the Fae do. Naturally.”

“But that takes...”

“An inconvenient amount of time,” Cethin agreed.

They fell into silence for a while, the scenery turning from businesses to homes as they made their way. No area appeared run down or neglected, but she doubted Cethin would take her to such areas on her first trip through the city.

“Is this the capital city then?” Sorin asked, the homes gradually growing in size as they moved from one neighborhood to the next.

“The port city of Aimonway has been the capital of Avonleya since the wards went up,” Cethin explained.

“And before that?” Scarlett asked, looking over at her... brother.

She could see it, she supposed. Same hair and eyes. Same facial features— nose, cheekbones, side profile.

There was a long beat of silence before Cethin said, “Before that, the capital of Avonleya was Elshira.”

“Elshira,” Scarlett repeated, bolting upright from where she’d been reclined against Sorin’s chest. There was no way that was a coincidence.

“Yes,” Cethin answered. “And what you are thinking is correct. Elshira is right outside the Shira Forest.”

“The spirit animals are from Avonleya?” Scarlett sputtered.

“The spirit animals currently reside in Avonleya, but no, Scarlett. They are not from here,” Cethin answered. He nodded to her left. “There. These are the estates that will house your people if you are comfortable with that.”

Scarlett turned to see a sprawling building in the shadows, a large brick wall running along the perimeter. It was easily bigger than the Tyndell Estate.

“We can have additional staff to help your own people with the children if you would like,” Cethin added.

“How far from your castle are these estates?”

“A few miles.”

“We can have Neve and Rayner stay with them if you’d like,” Sorin said, and she twisted to look up at him.

“You want Rayner to stay separate from us?”

“It is not ideal, but I think he will want to be with Tula anyway.”

“But his power levels are still low. Tula could come to the castle with us. He can’t—” She stopped, not sure how much Cethin knew about her family. “Can we stay with them? All of us? Here on these estates?”

Cethin and Razik exchanged another look, seeming to have some sort of silent conversation, before Cethin finally said, “If that is what you wish for tonight, then of course. But I would ask you to join us for lunch at the castle tomorrow.”

“We can do that,” Scarlett agreed as they approached another gated perimeter.

Cethin nodded at the guards stationed at the entrance, and they immediately moved forward to open the gates for them. “The town does not really start moving until mid-morning,” he said. “As you may recall from one of our...visits, we prefer the night. In case you decide to explore before lunch tomorrow.”

Scarlett rolled her eyes. One of their “visits.” That was not how she would describe this male’s habit to walk into her dreams and drop tidbits of information that turned her entire world upside-down.

But it had been more than that, right? The first few times she’d seen him, he’d said nothing. He was terrifying, appearing in her nightmares and simply watching her. But

when he'd started speaking, he became protective. He'd helped her become bonded to Shirina. He'd helped her with the draining Mark, and he'd helped her bring Sorin back.

She was so lost in her thoughts, she didn't realize they'd made their way to the front of the large manor house until she felt Sorin sliding off the horse behind her. He reached up to help her down, his hands gripping her hips as she swung her leg over.

The others were all dismounting around her, including Cethin and Razik. At her suspicious look, Cethin said, "We are just going to show you around. We are not staying."

"You know the house well enough to show us around?"

"This is the estate of the Commander of Avonleya's forces. He was expecting us at the castle, so he is not here to greet you himself," Cethin said, Razik already heading up the front steps to the main doors.

"And he will not mind us staying here?" Cassius asked, coming up behind them.

Cethin looked him up and down before he said, "He will not." The rest of them all shifted, feeling uncomfortable at basically taking over a Commander's home. Cethin took notice and added, "He is busy at the castle these days and is rarely home. I assure you, he will not mind. He would offer it up to you himself if he were here."

"And the Lady of the house?" Drake asked.

"There has never been a Lady of this house," Cethin answered.

After a tense moment of silence, Scarlett gestured towards the manor, telling Cethin to lead the way, and they all followed the path Razik had taken. When they stepped through the front doors, Scarlett tilted her head back, looking up at the balcony that ran along the second floor. Two winding staircases ran up either side of the foyer they had stepped into, leading to a landing that split off in two directions. Shining black banisters ran along them, silver etchings shining in the glow of the sconces lit on the walls.

She took another step forward, but a hand gently gripping her arm stopped her. She looked up at Sorin who looked pointedly down at her boots...that were leaving muddy prints on the grey marble floor.

She sighed, reaching for the buttons on her cloak, but Sorin was brushing her hands aside. "Thank you for the last-minute accommodations," he said to Cethin. "We understand asking to stay here is an inconvenience."

"It is not an inconvenience," Cethin said, stepping to the side while their company all removed boots and cloaks. They were all tired from being woken during the middle of the night, and they were all dirty from the weeks of travel. "I want Scarlett—all of you—to be comfortable. If she is more comfortable here, then we will make it work." Sorin pulled the cloak from her shoulders, Cethin immediately stepping forward to take it from him and pass it off to a small female who appeared from the hallway to the right. She was shorter with long brown hair pinned back. She was wearing a simple blue gown, and she had warm brown eyes. "This is Magdalena," he said. "She runs the household. If you need anything, let her know, and she will see that it is done. Magdalena, this is Scarlett and her husband, Sorin."

The female bowed her head to them, moving forward to gather more cloaks in her arms. "Lord Razik is making sure the rooms are in order," she said, her voice soft and melodic. "There will be hot tea and something to eat waiting for you along with fresh clothing once we know who is staying in which rooms."

"Scarlett and Sorin will need the master at the end of the hall," Cethin said.

"Already taken care of," came Razik's deep timbre, and Scarlett looked up again to find him standing on the balcony of the landing overlooking the foyer. He was leaning casually on the railing, forearms braced atop it, and his brown hair falling into his eyes as he watched them carefully. She knew that while she had been sizing them up on the ride here, Razik had been doing the same. He was doing so now as well, taking in

interactions, looking for strengths and weaknesses. “When you are ready, I can show you to your rooms.”

“Right then,” Scarlett said, straightening her shoulders, suddenly ready to be alone with Sorin to take everything in and talk it over with him. She motioned to the others behind her. “Forgive me if I ask to save introductions for tomorrow. We are all rather tired.”

Cethin glanced up at Razik again before saying, “Of course. The estate south of here is being prepared for the rest of your company. The two estates together should be more than enough to house you all.”

“Thank you again, Cethin,” Scarlett said, moving towards the staircase on the left.

Calloused fingers encased her hand, tugging her to a stop, and she glanced back to find her brother. Something on his face seemed different, almost pained. The way his brow was scrunched, lines at the corners of his eyes, as if he were fighting a wince.

“I tried, Scarlett,” he said softly, squeezing her fingers. “All those times, whenever I could get to you, I tried to earn your trust. I hope you know that. I tried to show and tell you as much as I could. I tried, Scarlett.”

She could see it in his silver eyes— the sincerity of those words. And gods, she wanted to believe him. She wished she wasn't so broken and battered and hardened to this world that she could simply believe in the goodness of another person. But she'd been lied to and used and caged too many times. She simply didn't have it in her to believe that such a thing still existed. She'd seen him torture Talwyn in her dreams. She'd seen him call forth her shadows when he awakened her gifts. He'd done things to her without her knowing what they were. Sure, the Mark he'd given her had proved useful and needed, but at the time, it was simply another thing she'd had no control over.

He slowly pushed up the sleeve of her tunic, watching her carefully as he did so. When she didn't pull back, his thumb brushed over the newest Mark he'd given her. The one he'd

painted onto her skin with his own blood when all hope had been lost.

“Do you know what type of Mark this is?” he asked, his voice going even softer, as if he was sharing a secret only for her ears.

Scarlett shook her head, gaze fixed on the interlocking circles on her arm, pale and silver like all the other Avonleyan Marks on her skin. She could feel Sorin hovering behind her. Cassius too.

“It is a Melding Mark. It can only be used by those who share blood.” He pulled his sleeve back, a matching Mark on his forearm. “When used, when our blood is mixed, we can lend each other our strength. The more closely related, the more we can share. But only blooded siblings can share gifts.”

Her gaze snapped up to his. “Share gifts?”

“For very brief periods of time, yes.”

“I did not dream-walk though.”

“Could you feel the power of those around you? Were you able to find those who were strongest? To draw from them?”

She felt the color drain from her face at the memory of her shadows latching onto Cassius and pulling every bit of magic from him, at feeling all of them around her. How Cyrus had snarled at her about purposefully drawing from Cassius that night.

“That was your power?” she whispered. “You can drain people of their magic to strengthen your own?”

“That is one of my gifts, yes,” he answered.

“But... Alaric can do that too.”

“Yes, I suppose he can.”

“How?”

“That is...a long discussion, Scarlett,” he said, releasing her arm. “Go rest. There will be time for all the answers in the days to come.”

She didn't argue. She was exhausted and that little bit of news was just another thing she needed time to think over, another puzzle piece to try to fit into place.

Cethin led them all up the stairs where Razik was waiting and then they were escorted down the hallway to the left. It easily had at least ten doors on either side of the hall. The various members of their company peeled off as rooms were opened, and when they reached the end of the hallway, double doors stood thrown open.

"One of the guest master suites," Razik said as Scarlett and Sorin followed them into the space. "Not as grand as the suite that was prepared for you in the castle, but the best we could do on short notice."

"We do not need anything grand," Scarlett said. "Just a soft bed and a bathtub."

"You are in luck," Cethin said with a grin. "This suite contains both."

"If you need anything before lunch tomorrow, just ask Magdalena," Razik said from the doorway, arms folded across his broad chest. He looked over his shoulder at the two doors on the left and right. Cassius had taken one of those rooms. Cyrus had taken the other.

"Someone will be here to escort you to the castle for lunch," Cethin said. "Do you need anything else before we go?"

Scarlett glanced at Sorin, who took the lead and said, "No. Thank you again for the last minute accommodations."

"They were not exactly last minute. We have been expecting you, but I understand the sentiments," Cethin answered. He turned to Razik. "Need to do anything before we go?"

Razik shook his head and in the next blink, they had both disappeared, Traveling from the room.

Sorin moved to shut the doors to the suite, and Scarlett let loose a long breath, finally feeling like she could breathe normally. She took in the space, a sitting room of some type.

The grey marble floors were covered with ornate black and white rugs, soft and plush beneath her stockinged feet. There was a small dinette set off to the left, and to the right were two forest green sofas and some chairs. Blankets and pillows were tastefully arranged. There was a small step up that led through another door that she could only assume was the bedchamber.

She made her way through to the bedroom, noting the large canopied bed and double doors that led out to a balcony, before moving through another doorway to the bathing room. The large claw-foot tub before her drew a moan from her lips that could only be described as sexual.

A dark chuckle came from behind her. "Here I thought only I could get you to make such sounds, Princess."

She was already reaching for the knobs to begin filling the large tub. "Looks like you have competition," she replied, grateful that Avonleya had the amenity of indoor plumbing. Sorin huffed another laugh as she peeled off the heavy tunic, pants quickly following.

"There were tea and small sandwiches just delivered," Sorin said, eyes skimming over her bare flesh as she continued to undress unceremoniously.

"After I bathe," she answered, waving him off.

"Bath over food. I never thought I would see the day."

She sent him a dry look before lifting a leg over the side of the tub, another groan coming from her throat when she lowered into the steaming water. Without another word, she slipped beneath the surface.

When she came back up, Sorin was shirtless, slipping off his pants. He motioned for her to scoot forward, making his way to the tub, and she arched a brow.

"This tub is big enough for two, Love," he said as she scooted forward, making space for him behind her. "You have at least had the luxury of a makeshift bathtub these last few weeks."

"That was tainted by Mikale," she said with a small pout. "You cannot really call that a luxury."

“Fair point.”

She slid back, her back melding with his chest, and a moment later he was dragging a cloth over her shoulder, down her chest. She tilted her head back, closing her eyes and gliding her fingers through the hot water. Sorin said nothing, gently washing her while she gathered her thoughts.

“I have a brother.”

“It would appear that way,” he confirmed.

“You believe him?”

“Do you?”

She mulled that over, letting it settle in her soul. “I do. When he explained this Mark... It made sense.” She had lifted her arm, running a finger along the Melding Mark. Sorin brushed her hair forward over her shoulder, running the cloth down her back. “But Sorin, his gifts... The way he described how he can draw from others...”

“It sounded like Alaric’s gifts. I know. I heard,” he said.

“And if Maraans acquire their gifts by killing someone and taking their power for their own...”

“Let’s not go down that path until we speak more with Cethin tomorrow, Scarlett,” he said gently.

“How can I not? What if he killed another member of my family for those gifts, Sorin? What if...”

What if one of her parents had those gifts? She couldn’t say the words out loud. Alaric was already responsible for Eliné’s death, a woman Scarlett had thought was her mother. Was he responsible for her actual parents’ deaths too? Was there ever truly an end to what the Maraan Prince had taken from her?

Hands on her hips were gently rotating her, water sloshing over the sides of the tub as she shifted so she was facing Sorin, straddling his hips in the water.

“We are here, Scarlett. We made it here, and here we will find answers. But now we are going to bathe, and then we are

going to rest so we can be ready for those answers when the sun rises.”

She nodded, swallowing down the knot of emotion in her throat, then she slid back and across the tub, motioning for him to go under and wet his hair. When he came back up, water running down his face and chest in rivulets, she slid back up his legs, reaching for the hair tonic.

“You are going to wash my hair?” he asked, a half-grin pulling at his lips.

“You take care of me all the time,” she answered. “I can take care of you every once in a while.” She leaned forward, working the tonic into his hair. As her finger combed along his scalp, she asked, “How are your power reserves after everything?”

He stiffened slightly against her. “They are full, as I would expect them to be after sleeping for two days straight.”

She nodded. “And?”

He sighed heavily. “They feel smaller.”

She wasn’t surprised. She had pulled from him a lot at the Eternal Necropolis, but hearing it spoken aloud still had her stomach sinking. She bit her tongue at the apology on her lips, knowing Sorin would chastise her for speaking it. He would willingly and gladly give every last drop of his flames for her. No questions asked.

But they had made it here, and here they would find answers. Maybe they could find answers for this while they were here too.

That’s what she told herself as he slid beneath the surface once more to rinse his hair. They would find the answers she had been searching for. They would find the answers Cassius had been searching for. They would find the answers to win this war. And they would find the answers to Sorin’s power too.

She wouldn’t settle for anything less.

CHAPTER 23

CYRUS

He was lying in bed in the room he'd been given in the manor. His shirt was off, one hand propped behind his head resting on a couple of stacked pillows. He was tossing a ball of flames in the air and catching it with the other hand.

A few more hours.

A few more hours and the sun would rise, and he could find something to do that didn't involve sitting in a quiet room by himself with only his memories to keep him company.

There was a knock on the door, and he looked at it, the flames flickering in his palm, as he wondered who would be knocking on his door at this hour.

"Yeah?" he called out.

The door pushed open, Cassius standing on the other side. Still fully dressed, Cyrus could tell he hadn't slept a wink in the two hours since they'd all gone to their own rooms.

"I need you."

"What?" Cyrus asked, sitting upright, the flames in his palm extinguishing. "What's wrong?"

Cassius ran his hand through his hair. "I need your help," he amended, his gaze darting around the room. "Being here, my magic is... It feels different. It's unsettling. I do not want to wake up Scarlett, and I figured you were awake, cursing the night, so I thought..." He trailed off, his eyes settling on Cyrus.

And holy shit. They were both glowing the way Scarlett's did, only his were a deep amber-red color. Both his pupils were more vertical than circular and wasn't that interesting? That his injured eye responded to his magic just as his good eye did. It had been beneath the patch on the ship. They wouldn't have known.

Cyrus was already on his feet, reaching for the tunic he'd tossed across the desk chair nearby. He turned back to Cass, and he just looked so damn helpless. Cyrus had never seen him so out of sorts. Even when everything would go to shit, Cassius was the calm in the storm. Not only for Scarlett, but for everyone.

He was still shrugging into the tunic when he reached Cassius's side, and he rested a hand on his shoulder. "It's going to be fine. You just need to siphon off some of your magic. You haven't touched it since that battle with the seraphs and that was a while ago. And now, being here, it's getting anxious. It's energy that needs to be released, Cass."

"I can't here," he argued, shaking his head. "I do not have control over it."

"We will find some place," Cyrus replied, pulling his door shut behind him. "At home I would take you to the Courtyards, but we will find some place here."

Cassius nodded, falling into step beside him. They made their way down one of the winding grand staircases, moving to the front doors when the small female from earlier appeared.

"Can I get you two something?" she asked, kindness and warmth radiating from her.

"We just need to get some air," Cyrus said quickly. He glanced at Cassius before he added, "Preferably somewhere not flammable."

Understanding flashed across the female's face, and her gaze flitted over Cassius. "I can summon Lord Razik," she said carefully. "He would know the best space for such a thing."

“That is not necessary,” Cyrus said. “Just an open area nearby?”

She nodded, gesturing for them to follow her. “There is a path that goes through the courtyard and leads to the base of the mountains. It is a little bit of a walk. Unless you would like someone to Travel you there?”

“Can everyone here Travel?” Cassius asked.

The female looked over her shoulder at them. “Most with magic can. The mortals, of course, cannot.”

“There are mortals here?” Cyrus asked.

She laughed lightly. “Of course there are mortals here.”

“Mortals, but not Fae?” Cassius asked as they followed her through a set of doors and out into the night once more.

She paused, holding a door open for them, her warm eyes darkening some. “Not since the Wards went up.” She nodded to the dark. “Follow the path. You will know when you leave the estate. The wards will alert the Lords to your departure and return.”

“Lords? As in more than one?” Cassius asked.

She smiled again, nodding. “The Commander and his son.”

“No one told us of his son. He will not mind us being here?”

Her smile faltered somewhat, as though she were confused. “No. He does not mind.”

“Let’s go,” Cyrus said, bumping his shoulder against Cassius’s.

They were silent as they made their way down the path, and he could feel the tension radiating off of Cassius beside him.

“Breathe, Cass,” he said reassuringly. “You will learn to control it. This will all be fine.”

Cassius nodded, his pace seeming to quicken. Cyrus increased his steps to keep up. It took a good twenty minutes

before he felt the estate's wards pressing against his skin as they crossed them. Cassius didn't even seem to notice. Maybe it was his Witch blood.

Another twenty minutes later, they stepped through a dark mist to find rocky ground beginning to incline. The base of a mountain. Cassius seemed predisposed to simply keep going and climb the damn thing.

Cyrus reached out, gripping his forearm. "You can't outrun this," he said with a smirk.

Cassius didn't return the sentiment.

Cyrus looked around them, tossing a flame in the air to illuminate their surroundings. Rocky bare ground, a few sparse trees. Not the Courtyards, but it would certainly do.

"You do not have to worry about burning anything down here," he said. "If you lose control, it will be fine."

Cassius seemed to tense even more.

"Take a deep breath and let it go. It shouldn't take much to tap into your magic if it's causing you this much trouble," Cyrus continued, watching him carefully, ready to intervene if necessary. He wasn't entirely sure he'd be able to do much against the flames Cassius had, but a shield should at least protect him.

"It is not that easy," Cassius grumbled.

"I know it's not," Cyrus said. "But seriously, Cass, your eyes have already shifted. You just need to let it go. There is nothing out here you can harm."

"You are out here."

"And I can make a shield."

"You don't know that it will hold against...whatever it is I can do," he argued, echoing his thoughts.

"I'm pretty fast," Cyrus said with a wink. "I'll manage to get out of the way if needed."

"This isn't something to joke about," Cassius snapped, dragging both hands through his hair this time. "Gods, you and

Scarlett turn everything into a godsdamn joke. This is serious.”

“Hey, hey,” Cyrus said, frowning at the words. “Where is that coming from? We both care. You know that.”

Cassius’s hands went through his hair again, fingers tightening in the strands. Cyrus had never seen him like this. Unsettled wasn’t a strong enough word to describe him.

Cassius was rattled about whatever this was.

Cyrus reached out and gripped his arm again. “Come on, Cass. Talk to me.”

“It is this place,” he muttered. “I cannot... I do not like how this feels. This magic beneath my skin, screaming to get out. Uncontrollable and frenzied.”

“So let it out,” Cyrus said. “We’re away from everyone else. It’s just me and you.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“I just can’t.”

“You need to, Cass. Or eventually your magic will take over and take what you refuse to give it.” Cassius just shook his head again, and Cyrus was grabbing his face, forcing him to look at him. His pupils were fully vertical now, glowing brighter than before. If he didn’t let this out soon, it would force its way out just like he’d said. “Sorin told me that Scarlett’s magic would take over, breaking through her tonic.” Cassius nodded, swallowing hard. “That is what will happen, Cassius. When we don’t use our magic, we lose control of it.”

“I don’t know how to not be in control,” Cassius said, his voice hoarse and full of agony. “I have always been in control. The few times I have lost it...”

Understanding washed through Cyrus, a sense of relief with it. He could work with this. He could talk him through this.

“Okay,” he said, inhaling deeply. “Okay. Cass, look at me.” When those amber-red eyes were back on his, he said,

“I’m going to use my flames to guide yours, all right?” It wouldn’t be quite the same as sharing with a twin flame, but their magic would still be drawn to each other, especially if his was trying to break free. “If you can’t trust your magic right now, then trust me, okay? Can you do that?”

“Yeah,” he replied thickly. “Yeah, I can do that.”

“Good.” Cyrus called his flames up, bands of fire twining around Cassius’s arms. “Breathe, Cassius. Let your magic do what it was created to do. It’s part of you. It’s not the enemy. It doesn’t want to work against you.”

He could feel it, Cass’s magic struggling beneath his skin. Cyrus’s own fire seemed to flare with anticipation at this unknown power. It was hot and fierce, and, *gods*, Cass was powerful. He’d only felt power like this from the Fae Royals. But Cass still wasn’t letting it out.

“Cass, let it go.”

“I can’t.”

Fuck. This was about to get brutal.

“Cassius, if you do not let your magic out right now, it will go wild. It will claw its way out of your being. And when that happens? I will not be able to help. I cannot promise you I will not get hurt. I cannot promise that something drastic will not happen. But right now? Right now, if you trust me, I *can* help. But I can feel your power, Cass. You don’t have much time left before it takes over.” He could feel Cassius trembling beneath his hands, his eyes still fixed on him. “Come on, Cass,” he encouraged, bordering on begging. He brought his brow to his. “You can do this. You always catch everyone else. Let me catch you. This one time.”

And then there were black flames flaring around them. Cyrus quickly threw a shield around himself, pulling it close to his body, but he refused to break contact with Cassius. Not when he’d finally gotten through to him.

“Just let it burn,” he murmured, feeling the tension drain from Cassius with each passing second.

The black flames were swirling around them, a whirlwind of writhing, intense heat. He'd expected Cassius to shift more, for those wings to appear at least, but nothing else on him changed. His eyes continued to glow as he kept them pinned to Cyrus's, his breathing measured and focused.

It was several minutes later when the black flames around them started to lessen. Cyrus sent his magic to weave among the black flames, calming them and slowly coaxing them to go out. Cassius sucked in a sharp breath.

"That feels...different."

"I know," Cyrus said, adamantly ignoring the feeling of their powers mingling together. "But it's the only way I can put your flames out right now."

It was another few minutes before he had them all out.

"Better?" Cyrus asked, taking a measured step back from Cassius.

"Yeah," Cassius said. He sounded utterly exhausted.

"How do your reserves feel? Do you need blood after that?"

"No," Cassius said quickly. At Cyrus's skeptical look, he added, "I want them to be...not full right now. It is harder to control when my reserves are full."

"Now that we are off the ship, you can start training with them. You can practice with them and learn to control them. It will get easier."

Cassius nodded, looking towards the path they'd come down. "Ready to head back?"

Cyrus watched him for a long moment before he ventured, "Before we go, maybe you should try calling your power forth now. When it's not so intense."

"Why would I want to do that?"

"So you can practice controlling it. Maybe it will be easier to control when your reserves aren't full?"

Cassius ran his thumb and forefinger along his brow. "I do not want to deal with this right now."

"Obviously," Cyrus drawled, and Cassius glared at him. "Whether you want to or not, your magic is going to demand it."

Cassius shoved his hands deep into his pockets, tipping his face to the sky that was beginning to show the barest traces of the coming dawn. "Can I admit something to you?"

"Of course," Cyrus answered with a slight frown.

"I often wish Scarlett had never awoken my gifts."

He clamped down on the immediate response of wanting to refute that statement. His magic was a gift as much as any of theirs were, but he clearly viewed it as anything but at the moment. Instead he said, "I can see why you feel that way."

Cassius slowly slid his gaze to him. "Scarlett would try to tell me I just need to learn to control them, that I will feel differently when I do."

Cyrus shrugged. "I'm not Scarlett."

"No," Cassius agreed. "You are not."

"Do I think you will eventually feel differently about your gifts? Yes. But can I promise that? Not really," Cyrus added. "Do you need to learn to control them whether you like them or not? Yes."

"I know," Cassius sighed into the waning night. "I thought it might be easier when we got here, but I was not prepared for...that. Scarlett let her shadows free on the ship, and she... Gods, it was like her shadows knew they were home. It was like *she* knew she was home. I thought..."

"You thought you would feel that way when you got here too, but you don't," Cyrus supplied.

"Something like that."

"You know better than anyone she was not always like... Well, like she is now. If this had all been happening a year ago,

before she found Sorin and faced her darkness, I suspect she would have felt the same.”

“Maybe,” Cassius muttered.

“She struggled with her magic too, you know. She was so frustrated it didn’t come naturally to her, and gods, she could be so insufferable during that time. She was just so lost and angry. I don’t know how many weeks Sorin took her to the Courtyards and nothing would happen. Well, nothing with her magic anyway. But…” He trailed off, not entirely sure how Cassius was going to receive what he needed to say. He waited until Cassius looked at him again before he said, “Our magic is tied to our emotions and our mental state. It is why it can explode when we are angry. It is why it reacts when we sense danger. And when Scarlett was working through all of her trauma, it was hard to access her magic. It was buried beneath everything she was trying to shove down. You come to understand your magic, and it comes to understand you. Your magic tends to recognize when you are dealing with hard truths.”

“What exactly are you trying to say, Cyrus?” Cassius asked, turning to face him fully. His eyes were still amber-red, although they weren’t glowing quite as intensely. They were more muted now.

“I’m saying you might find it hard to work with your magic until you figure out all this stuff with your father and the High Witch,” Cyrus said bluntly. “It is something you do not have control over, who your parents are, and you like control. I think things have always come easily to you, like they did for Scarlett, and magic is entirely different from fighting and darting through the night. Your power isn’t about control so much as it is about the give-and-take.”

Cassius exhaled another harsh breath. “I think that is about as much introspection as I can take for the night.”

“Fair enough. It is dawn,” Cyrus conceded, nodding towards the slowly brightening sky.

Cassius rolled his eyes, starting towards the path they’d followed up here, and Cyrus fell into step beside him once

more.

“So when your eyes are shifted like that, can you see out of both of them?” Cyrus asked after a few minutes of comfortable silence.

“Actually yeah. It is really strange,” Cassius answered. “Adjusting to randomly seeing with both eyes again is odd.”

“I imagine it is,” Cyrus said. “Can you shift them back?”

“No.”

“Have you tried?”

“Have I... Of course, I have tried, Cyrus. What do you think I was doing in my room before I came to get you?”

“...sleeping? Like everyone else?” Cyrus guessed. Then he smirked to himself when he heard Cassius muttering about a “smart ass” under his breath. “But in all seriousness, Cass.” He reached out, tugging him to a stop. “Your power reserves should be full. We don’t know who and what we’ll be facing today. If not for you, then for Scarlett,” Cyrus rushed on when Cassius started to protest.

“Guilt as a motivator,” Cassius quipped with a soft huff. “You are not as clever as you think you are.”

“I’m exactly as clever as I think I am.”

They stepped back across the wards as the sun crested the horizon, bathing the courtyard around them in soft light. There were low stone walls along the path, ivy and flowers nearly obscuring the stones from view. Various paths branched off as they walked, and at one point, Cyrus was sure he saw movement in the shadows of one of those paths. He’d slowed, studying the darkened walkway that led deeper into the courtyard, but then Cassius had said, “Fine, I will refill them to be prepared for today,” and they’d continued on to the manor.

The house was obnoxiously large but somehow tasteful at the same time. They hadn’t seen much of the kingdom, having arrived in the dark, but the streets they’d traveled along had seemed clean and taken care of. Homes appeared in good

condition and were inviting. Even the docks by the sea had been relatively neat. As neat as docks could be anyway. He could still smell the sea from here, but it was faint enough that he could breathe deep and not feel like he was choking on memories.

The female from earlier met them at the doors with her warm smile in place.

“Welcome back.”

“Thank you,” Cassius answered, and Cyrus let him take the lead in conversing with her. He was the one who’d spent the last decade in a noble’s household, had essentially been raised in one. “It is Magdalena, yes?”

She nodded with another smile. “Would you two like some breakfast? I have several options already prepared and waiting in the dining room,” she said, closing the doors behind them.

“That would be great. Then we could rest before the lunch meeting later today,” Cassius answered, following her down a hallway.

She led them to a large dining room, a long table within that was laden with place settings and various breakfast foods. Eliza and Auberon were already at the table, the latter sipping from a silver goblet. Cyrus assumed Eliza’s blood filled it.

Eliza glanced up from the book she was reading, annoyance flickering across her features.

“Eliza, dear,” Cyrus drawled, dropping into a chair across from her. “There is still time to get some more sleep if it will make you more pleasant today.”

Auberon snickered into his cup.

“If only more sleep would make you less of a pain in my ass,” she returned, her eyes already back on her book.

“Seriously, why are you so cranky this morning? There’s food right in front of you if you’re hungry,” Cyrus said, reaching for a plate of bacon. Eliza didn’t exactly have a cheery personality on a normal day, but she seemed especially irritable for this early in the morning.

“I am not hungry, you prick,” she sniped at him.

Cyrus had a retort on the tip of his tongue, but Auberon cut in before he could speak.

“She is upset because that male from last night just left,” the Night Child said, a smirk lifting his lips.

“I am *not* upset because he left,” Eliza snarled, her book snapping shut. “I was glad he finally took his leave.”

Auberon was obviously trying to keep the mirth from his face, but was failing miserably.

“So...what happened?” Cassius asked before he took a bite of toast covered in raspberry jam.

“Do not say a word, you bloodsucker,” Eliza hissed, her finger pointed at Auberon. Warning laced every word, and Cyrus knew she would carry out the underlying threat.

Auberon apparently didn't give a shit.

“He thought she was one of the queen's Ladies-in-Wait.”

Fire was flaring from Eliza's palm right at the vampyre, who was ducking under the table with a curse amid his snigger.

Cyrus was fighting back his own laughter. Eliza must have wanted to gut the male.

“I assume that was Razik?” Cassius asked, a polite smile on his face.

“Yes, it was,” Eliza replied through clenched teeth.

“Oh, come on, Eliza. Maybe their females aren't in the armies like they are back home,” Cyrus said, shoveling eggs into his mouth to keep the laughter from spilling out. “I'm sure it was an honest mistake.”

“Chew your food and then speak, Cyrus. You do not need to act like a buffoon all the godsdamn time,” she retorted.

“Sorry to offend your delicate sensibilities, milady,” he volleyed back after swallowing his eggs.

“I am going to take my boot, start it on fire, and shove it so far up your—”

“Well, good morning,” Scarlett said loudly.

They all turned to find the king and queen in the doorway. Sorin’s brow was furrowed as he observed his Court, while Scarlett looked amused and ready to join in the bantering.

“What are we shoving where and why exactly?” she asked, plopping down beside Cassius.

“Apparently the King’s Hand thought Eliza was— Fuck!” Cyrus yelled, dropping his fork as he lurched back from his plate of food that had gone up in flames, nearly singeing his face. He wouldn’t have felt the burn of the flames, but that didn’t mean his hair and godsdamn eyebrows wouldn’t have caught alight. “Eliza!” he growled, picking up the few eggs that had flown from his fork and splattered across the table.

“Kindly remember we are *guests* here,” Sorin said, his voice rising to be heard over the top of his Second and general.

“Scarlett’s the princess. She outranks any Lord here,” Cyrus muttered, putting out Eliza’s flames and frowning at his now burnt food.

“Cyrus...” Sorin said, already sounding exasperated.

“No, no. He’s right,” Scarlett cut in. “I say we let this play out. I can play the princess card if necessary.”

Cyrus’s head snapped up to find her grinning like a cat that got the cream as she chewed on a pastry. Sorin was rubbing his brow in that way he always did when he felt like he was refereeing children. Cassius was placing bacon on her plate.

“Perhaps introductions should be a top priority at lunch,” Cassius said, passing Scarlett the bowl of scrambled eggs next. “Lord Razik, apparently, did not realize that Eliza is part of your Inner Court.”

“I am sure Eliza took care of any misunderstandings,” Scarlett said carefully, reaching for the glass of juice Sorin had poured for her.

“*Lord Razik*,” Eliza grumbled under her breath. “He is not even the Lord of this house. He is the son of the Lord.”

“Wait,” Scarlett said, her glass landing back on the table with a faint clunk. “*He’s* the son of the Avonleyan Commander of the armies?”

“Apparently,” Eliza said, looking put out by the fact. “When Magdalena asked him of Lord Tybalt, he said his father was doing well and would be stopping by later today.”

“What did you say?” Cassius demanded.

Cyrus turned to look at him, startled to find both him and Scarlett frozen, eyes wide as they stared back at Eliza.

Eliza, confused as the rest of them, said slowly, “Razik said his father would stop by later today. To check in and take care of any pressing matters.”

“The Commander’s name,” Scarlett rasped. “What did you say his name was?”

“Tybalt. She called him Lord Tybalt,” Eliza answered.

The sound of a chair scraping had Cyrus’s attention going back to Cassius again, but he was already walking out of the dining room.

“Cassius!” Scarlett called after him, already halfway to the doorway.

“Cass?” Cyrus called at the same time, getting to his feet.

He came to a stop beside Scarlett, where she’d stilled outside the dining room.

“What was that about?” he asked, turning to face her fully.

She was staring down the hall in the direction Cassius had gone, worrying her bottom lip. When she met his stare, silver eyes full of concern stared back at him. “Hazel told us that his father’s name is Tybalt.”

“But that would mean...”

“The Avonleyan Commander is his father,” she finished for him, gaze drifting back down the hall. “But it also means

that Razik is his brother.”

CHAPTER 24

CALLAN

Callan rode atop a white horse as their company made their way to the castle some time after mid-day. With the kingdom favoring the night, they started everything a little later in the morning. Apparently that included lunch being served mid-afternoon rather than at mid-day.

He'd come downstairs, Magdalena directing him to the dining room for breakfast, but when he'd gotten there, only the Earth Prince and Drake were there. He'd been told the others had already eaten. Some had gone to the other estate to check in on the children and other Fae, Tava included, and others had gone into the capital to explore. Although, 'explore' was probably an inaccurate term. They had gone to scout out the terrain, spy, and gather as much information as they could.

Callan had opted to stay at the original estate and help where he could. After nearly ten minutes of insisting he could help, Magdalena finally relented, and he had been assigned the task of helping to bring fresh towels to all the rooms. It was a simple task that gave him something to focus on and kept him moving. Idleness just had him reliving that throne room these days, and if not that, his conversation with Tava on that ship nearly a week ago. Both memories made it hard to breathe. Both memories were unbearable, just in different ways.

The further inland they moved, the denser the fog was becoming. It wasn't really fog. Callan just couldn't quite wrap his mind around what it actually was.

Black mist. Shadows and darkness like Scarlett could summon to her fingertips. If there had been any doubt about

her being Avonleyan, it was gone now.

Not only was she Avonleyan, but she was the sister of the king, if he was to be believed. An Avonleyan princess. The irony that she had gone from a mystery woman who had moved among the shadows, that he would have never truly been able to be with and maintain his throne, to a lost princess of a nearly mythical kingdom across the sea was not lost on him.

She rode on her own horse today, Sorin on one side and Cassius on the other. Their escorts, soldiers from the Avonleyan forces, led the way. Two in the front of their group and two behind them. Tava had opted to stay behind, Drake saying she had insisted she was not needed for such a meeting and that it was not her place to be there.

Except that if they'd still been courting, if he could get out of his own godsdamn head, it *would* be her place as his future queen.

The path they were following seemed to grow steadily steeper until suddenly it was like crossing a veil. One moment, the "fog" was so thick, he could hardly see the road they traveled on. The next, it cleared as if it had never been there.

Callan looked back over his shoulder, a wall of misty fog rose up at their backs. Facing forward, he looked up at the castle that was before them. It was nestled into the mountains, the mountains themselves as black as the night. The castle itself was a grey so dark it was nearly black, but seemed to shimmer slightly in the sunlight. The front had three separate archways, side-by-side, various towers rising up behind them and reaching towards the clear sky. Somehow, the black mountains and grey castle were elegant against the blue expanse rather than a dark stain like one would expect. More towers flanked the main ones, various buildings visible, but more than that were the winding steps that led up to the building. The steps crossed over a ravine of sorts that Callan could assume ran deep. As the horses made their way across the now somewhat rocky road, they came to a stop at what was clearly a guard post.

“We have to walk across that?” Scarlett asked. Callan could hear the frown in her voice.

“We usually Travel,” one of their escorts at the front answered, dismounting and passing the reins to a waiting stable hand. “We were told you would likely not agree to such a thing.”

“And the horses?” Rayner asked, still seated atop his brown horse.

“The guards will watch them until you are ready to return.”

Sorin and Scarlett were doing their silent communication thing, judging by the way they were looking at each other, and Callan stifled the sigh he wanted to let out. He hadn't slept well. Again. They'd been woken in the middle of the night on the ships, and then he'd been assigned a small suite. While it had been nice to finally have somewhat spacious quarters again, it still provided only his nightmares to keep him company in the quiet hours of the night.

The trek across the stair-bridge took another ten minutes, everyone silent as they moved. The black mist was so thick in the ravine that Callan couldn't tell how far down it went, but he was more than glad to step off the damn bridge when they reached the other side.

They were escorted through the main doors of the castle, and the inside was tasteful and inviting. Light grey marble floors were offset by the walls the same color as the outside of the castle. Sconces every few feet cast a soft glow along with the windows that let in the natural light. There were soft white window curtains tied back with silver cords. It was all refined and far warmer than Callan was expecting.

They were led up a set of stairs to a second-floor council room by one of the soldiers, who informed them King Cethin would be there shortly. The table was laden with various food choices, and Scarlett immediately moved forward, snagging a seat near the head of the table and reaching towards a platter of what appeared to be roast beef.

“Perhaps we should wait for Cethin?” Sorin asked, lowering into a chair beside her.

She proceeded to pile meat onto her plate before reaching for another plate of roasted vegetables. “We were invited for lunch, and I am hungry.”

“We did eat breakfast,” Sorin said while simultaneously handing her a piece of toasted bread.

“And then we trained,” Scarlett countered. She motioned to the other chairs around her, looking over her shoulder as she took a bite of bread. “Sit and eat,” she said to everyone else. “I am the princess, apparently. It will be fine.”

Her Court seemed content enough with that explanation and moved to take seats at the table. Prince Azrael and Auberon were a little more hesitant, but ultimately followed suit, leaving Callan and Drake to do the same.

Callan was bringing a forkful of rice to his mouth when the doors opened and the king strode in with Razik at his side, along with a couple others and...a mortal.

Callan slowly lowered the fork still full of rice back to his plate. Callan wasn't quite sure how he knew the man was mortal. He had the rounded ears of humans, not that such a thing was a clear indicator anymore. Cassius had rounded ears instead of the arched ears of the Fae and Avonleyans, apparently taking after the High Witch in that regard. He was wearing brown pants with a finely crafted red tunic, gold threads running through it. His sandy blonde hair curled around his ears, and he had dark navy blue eyes. He moved casually enough that he was obviously comfortable among the royalty in the room. So the question remained: what was a mortal doing with the king of Avonleya?

The Fae around him had all gone still, the preternatural way only the Fae could achieve, as they took in the newcomers, eyes narrowed and calculating.

“Good afternoon,” Cethin said, moving straight to the head of the table and sitting down, Scarlett at his left. Razik moved to the seat at his right, the rest of their company following suit.

“Are the lunch options to your satisfaction?” There was mirth in the small smile on his lips, Scarlett taking a bite from a roast beef sandwich as she watched him.

“It will do,” she agreed, sucking juice from her thumb, and even after being around her constantly for so long now, her lack of propriety in front of royalty still somehow shocked him. He knew she had manners and could show respect, but it had to be earned first and that was not an easy feat with the queen. Princess? What exactly would she be considered at this point?

“Gentlemen,” Cethin said, his gaze staying fixed on Scarlett. “May I introduce Scarlett Aditya, *Fae* Queen of the Western Courts across the sea, and her husband and twin flame, Sorin Aditya, Prince of the Fire Court and King of the Western Courts.”

“Again, we appreciate your willingness to be flexible with our accommodations last night,” Sorin said, nodding toward the Avonleyan company. Scarlett, however, was staring at Cethin, her nose slightly scrunched and eyes narrowed on her supposed brother.

“Right then,” Scarlett said, clearing her throat as she settled back into her seat. “You apparently already know Cassius. He is my Guardian and Hand-to-the-Queen.” She paused, her features hardening as she pinned Razik in her silver stare. Razik didn’t seem to notice, his eyes flitting over Cassius once before moving on to Cyrus beside him. “Next to him is Cyrus, Second in the Fire Court.”

She continued on, introducing the Fae Princes, the rest of the Fire Court, Auberon and Sawyer. Cethin and Razik didn’t say anything, absorbing the information. Cethin’s eyes kept darting back to Scarlett as she spoke, as if he couldn’t quite believe she was really sitting there. Maybe he couldn’t. How long had he known about her? Known his sister was across the Edria Sea and he couldn’t get to her? Help her? Save her? He would do anything for Eva; he could only imagine Cethin felt the same way.

“King Callan Solgard of Windonelle,” Scarlett said, reaching him in the line down the table. “His sister, Princess Eva, is with the other children. Next to him is Lord Drake Tyndell.”

“Tyndell?” the mortal man said, his head tilting in interest. He was the first to speak since Scarlett had started introductions. “You are Lady Tava’s brother then?”

Drake stiffened beside him. “How do you know my sister?”

“I met her this morning,” the man answered, a warm smile filling his face. “I make it a point to know the people who enter my home, especially a Lady as bright as your sister.”

“You own the estate the children are staying at?” Sorin asked.

Cethin cleared his throat. “I thought you would want to meet the owner of the home where your people are staying. Allow me to introduce Hale Coventry.”

Callan lurched forward. “Coventry?”

A small smile pulled at Cethin’s lips, his attention shifting away from Scarlett. “I thought if anyone would recognize the name, it would be you.”

“Callan?” Scarlett asked.

“Coventry is the name of the last Toreall ruling family.”

“Before Alaric put a Maraan on the throne,” Scarlett clarified.

Callan nodded, studying the man seated on the other side of the table. It wasn’t possible. He couldn’t be any older than late twenties, possibly early thirties. The last Coventry king died without an heir or siblings more than seven decades ago, paving the way for the current king.

Scarlett turned back to Cethin. “Is he related to the Coventry line?”

Cethin glanced between her and Hale, and the man nodded his head before Cethin said, “He *is* the Coventry bloodline.

His grandfather was the last Coventry king to hold the throne of Toreall.”

“Bullshit,” Callan said, unable to keep the curse from flying out of his mouth. “How? How is that possible?”

“My grandfather became suspicious of the Commander of his forces some time before his death. From what my father told me, he sent my grandmother and him away a week before his life was taken from him,” Hale explained. He was relaxed and casual, clearly at home here. His features were solemn as he spoke though, and Callan wondered how often he’d told this story. Did the people of Avonleya know his true heritage?

“Of course, my grandmother and father were hunted down as the queen and prince. Whoever had done this wanted the bloodline wiped out. They were in a small hunting cabin in the Xylon Forest, only the King’s Hand with them. Supposedly it was a cabin no one else knew about, but they were found. It was burned with them still inside it until even the ashes were nothing. They had tried to hide my father, shoving him into a small space that was beneath the floor. It was meant to be a hiding space, but it would not have kept him from flames.”

“Then how did he survive?” Sorin asked, his tone grave as he listened to the story.

Hale smiled, a sad tilt of his lips. “Apparently, a beautiful Fae who could walk among the winds appeared in the small space with him. She held her hand to his mouth, giving him fresh air to breathe, while her winds kept the fire from them.”

“Ashtine,” Briar breathed. He sat forward, hands coming to the top of the table. “Are you telling me Princess Ashtine saved your father?”

Hale nodded. “Whether or not she knew who she saved, I do not know.”

“If the winds called her there, she would have gone. Whether she knew the reason or not,” Briar said, sitting back once more, his eyes going distant. It wasn’t hard to work out that his thoughts were back home with the princess he loved.

“She stayed with him, helping to keep him hidden when the soldiers searched the burned remains for survivors. I suspect she helped make them believe they found evidence of three bodies as well,” Hale continued. “After that, she helped him find shelter in northern Toreall. He eventually met my mother, and I came along, but she died during childbirth. He had plans to take back the throne, until he suddenly found himself a single father.

“Then, twenty years ago, another silver-haired woman came to him, her own belly round with child. I was nine. She came to my father and told him she knew who he was, that she could help restore his bloodline to his throne, but that he would need to come to Avonleya until the time came. Of course, he did not believe her. She gave him a deadline, said she would come for his answer soon, and whatever he decided would seal his fate and mine. She would never be able to offer him this again.”

Callan had been subtly watching the others while Hale spoke, and Scarlett’s face had gone pale the more he spoke. Sorin had reached over, his hand covering hers where it gripped the arm of the chair she was seated in. Cassius was leaning over, whispering something into her ear, but she gave no inclination that she heard him. She was fixed on Hale, drinking in every word.

“When she came again, I was ten. It was a few months after that. She was no longer with child and did not have one with her. To this day, I do not know what made him change his mind, what made him believe her, but we left that night. She carried us both through the air, Traveling I later learned, to a ship outside these wards where Altaria met us with a vial that she poured into the black waters to let us in. I have been here ever since. My father passed a few years ago, and I have been waiting and preparing for when I can go back and take back the throne, to free my people from chains they do not even know they bear.”

All this time, for years, it had been drilled into him that the Fae wanted to enslave the mortals, to take over their lands. Callan blinked at the realization that such a thing had already

happened. Their greatest fears had come to fruition, only no one realized it yet. It had been so subtly and artfully done. But it wasn't the Fae. Never had been the Fae. He had to appreciate the brilliance of the various pieces that had been put into place and carefully calculated to make all this happen, even if the mortals had only been pawns this entire time.

The room had gone quiet when Hale had finished speaking, everyone lost in their thoughts until Cyrus spoke.

"I do not understand. If you all can come and go from the wards whenever you wish, why have you let the Maraans run wild across the sea? If you could come for him, why not save the Rydeon bloodline as well? Why not aid the Fae? Why not aid *us*? You clearly knew everything that was happening there based on the interactions between..." He gestured between Scarlett and Cethin.

"Because we cannot come and go as we please," Cethin answered. "At least we could not until recently. I control who enters the Wards, but none of us can leave. Not without the other Avonleyan key."

Scarlett was shaking her head. "We do not have the keys. I altered them. Instead of unlocking the wards, they locked the rips Alaric had created and lifted the wards confining the Witches and Shifters."

Cethin's knowing smile was identical to one he'd seen on Scarlett's face numerous times in the last year. "Those keys were the work around, in case the original keys could not be used. There is always a work around when it comes to magic."

"Yes, yes," Scarlett muttered, her hand waving off the comment. "So the work around is no longer an option. What is the plan now? You let us in. How do we get out? If you are about to tell me you trapped us here and I can no longer aid my allies across the sea, our supposed *connections* will not save you from what I will do."

Cethin's smile turned razor sharp, the same darkness on Scarlett's face mirrored on his. "Do not mistake my patience —"

“Patience?” Scarlett repeated incredulously, moving as if she were about to rise to her feet. “I have been across the godsdamn sea trying to put together a picture without all the pieces. Do not speak to me of patience.”

“Maybe this discussion is a more suitable one for when you two do not have an audience?” Razik cut in dryly, sounding truly bored.

“Why is that?” Scarlett sneered. “Afraid some *secrets* will be exposed?”

A crease formed on the male’s brow, confusion etching across his face. “No. This just sounds like it is a personal squabble between you two, and I have better things to do than sit here and listen to you try to work through your petty differences. I would guess everyone else at this table does too. So can we discuss matters that involve *all* of us, and then you two can go off and have a heart-to-heart or whatever the fuck you need to do?”

“Raz,” Cethin sighed, hand rubbing at his brow.

Razik settled back in his chair, giving a dramatic wave of his hand, motioning for him to go on.

“These matters would be better discussed at another time,” Cethin finally agreed. “Scarlett, I was hoping you and Sorin would join me for a private dinner tonight.”

“Me *and* Sorin?” she repeated.

“I am not fool enough to try to separate you from your husband. Fae males are far too protective and possessive, let alone the fact that he is also your twin flame,” Cethin said.

“Are Avonleyan males not the same?” she asked, her head tilting to the side.

“We are,” Cethin agreed. “Which is why I know if I tried to see you without him or someone else from your Court present, I would find myself at odds with your entire side of the table.”

He is not wrong, Callan thought, watching the conviction of that statement pass over all the faces of the Fae.

“Fine,” Scarlett finally conceded. Her fingers drummed on the table, her chin propped on her other hand. “I do not suppose you have a secret Rydeon heir hidden around here somewhere as well?”

The soft smile was back on Cethin’s face. “No. Unfortunately, we learned of that loss too late.”

Scarlett jerked her chin at the rest of the people across the table from her. “Who are they?”

“Higher ranking members of our forces,” Cethin answered. “Orson and Riggs.”

“Higher ranking members,” Sorin repeated. “Your Commander is not here to meet with us?”

Razik seemed to stiffen slightly, and Scarlett’s face went serpentine. She’d obviously learned something. “I would like to meet the owner of the home *I* am staying in as well.”

“I am hoping after our meal tonight, you will reconsider and come to stay here, in the castle,” Cethin replied.

“Is Lord Razik your Second and your Hand?” Cyrus asked suddenly.

This question had everyone on that side of the table stilling as well as the Avonleyan king.

And everyone on Scarlett’s side of the table took notice.

Cethin’s fingers drummed once on the table in a mannerism so similar to Scarlett that it was hard to deny the two weren’t related in some way at this point.

“No,” Cethin finally gritted out. “Razik is not my Second. He is my Third.”

“Surely not...a mortal,” Azrael piped in, the absurdity of that written across his face as his eyes darted to Hale.

“No,” Cethin said again. His fingers drummed as his eyes ran over everyone in their company, and Callan wanted to shrink back from what glimmered in his silver irises.

Threats of violence.

Promises of death.

“Kailia is my Second,” Cethin finally said.

“And where is she? Is it not customary here for your Second to be here for such meetings?” Cyrus pressed.

“It is, but as already discussed, Avonleyan males are just as protective and possessive of their mates.”

“She is your wife,” Scarlett said, her eyes softening slightly.

“Wife and queen. Yes,” Cethin answered. “And she threw a godsdamn fit about not being here.”

“That was *not* a fit,” Razik muttered. “You two fought for nearly two hours.”

“Not helping, Raz,” Cethin snapped. “Until I know for sure that none of you are a threat to her—”

“You keep her out of sight,” Scarlett cut in. “Gods. Mother hens everywhere.”

“Out of sight is one way to put it,” Razik said with a small smirk.



“Now that we are not on a ship, we can up your training,” Eliza said from where she rode to Callan’s right. Drake was on his left as they made their way back to the estates. The heavy conversations were tabled while they finished lunch, everyone needing a break and time to absorb the new information they’d learned.

A Coventry heir. Here in Avonleya for decades. It still didn’t seem possible. He hadn’t given much thought to what would happen to the other two kingdoms at the end of all this. He’s been too focused on simply surviving. But if they

managed to win, the other kingdoms would no longer have rulers.

Well, just Rydeon at this point.

“Callan?”

“Yeah, sorry,” he said, Eliza’s voice pulling him from his thoughts. “That sounds great.”

She smirked at him. “It sounds *great*, does it?”

He huffed a small laugh. “As great as getting my ass handed to me daily can be,” he agreed.

The smirk on her face lasted a few more seconds before it faded away, her gaze going back to the road they were following. She hadn’t trained him since the battle on the ships, since Nakoia had been killed. Callan had continued to practice and train as well as he could on his own, but he’d been waiting for her to come to him. He didn’t want to push too much when she was grieving.

“You train with a Fae?”

Hale was riding ahead of them, one of the soldiers—Riggs—with him. Hale was peering back over his shoulder at Callan.

“It seemed prudent to do so,” Callan answered.

“They finally came for your kingdom too,” Hale said. A statement, not a question. “I wondered when they would strike. I am surprised they did so this quickly. They waited nearly fifty years before going for Rydeon.”

Callan cleared his throat as Hale fell back some. Drake dropped back, Eliza with him, so the Toreall King could ride beside Callan. “Yes. Scarlett kind of forced their hand and moved their timeline up.”

“You seem to know the Fae Queen fairly well,” Hale observed, picking up on the first name basis he was on with her.

“You could say that,” Callan agreed.

There was a brief pause before Hale said, “And you have a sister?”

Callan nodded. “Eva. She is six.”

Hale made a sound of acknowledgment before saying, “If you would be willing, I would like the opportunity to visit at some point. About what it is like across the sea. The kingdoms. As you can imagine, I do not know much. I never saw any of my kingdom outside of the little village I was hidden away in.”

Callan glanced at him quickly before focusing ahead once more. “I only traveled to Toreall a few times, but yes. I can try and answer any questions you have.”

They continued on in casual conversation, heading for Hale’s estate. In addition to Eliza, Rayner was with them. Briar and Sawyer were going back to the other estate. He did not know what Scarlett and the others were doing.

Hale nodded to the two guards as they approached his home. It was very similar to the Commander’s estate, perhaps a little smaller. The yard was kept, various trees around the property providing shade from the sun. There were a few footpaths that led around the house, and as they moved along the main road to the front of the house, the sound of children could be heard in the distance.

Hale smiled. “They must have found the hedge maze.”

“Hedge maze?” Callan asked.

Hale nodded. “It is in the garden around the back. A large maze. My father had it made for me when we first came to Avonleya. I cannot count how many hours I spent memorizing it. Then my father found an Avonleyan with earth magic, and he had him come and change the entire thing. He did that every time I became too familiar with the layout.”

Callan found himself laughing at the idea and could imagine doing the same when he’d been younger.

He was dismounting when he heard his name being called. He turned just in time to catch Eva as she flung herself at him. The horse whinnied behind him, shifting nervously.

“Eva, you must be careful around animals. You know this,” he chided gently.

“Sorry, Cal,” she said, her chin dropping.

He smoothed a hand over her hair. It was braided intricately down one side, laying over her shoulder, but stray hair was already framing her face. “What have you been up to today?”

She huffed. “Tava says I need to resume my studies. She made all of us do arithmetic for a whole hour,” she whined.

Callan fought the urge to grin, his lips twitching. “Did she now? *Lady* Tava is right, you know. Your studies are important.”

Eva stuck her bottom lip out in a pout. “I knew you would take her side. You always take her side.”

“I do not always take her side,” Callan sighed, crouching down to look up into her face. He lightly flicked her lower lip with his finger. “This, however, is very unbecoming of a princess.” Eva quickly sucked her lip back in, but her arms crossed with the same attitude. “I did not always enjoy my studies either, but they were still important,” he tried.

“Tava said the same thing,” she mumbled.

“And were you made to do your studies the entirety of the day?”

“No,” Eva answered, her voice still bordering on whiny, until she perked up slightly. “Tava also let me ride by myself today.”

“*Lady* Tava,” Callan corrected.

Eva’s brows scrunched. “Will you still make me call her *Lady* Tava once you are married?”

Callan rocked back, nearly falling on his ass. How was he supposed to explain to a six-year-old that his courting had all been a ruse? That the actual courting had only been for a few weeks and had ended in disaster?

Another child called Eva's name, effectively distracting her as she looked over her shoulder for the source, waving at another little girl. She turned back to Callan, fidgeting from foot to foot. "May I go now?"

He smiled, grateful for the interruption saving him from having to answer her question. "Go play, Eva," he answered, pushing back to his feet. "I will come find you when it is time to return to the other estate for dinner."

She was gone in the next blink, her braid flying out behind her.

Callan turned to see where the others had gone and found Hale watching him closely.

"You and Lady Tava are engaged?" Hale asked.

"No," Callan answered quickly, looking for Drake. He could only assume Rayner had gone in search of Tula, and who knew where Eliza had disappeared to.

"Courting?"

Callan shook his head. "Eva wishes we were," he replied, far more subdued than he intended. Hale studied him a moment longer before nodding slowly. "Where is Drake?"

"I believe he went to find Lady Tava," Hale answered, gesturing to a path to their left in the same direction Eva had run off in. "Shall we?"

The two kings made their way around the back of the house where large hedges indeed ran. They were tall, reaching above Callan's head, and they seemed to go on forever. He spotted Drake speaking with Tava on a bench near one of them, and as he and Hale made their way closer, Tava spotted them and immediately stood.

She dipped her head when they stopped in front of her. "Your Majesty," she greeted softly.

Callan's lips pressed together at the title. "Lady Tava," he said tightly. He saw Drake frown out of the corner of his eye, looking back and forth between them.

She held his gaze for a fraction of a second before turning to Hale and bowing her head to him. "Lord Coventry."

Hale smiled warmly at her. "I told you to call me Hale," he answered.

And something in Callan's chest tightened when her cheeks heated just a touch. He knew she wasn't blushing for Hale himself. She was used to being in the background, seen and then ignored. Any attention could make her blush like that. It wasn't for Hale...right?

"Did you try the maze?" Hale asked, a hint of mischief in his tone.

Tava laughed. "I did not dare," she answered, her hands clasping in front of her. "I could not risk getting lost in there for hours."

"Perhaps after dinner we can tackle it together. All of us," he added, addressing Callan and Drake.

"That hardly seems fair," she countered. "You know the layout of the maze."

Hale seemed to consider this for a moment before he said, "You are right. I will contact someone to change it in the next day or two. We will then all be on even footing."

She smiled at him, and Callan was grateful it wasn't her real smile but her demure one that had been drilled into her since she was a child. "That would be lovely."

"I look forward to it," Hale answered. He glanced towards the house. "I have some matters to take care of this afternoon, but I will see all of you soon. Please do not hesitate to ask any of my staff if you need anything."

After Hale was out of earshot, Drake turned to Callan. "What do you make of everything we learned today?"

"What do I make of Hale being the rightful Toreall king?" Callan asked, rubbing at his jaw. "I do not know what a person makes out of that. It is a good thing, I suppose. Assuming the people of Toreall will believe his story." He pushed out a harsh breath. "I will have my own challenges to worry about if we

win this war. Starting with how do I convince a kingdom full of people I did not abandon them but went to get help?"

"If we win this war, I think that will be evident enough, don't you?" Drake asked, his arms folding across his chest.

"There are so many variables," Callan said. "So many things to consider, and I do not have any resources at my disposal. None of my father's advisors. My personal guards. I have...nothing."

The words fell from his lips as he realized Tava had slipped away.

"You know I will help in any way I can," Drake said. "Tava too."

He knew that. He knew Tava wouldn't let whatever this thing was between them, or rather lack thereof at this point, impede on helping the people of Windonelle, but he also knew she wouldn't be as outspoken as she had been before. She would fall back into her role of docile Lady, following commands from the men in her life. Following commands from her king. She would go back to working in the background.

And what is it you do want, Callan?

Not that. He sure as fuck did not want that.

But he had nothing. Nothing to offer her. Nothing to give but a shattered future, a growing emptiness in his soul, and a darkness that was threatening to take over the light.

And who would stick around for that?

CHAPTER 25

TALWYN

“I saw your plant prince,” Nuri said casually when Talwyn stepped from the air outside the Windonelle castle. How the Night Child had known she was going to appear at this exact moment in time, Talwyn didn’t know. She hadn’t even flinched at her sudden appearance. When Talwyn stared back at her, face void of any emotion, Nuri continued. “You know. The night they managed to remove that tracking Mark from Cassius. He was there.”

“You mean the night you failed at your assignment?” Talwyn returned coldly.

“Did I?”

“You were supposed to detain Scarlett and bring her back here. Since she is not here, it would appear you failed.”

Nuri shrugged her slender shoulders. “I guess it depends on who you are asking.”

“That does not make any sense,” Talwyn snapped, moving towards the castle entrance.

Nuri all but danced along with her, walking backwards so Talwyn could see her face. For once, the female’s hood was down, but the sky was overcast, so she wasn’t in danger of being weakened by the sun.

“That’s not the point. The point is your flower guy was there. He looked good. Cranky. Scowling. Growly.” She shrugged again. “You know, the usual.”

That *did* describe Azrael fairly accurately to outsiders, but Talwyn still wasn't exactly sure why Nuri was telling her all of this.

"That was days ago," Talwyn said.

"It was," she agreed. "I just haven't seen you without the wanna-be prince since then."

Talwyn paused mid-stride for the briefest of moments.

Was Nuri...being *nice*? In some round-about way, was she letting her know Azrael was all right simply because she somehow knew Talwyn worried about him constantly? Thought of him often despite her best efforts not to?

No. That wasn't it. This was some kind of *assignment* from Alaric. Befriend the Fae Queen. Earn her trust. No one was nice to her without wanting something in return. She did not have any allies here. Not anymore. Not since she drove them all away.

No one but Ashtine, who Talwyn still had not heard from since that day on the beach in the Water Court. That had been over a week ago. She'd driven her away in the end too.

Nuri had turned, walking ahead of her now, and by the time Talwyn entered the castle after her, she had already disappeared. She hadn't been wrong. Talwyn had hardly been away from Tarek. She'd spent her nights beside him in bed at the White Halls. He'd accompanied her on trips to check in on the other Courts, and he seemed to have been appeased. He did not ask of Ashtine again or bring up using her to plant false information with those sailing west. Not that they could anymore anyway. They couldn't track them anymore. Scarlett had made sure of that when they had surprised them all and showed up in Rydeon.

The Maraan Lords had been in a frenzy for days before that time, trying to figure out what Scarlett was doing in the northern continent. Mikale, of course, had wanted to go and set a trap for her there. Alaric had wanted to wait for her to reveal her hand. Lord Tyndell had... Well, he'd been more absent lately, letting Alaric and Mikale handle most things.

Talwyn actually had no idea what the Lord was up to these days.

Tarek had been keeping her as distracted as she had been keeping him, she realized, making her way up the stairs to the third floor. His attendance was not required at meetings as it used to be. Until today. This morning he had been summoned by Alaric, and Talwyn had welcomed the chance to be alone, to breathe. She had shifted into her wolf for the first time in days and ran in the Dresden Forest, her pack emerging to greet her.

All of them except Maliq that is. The spirit animal had apparently left them when he'd left her.

She was contemplating how she was going to figure out what exactly Tarek was attempting to distract her from when she entered the council room and froze. It was empty save for one other person.

Alaric.

He stood near an alcohol cart along one wall, a glass of liquor in his hand, staring out a window. He didn't look at her when she entered, just took a sip of his drink. His dark hair was tied back at the nape of his neck, and he wore black pants with a white tunic and a grey jacket.

She had never been alone with him before. Not once. Tarek had always been there, as if he were a buffer between them. He'd subtly try to warn her when he thought she was pushing too far, not that she'd ever cared. But suddenly being in this room, completely alone with the ruler of the Black Syndicate, with a Maraan Prince... She would almost welcome Tarek's hovering presence.

Talwyn lifted her chin, squaring her shoulders as she shut the door behind her with a decisive click. She flexed her fingers, the silver bracelet wound around her wrist vibrating with energy at the possibility of having to defend herself. Not that she would use that magic. She hadn't touched her gift to shift energy since the throne room.

Alaric finally glanced at her, a brief flick of the eyes, his lips twitching the smallest amount.

“Your Majesty.”

“Alaric,” she replied tightly, and she saw him stiffen at the lack of title. But what was she to call him? He wasn’t her master. She wasn’t his subject. “Was the meeting time changed?”

“No,” he answered, taking another sip of his drink. He stared down into the glass, swirling the contents as he studied it.

“Then where is everyone else?” Talwyn demanded.

“They are tending to other matters,” Alaric answered, finally turning from the window. He gestured to the table. “Please take a seat.”

She moved stiffly to the table, taking the chair at the opposite end. An almost amused look passed over Alaric’s face as he took the seat at his end. He swirled his liquor glass again, seemingly in contemplation, before he placed the glass on the table with a dull thud.

“We are allies, are we not... Talwyn?” He met her gaze at the use of her name, a challenge emanating from his dark eyes.

“Unless something has changed that I am unaware of, yes,” she retorted, her elbows resting on the arms of her chair, hands curled tightly around the ends beneath the table.

Alaric surveyed her for a long moment before he settled back in his chair, posture relaxing. He was fidgeting with his liquor glass when he asked, “Did you know I can detect power? I can sense who is the most powerful in a room. I can tell when power is depleted and when it is at its fullest.”

“That sounds incredibly useful,” she deadpanned.

“Quite,” he returned. “Of course, the farther away a being is, the harder it is for me to detect them. Scarlett, for example, even days after she left, I could feel her when her power reserves were full.”

“Interesting,” Talwyn said, unsure of where he was going with this.

“What is interesting, *your Majesty*, is that a little over a week ago, I started detecting another great power south of here. In the Water Court,” Alaric said, swirling his glass a little harder. “I had assumed it was you attempting to find a way into the Underwater Prison.”

“That sounds logical,” she said tightly.

“It does, does it not?” he agreed, bringing the glass to his lips and throwing the rest of the liquor back. He dropped the glass to the table unceremoniously. “Except for the fact that I can still feel that power, and it is no longer in the Water Court, but even further south. And it grows stronger. Can you tell me why that would be when you, presumably the most powerful being currently on this continent, sit across from me?”

South of the Water Court?

Talwyn was rigid as she stared back at the Assassin Lord. South of the Water Court there was an endless sea. Eventually there were islands, but they were not ruled by this continent. From what she’d been told, they had not been inhabited for several centuries. Some great evil had once inhabited them but had been banished. The islands had remained uninhabited since then. Something about a curse or some other myth.

But if he was sensing power from those islands, maybe it wasn’t a myth after all.

“I have never been south of the Water Court,” Talwyn answered. “I only know of the legends of the islands south of there.”

A small, cruel smile tilted on Alaric’s lips. “Yes,” he mused. “I know of those legends as well. This is...not that.”

“Then you know more about this than I do. Why did you summon me here?”

“I have sent some of my people to try to find the source of this power,” he said, ignoring her question.

“And? What did they learn?”

“Nothing,” he said simply.

“Nothing,” she repeated. “Perhaps you need better people.”

Alaric made a show of seeming to consider the merit of that statement before saying, “I only know of a handful of people who could take on a water horse and live to tell the tale.” Talwyn stopped breathing, that cruel smile on Alaric’s face growing. “No, your Majesty, I do not believe it is my people that are the problem.”

Abrax.

Abrax was keeping people out, which could only mean that Ashtine was there.

“Then what do you think the problem is?” she asked, her tone hard and irritated.

Alaric stood, moving back to the liquor cart and refilling his glass. He took another sip before turning to her once more. “I think there are a great number of problems with this mysterious power source, but the greatest problem I find I currently face is that my *allies* are proving worthless. More so, I am questioning their loyalty.”

“I have done nothing to warrant such questioning,” Talwyn snarled, a hand coming up and splaying on the table in front of her. “I tried to talk to the Shifters, despite telling you it would be futile. Tarek was there. He witnessed everything.” When he continued to stare at her in that unnerving way of his, swirling his godsdamn liquor, she went on. “The Water Prince is needed to enter the Underwater Prison. Until a work around is discovered, that is not possible right now either.”

“True,” Alaric agreed. “However, had the Fae Royals been dealt with properly, a new Water Prince could have already been instated and this would not be an issue.”

She couldn’t argue against that, but she’d be damned if she was going to apologize for it. An insincere apology was pointless, and she had a feeling Alaric would see right through it anyway.

“And Princess Ashtine?” Alaric asked. “She does not have any insights to offer?” His head tilted to the side as he watched her, gauging her reactions. She let nothing show, no trace of emotion.

“No,” she answered curtly. “She continues to be unwell since Nasima left her.”

Something crossed Alaric’s face at the mention of the spirit animal. Disdain or displeasure? Perhaps both.

“What lies within Avonleya?” Talwyn asked. The question had plagued her for weeks, but she’d had other things to worry about. Now, though, she was curious what exactly Alaric had to gain from this war. She wanted revenge, wanted to see Avonleya brought to ruin, but Alaric didn’t seem to care about the kingdom itself, only what it housed. It was evident the spirit animals guarded it, explaining why they sided with Avonleya. It was foolish to go up against spirit animals. She knew that, but they only seemed to appear when it suited them. Sure, their bonded could summon them, but there was nothing that required the animal to answer. Nasima was proof enough of that.

So was Maliq.

Not that she’d tried to summon the wolf of Celeste since he had failed to come for her in that throne room. Partly because she wasn’t sure if their bond still existed. More so because she did not want to know the answer to that question.

Alaric moved back to the table, taking his seat once more. He leaned back, crossing an ankle over his knee. “You know, I once tried to convince Scarlett to see reason by sharing more with her. I thought if she had all the facts, she would understand and join me by choice rather than by force.” He sipped on his drink. “Of course, all that accomplished was pushing her further into the arms of that godsdamn Fire Prince. All those years of keeping her hidden, wasted.” That last part he seemed to mutter more to himself. He lifted his gaze back to hers. “Everything started to go to shit the moment that fire Fae stepped over the border into these lands. Sent here by his

queen to look for *my* weapon. How did you come across the whisperings of her, by the way? I have often wondered.”

If she were the laughing type, she would have lost it at the irony of how that had come about. As it turns out, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d laughed at anything. She wasn’t even sure she could remember the last time she had smiled.

“The winds whispered of her to Ashtine,” she replied. “That led me to consult with the Oracle.”

“Ah,” was his only reply. Another sip of liquor. “You seem to be more...receptive to rationale. Unlike my protégé.”

“Your protégé,” she repeated coldly.

“I trained her to be exactly like me,” he said. “That is why she is proving to be such a formidable opponent. She thinks like I think. Strategizes like I do. Which is why I need to try something different. Make a move she would not expect.”

“One would think the attack at sea was rather unexpected.”

“Perhaps,” he mused. “But this is more of a mental attack rather than a physical one. She will not be beaten with mere strength. Not anymore. She has learned to harness her power too well, and once they get to Avonleya—provided she can find a way in without the keys she so foolishly wasted—she will be even more powerful. No, she will be beaten the same way I have always controlled her, and her rage will make her brash as usual.”

Her rage.

He clearly did not understand the depth of the bond between twin flames. Her rage at losing Sorin would be enough to burn the world down. It was already simmering, the embers of her fury hot and ready, waiting for her to breathe its fire to life, and then she would let it consume anything and everything. She would not care what got in the way.

That is what Cyrus would have done if he’d had the power Scarlett has.

And that is how she should have felt when she thought Tarek had died. Instead, she’d gone to Azrael.

“Do the Maraans have twin flames?” she asked suddenly. Because by the gods, if he had *any* idea about what that entailed, he would know this was not just any kind of wrath.

Alaric paused, surprised by her random question, but then he scoffed. “No, your Majesty. We were not *gifted* such a thing by the gods. The Maraans and seraphs were created for one purpose. The twin flame bond was created as a gift for their Legacy, not for those created with an actual purpose to serve.”

“What does that mean?”

“The Legacy are the children of the demigods,” Alaric said, bitterness ringing in his tone. “The demigods are the offspring spawned when a god has a child with a mortal.”

“Why in the realms would a god have a child with a mortal?” The mere idea was absurd.

Alaric shrugged. “Eternity is a long time to live. They get bored. Petty. Experimental. Perhaps they even care for one at some point in their infinite lives. I would not know. What I do know is that they populated their various worlds in more ways than one. Some of the bloodlines were created,” he said, gesturing to himself. “And some were born.”

“Then what are the Avonleyans?”

“They would all be considered Legacy, I suppose,” Alaric answered. “But the original Avonleyans were the product of a god and a demigod.”

“A god and a...” That kind of power, to have the power of a *god* running in your veins? Sure, a demigod would be half-mortal, but an Avonleyan would only be a quarter mortal. And if they had a child with another Avonleyan and their children continued to do so, eventually that mortal blood would be nothing.

She narrowed her eyes at Alaric. “Then what is Scarlett? Avonleyan or Legacy?”

A knowing smile filled Alaric’s face. “I think that is enough history for one day. It all gets very complicated after a while. God and mortal. Avonleyan and Legacy. Demigod. Deity. The gods are fickle beings with an infinite lifespan.

Back to the matter at hand: I have shared something valuable with you. It would only be fair for you to do the same.”

“I do not think there is anything I can share that you do not already know,” she replied, still trying to wrap her mind around everything he’d just told her.

“While I do not believe that is true, that is not the reason I summoned you here today,” he said, pushing to his feet and moving towards her. “There is something else you can share with me, since you refuse to share knowledge I know you are keeping.”

A vine with thorns appeared in her hand beneath the table. She was on her feet, a thin shield of air pulled close to her body. “I am not the only one suspected of keeping knowledge from the other in this arrangement.”

“Am I not upholding my end of what was promised to you? Am I not aiding you in getting your revenge?”

He moved another step closer.

“Are you?” she asked. “Because from where I sit, that does not appear to be the case.”

“And whose fault is that, Child?” he sneered, taking another step. “*You* are the one who let the Royals flee across the Edria. *You* are the one who failed to convince the Shifters to join our cause. *You* are the one who refuses to search for another way into the Underwater Prison.” He paused, standing mere feet from her now, his head tilting. “Or rather, you are the one who refuses to share the work around to that little problem.”

“I do not know the work around,” she ground out, and that wasn’t entirely a lie. The Underwater Prison required the Water Prince’s bloodline for entrance. If Ashtine weren’t carrying an heir, Talwyn would have no idea where to even begin looking for an alternate way into the prison.

The smile he gave her was tight and indulgent, akin to one given to a child when they are being tiresome. “Do you know how seraphs and Maraans obtain their power?”

Talwyn couldn't help but be thrown by the sudden change of topic, but she reinforced her winds in the shield around her.

“Considering I did not know the Maraans existed until a few months ago, no. I assumed you were born with them the way we are.”

“We take our power,” Alaric said, his entire demeanor going cold. “It is a rite of sorts. We get one opportunity. Once we take a gift, there is no second chance. No changing our mind. Naturally, it is a decision made with very careful consideration.”

“Naturally.”

“There is much to consider,” he continued, as though she hadn't spoken. “What kind of power one wants. How that power will be refilled. How to take it.” He knocked back the last of the liquor in the glass he still held before placing it down softly onto the table. “I, for example, took the power of a Legacy. I am assuming your education taught you how Avonleyans refill their power reserves, no?”

“Of course they did. It was why—” She went utterly still.

It was part of the reason the Fae were gifted their own magic.

And then her knees were buckling, and she was gripping the table to stay standing. Magic, cold and dark and oily, was snaking over her shield, and she could feel her power being ripped from her very being.

“The stronger the power I feed off of, the stronger my power becomes,” Alaric said, moving close enough to touch her now. “Tarek has been fine enough these past years, but after the battle above the Edria Sea, I find my reserves aching empty.”

A vicious yank on her power pulled a cry from her lips as she sank to her knees. She scrambled, trying to gain any ounce of control, but she could do nothing. She was completely at his mercy while he drew from her.

Alaric only smiled darkly down at her. “If you are not willing to share your knowledge of your Courts with me, *your*

Majesty, I can certainly find other uses for you.”



Talwyn stumbled through the sand in the Water Court. She'd wanted to go to the Southern Islands to try to find Ashtine, but Alaric had taken so much from her, this was as far as she'd been able to Travel. Shifting wasn't possible. She could hardly muster a breeze or stir the sand beneath her boots. She was fairly certain she had only ever been this drained once.

Azrael had forced her to drain her reserves during training one day. He'd wanted her to feel what it was like so she could recognize when she was getting too low. Looking back on it, she'd never questioned him. Had done exactly what he'd demanded, knowing he would keep her safe in her moment of greatest vulnerability.

Azrael would have never let her go to a meeting alone with Alaric. He would have never let this happen.

She should not have let this happen.

She sank down to the sand, turning to face the horizon, the same direction Abrax had taken Ashtine. She wanted to send a message to the princess, but she did not have enough reserves left to do even that. What would she say anyway? Nothing more than she already had. She just wanted to know if she was all right. Did she need anything? Was she managing? Abrax could protect her, but the animal couldn't take care of her.

“Talwyn?”

She stiffened at the sound of his voice.

“Did you know?” she asked, voice void of any emotion. She didn't bother looking up at him.

Silence greeted her. It was answer enough.

How had it all come to this?

Tarek cleared his throat. “I suspected, but he sent me with some others to try to find the source of this power in the Southern Islands. I was not told he had summoned you until after we were there. There was nothing I could do, and even if I had known beforehand...”

There was nothing he could have done anyway. He was bound to Alaric, had sworn a Blood Bond to the Maraan Prince.

“You have been filling his reserves. For how long?”

“Since Scarlett left the Fellowship. The tonic she took subdued her gifts, but he could still draw from them.”

“How could she not have known?” Talwyn asked, finally turning her head to look at him.

His hands were in his pockets, eyes staring at the sea as she had been. “He was discreet. On the nights she took a stronger tonic and slept for days. When they were in power struggles, and when he was caring for her after punishing her.” He shrugged because what more was there to say?

“You should really be commended, Tarek,” she said coldly.

And he stilled, his eyes slowly dragging to hers. “For what?”

“For committing so deeply to your role in his little power plays. For being willing to sacrifice anything and anyone to get what you want.” She snorted a huff of disbelief. “Really, it is what I would do and have done myself. I cannot fault you. Not really.”

“Talwyn, I do not know what you think—”

She pushed unsteadily to her feet. “You do not know what I think? What I think, Tarek, is that you have been working with Alaric far longer than this last decade. How, exactly, did that rumor of Eliné’s whereabouts reach Sorin all those years ago?” A muscle in his jaw tensed as he watched her. “Did you play a role in luring her there in the first place?”

“No,” he said quickly. “I had nothing to do with Eliné coming to Baylorin.”

“But you did lure Sorin out, knowing he would attempt to come for her. Ultimately leading to your *death*,” she said.

His gaze cut back to the sea, and she huffed another sound of disbelief. “Well done, Tarek. Truly.”

She could see it all. Every detail laid out before her as if a veil had been lifted. He’d watched her for years. He was around often enough when she was with Azrael, even for some of their more private moments. He was Azrael’s Third. He sat in on meetings, heard things others were not privy to. It would not have been difficult to learn her weaknesses, to figure out the best way to get to her. All it would have taken was time and patience. Years of it. Years of sitting back, watching and waiting, soaking in the little things, committing them to memory. Waiting for the perfect opportunity to make a move — some type of tragedy or trauma. And when it began taking too long, he initiated it by planting information about Eliné.

Then he had been there, whispering encouragement to her dreams of revenge. Breathing words of disdain for Avonleya that only served to bolster her bitterness. Filling places left empty by her mother, Eliné, Sorin. Playing on her deep-seated fears of abandonment.

Oh, he had played her and played her well.

And now she was stuck. She had no one to blame for it but herself. She certainly couldn’t blame him. Not for a remarkably brilliant plan, and one she would not have hesitated to carry out herself if it would have served her own purposes. Her own actions were just as manipulative, just as callous and unforgivable. The only difference here was that she was the one being sacrificed.

The finest of ironies.

“We can discuss this more tonight, Moon— Talwyn,” Tarek said, his tone carefully neutral. “He would like you to go with us to the Southern Islands, to see if you can discern something we may have missed.”

“I cannot Travel right now,” she snapped. “He made sure of that.”

“No, I... I know that. Lord Tyndell will take us all.”

“All?” She looked past him up the beach to where the Lord stood with Death’s Shadow and another woman she did not know.

“Who is that?”

Tarek glanced back before answering. “Sybil. She is the High Healer in the Black Syndicate. She was also Juliette’s mother.”

“Juliette? The Oracle?”

“Yes.”

“And she sides with Alaric?”

“Sybil has always sided with Alaric. Neither of them realized what Juliette was to become.”

Talwyn nodded, filing that away with all the other information she would need to try to process later tonight. When she was alone.

“And why do you think I will be able to get past a spirit animal when none of the rest of you have been able to? With my magic completely drained? When Maliq no longer visits me?”

“We are only going to scout things out, Talwyn. We are not looking to do anything more. Just gather information.”

“And if I refuse?”

Tarek stared back at her, the answer reflected in his eyes. Refusal wasn’t an option, and there was nothing she could do about it. She could maybe fight with weapons, but being this drained made her off balance. Azrael had tried to convince her to train more with drained reserves, but she’d refused, hating the feeling of being so vulnerable. Never believing it would come to this. Just more arrogant foolery.

She nodded in agreement, allowing Tarek to place his hand on her lower back and lead her towards those waiting for them. She’d gather information all right. Once she’d visited

the islands, she'd be able to Travel back there herself when her reserves were refilled. Then she could look for Ashtine.

No one bothered with introductions to Sybil, although Lord Tyndell greeted her politely enough. He always was the most civil of the Maraans.

A moment later she was pulled through the air and stepping onto more sand. Cliffs were off to one side, while a thick tangle of trees was to her back. It was hot and muggy, the air so thick she could cut it with a knife.

"We searched that way this morning," Tarek explained, pointing to the cliffs. "So we're going into the trees next."

"Perfect," she muttered, waving away a swarm of small flying insects. "Just perfect."

Tarek turned, following Sybil towards the trees, and Talwyn began to follow when Nuri appeared at her side.

"Someone's leash got shortened," the Contessa mused. She was head-to-toe in her usual black. It had to be sweltering. Talwyn was uncomfortable in the pants and short-sleeved tunic she was wearing.

"And yet here you are, having failed in your own assignments. I would say your leash is just as short," Talwyn bit back, her boot squelching in something she had no desire to identify.

"Maybe," Nuri conceded, pushing a low hanging vine out of her way. "Or maybe I have just learned how to play the game."

Talwyn snorted derisively. "Is that what you call it? You took a Blood Bond to play *a game*? Maybe this is more than a game to the rest of us."

In the next breath, Talwyn was shoved hard against the trunk of a tree, the bark digging into her back. There was a dagger at her throat, and a snarl coming from the female who held her there, fangs bared.

"Do not, for one moment, pretend to know my motives in what I do," Nuri whispered. Her voice was so low and deadly,

Talwyn could feel her magic trying to surge up to protect her in response, but it could do nothing. “Do not think you know the sacrifices I have made to protect others, to make sure things play out as needed. I do not seek some petty, pathetic revenge, you arrogant waste of power. If I had a fraction of what you possess, *everything* would be different. Instead, I have to sit back and watch you squander it away on useless ploys because your feelings were hurt.”

Her lips curled up in a twisted smile at the flash of indignation that Talwyn couldn't keep from her face. “Oh, did I hurt your feelings again, poor little queen? Allow me to dig that knife in a little deeper. You are not the only one who grew up without a mother and father, who was abandoned by those who were supposed to care. You got to do so in a palace. You were handed power and authority on a silver fucking platter. Others grew up on the streets. Some were sold into brothels where they were taught to lie on their backs and spread their legs, that such a thing was the only thing they were good for. Some were taught to kill, others taught to steal. Some had to *earn* the respect and fear you were so freely given. No one made sure their bellies were full at night. You did not sleep with your arms curled tightly around your belongings to make sure no one took the few items you possessed.” A harsh laugh came from her. “Oh no, you got the luxury of plotting out *revenge* against a kingdom of people you know nothing about.”

“I know plenty—” Talwyn started.

Nuri's bark of maniacal laughter cut her off again. “You know *nothing*. I think the events of today prove that, don't you?”

Talwyn felt the side of the dagger dig into her throat, felt the bead of blood swell and begin to run down her skin. Honey-colored eyes met hers, and there was no denying the madness that danced in them. “So tell me, *your Majesty*, are you ready to get your head out of your ass and play the game? Or will you continue to let your pettiness put the few people left who actually give a damn about you in danger?”

CHAPTER 26

SCARLETT

“Are you ready for this?” Sorin asked her, reaching over to tuck her hair behind her ear. She leaned into his touch, seeking out the comfort of his nearness. Because no, she was not ready for this.

She remembered, all those nights ago, sitting in a bath at his old apartment. She had just woken up after the party at the Pier. Cassius had been there and was going to meet Drake to finalize plans for a meeting with Callan.

“Everything’s about to change, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Seastar. Nothing will be the same again.”

And it had. Something new had been revealed nearly every single day after that it seemed, whether she was ready for it or not, and now here she stood, on the precipice of change again. She knew that answers she had sought for years were about to be given to her, and suddenly, she was not sure she wanted them. Suddenly, she understood what Cassius must have been feeling when he was about to meet Hazel. What he had to be feeling at the prospect of meeting his father.

“Scarlett.”

The murmur near her ear pulled her from her thoughts, and she smoothed her hands down the dress she’d changed into. She’d debated for over an hour about what to wear, Sorin patiently and repeatedly telling her to dress in whatever she felt comfortable in. When she’d finally snapped at him that she didn’t know what to wear for this occasion and he should just

pick something out for her, he'd arched a brow from the sofa he'd been lounging on.

"You are asking me to tell you what to do?"

"No," she'd said in exasperation. "I am asking you to tell me what to wear for an occasion that is making me uncomfortable and irrational."

"Irrational?" he'd repeated. "As opposed to every other thing we face? When you act...rationally?"

"I hate you," she'd grumbled, flopping onto her back on the bed, tossing her arm over her eyes.

He'd chuckled lightly, and a moment later, the bed had dipped as he'd stretched out beside her, his head propped on his fist as he looked down at her. "Talk to me, Love. You only get this unnecessarily dramatic when you are truly anxious."

"Unnecessarily dramatic," she'd mimicked.

"Words instead of violence. Look at you, Princess." He'd caught the fist swinging for his face with a dramatic sigh of his own. "And here I thought we were making progress."

He'd kissed her knuckles before interlacing their fingers, waiting for her to start speaking.

"I am yours and you are mine," she'd whispered. "Nothing will change that. No matter what...what we learn tonight."

She didn't know why she'd needed this reassurance. Maybe she'd just needed to hear the words, let them settle into her soul.

He'd said the same thing to her then that he whispered to her now while they waited for Cethin at the entrance of his castle home. "All the way through darkness, my love, no matter what we discover in the shadows."

Rustling on the stairs had her looking up to find Cethin descending, Razik at his side, heads together in deep discussion. Was Razik joining them too? She'd been under the impression that it was only going to be the three of them.

“Scarlett. Sorin,” Cethin greeted when he reached the bottom. “We can go in a moment.” He turned back to Razik. “She is monitoring the east, but she is upset enough with me right now that—”

“She’ll be brash and impulsive? Imagine that,” Razik said dryly. “Do you want me here or there, Cethin? I am a being of many talents, but I cannot be in two places at once.”

Scarlett watched her brother’s jaw tense, a hand carving through silver hair. “Stay here. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Go, Cethin. All will be well,” Razik answered, jerking his chin at Scarlett and Sorin. “Rather let me know if *you* need anything.”

Then Razik was gone, stepping through the air, and Cethin turned to face them. “My apologies,” he said, a warm smile filling his face. “Drinks before dinner? I was hoping you would let me Travel us somewhere.”

“Somewhere else? For drinks?” Scarlett asked, Sorin’s hand coming to rest on the small of her back.

“Two on one. I think you will be safe if my intentions are untoward, don’t you think?” Cethin asked with a wink, extending a hand to her.

“Fine,” she conceded, placing her hand in his waiting palm.

They were pulled through the air, and when they emerged in their new location, she went still. The air smelled like night and starlight, and she didn’t know how that was even possible. The grass felt too soft beneath the slippers she wore, the stars and moon bright overhead.

She turned to Cethin. “This is where you would always bring me in the dreams.”

“It is,” he agreed almost tenderly. “I thought it might be comforting to be in somewhat familiar surroundings for this conversation.” He pointed to one side. “Back that way is Aimonway, across the Nightmist Mountains.” He shifted,

pointing in another direction. “That way is Elshira and the Shira Forest.”

“And where are we now?” she asked, already sliding her feet from her slippers. She bent down and scooped them up with her fingers, Sorin immediately taking them from her.

“A countryside,” Cethin answered. “There is a small path a short way away that would lead to a small estate. It was where...” He paused, shifting on his feet beside her. “It is a private residence of the king and queen.”

“So it is your residence then?”

“Yes, but I rarely go there,” Cethin answered. “There are too many memories. I spent a lot of time there with...”

“With our parents,” she finished for him.

She could just make out his nod in the glow of the stars above them, and she tossed some white flames up to illuminate the area further. “What were their names?”

“Our father’s name was Tethys.”

Was. Just as she’d expected, but it didn’t stop the ache that tightened in her chest.

“And our mother?”

“She was known to her people as Selinya.”

Selinya.

Juliette had said that name. That Queen Selinya had hidden two of the seven Avonleyan keys.

Scarlett nodded, pressing her lips together at the unexpected emotion gathering at the back of her throat. At some point Sorin had slipped his hand into hers, and he squeezed her fingers gently.

“When did they... How did they die?”

Cethin did not answer for a long time, as if he were gathering himself as much as she was gathering her own emotions and tucking them away. “Our father died to get our mother out. So she could get you to the other continent.”

“What?” she demanded, rounding on Cethin.

“We were bound here, Scarlett. We could not leave the wards, not without a significant cost. In this case, the cost was his life.”

She pulled her hand from Sorin’s, her fingers raking through her hair that she’d left down and loose around her shoulders.

“Our parents died because of me. To get me out,” she said, feeling the weight of that truth settle into her soul. Sorin was already reaching for her, spinning her by her shoulders, surely feeling the guilt she was taking on down their bond.

“No, Love. Do not do that. You are not responsible for their choices,” he said, his tone brokering no room for argument.

But there was room. Because those choices would not have needed to be made if she hadn’t...

If she hadn’t existed.

“*Stop,*” he snarled.

“He is right, Scarlett. They would make the same choices all over again, do things exactly the same,” Cethin said gently.

“How can you possibly know that if they are no longer here?” she asked.

“Our father no longer lives, Starfire. But our mother does.”

Starfire.

She stepped out of Sorin’s hold and moved to face Cethin. “Our mother... *My* mother is alive?”

He nodded.

“Then where is she?”

“In Elshira.”

“In Shira Forest. Where the spirit animals reside,” Scarlett clarified.

“Yes.”

“Where we cannot freely travel. Why is she there?”

“Because that is where she is safe and what she guards is monitored. Until the Maraans are taken care of, and she can leave this world,” Cethin replied. At her confused stare, he pushed out a harsh breath. “There is no easy way to say this that will lessen the shock, so I am just going to say it, Scarlett. Our mother is Saylah.”

“Saylah,” Scarlett repeated.

“Yes.”

“Saylah. The goddess of night and shadows.”

“Yes.”

She couldn't help the laughter that fell from her lips. “The daughter of Arius and Serafina. *That* Saylah is our mother?”

Cethin nodded, his eyes narrowing as she watched her.

And then her laughter turned hysterical because what the actual fuck? He had to be kidding. It had to be some kind of prank, and a poor one at that. She was going to beat him senseless for playing her like this.

She sank to the too soft grass, her side beginning to cramp at the laughter while the two males stared down at her, concern growing on their faces.

“You are serious?” Sorin asked. “Saylah is your mother? And hers?”

“Yes.”

“So you two are, what? Gods as well?”

And *that* idea had Scarlett's laughter starting all over again because this entire conversation was ludicrous. She was not a goddess. Her mother was not a goddess.

“No,” Cethin said slowly, his worry growing as he watched her. “Our father was not a god. He was Avonleyan. A descendant of Anahita.”

“A literal descendant of Anahita?” Sorin asked.

Scarlett was damn glad he was asking questions because she certainly couldn't get control of herself enough to do so.

"All Avonleyans are descendants of the gods. The bloodline may be diluted or strengthened depending on parentage and ancestry," Cethin explained. He lowered to a crouch before her. "Scarlett, are you all right?"

"I am fantastic," she said, tears rolling down her face from the laughter that was finally starting to ebb. "Apparently I am some sort of deity or demigod."

Cethin shook his head. "No, we are neither of those things. We are more powerful than a demigod, but not as powerful as a deity." Scarlett blinked at him, swiping the tears from her face. "A demigod is the child of a god and a mortal. A deity is the child of a god and a magical bloodline."

"But an Avonleyan *is* a magical bloodline," Scarlett argued.

"Yes, but there is still mortal blood somewhere along the line because Avonleyans are descendants of demigods."

Her nose scrunched as she tried to process this. "Then... what are we?"

Cethin shrugged. "We are...Avonleyans. The most powerful Avonleyans. You, in particular, are *the* most powerful Avonleyan because you also have Fae gifts."

"Cethin?" Scarlett said, reaching for Sorin's hand.

"Yes?"

Sorin pulled her to her feet as she said, "I need that drink now."



She had needed some time to process the revelation of her heritage after Cethin had given them each a glass of wine.

They'd wandered along the path that led to the country estate. Her brother seemed to understand she needed the silence, letting her think while Sorin asked basic questions about the kingdom.

When the estate had come into view, her footsteps had faltered. It was a beautiful three-story home. A well-kept iron fence surrounded the property. It was all well maintained. Cethin clearly made sure the entire estate never fell into ruin or disrepair. Scarlett would think someone actually lived there if she hadn't already known the truth.

Cethin had offered to take her into the house, show her around, but he had seemed relieved when she had declined. It would have been too much for her to deal with tonight. It would have been too overwhelming to see what could have been. To see a home where she would have been loved, surrounded by a father and mother and brother rather than a Fellowship where she was trained to kill with girls bound to her as sisters.

They'd returned to the castle, where the three of them had shared a simple dinner in a small den that reminded Scarlett of their casual dining space in Solembra. She had felt like she was returning to something familiar when their ship had passed through those dark waters, cutting through darkness and shadows, but this was not home, even if it was where her blooded family resided.

She cut a glance to Sorin where he was seated beside her, a refilled glass of wine in his hand as he listened to Cethin tell him of their agriculture system. She knew she should be listening, learning everything she could about this land, but her thoughts were all over the place. Sorin had relaxed more and more as the evening had worn on, he and Cethin falling into easy conversation. She should probably be getting to know her brother too, but again, she couldn't get her thoughts to focus on anything right now.

Scarlett reached for her wineglass that had been refilled... three times? Four? Whatever. It didn't matter. Anyone would need alcohol upon learning their mother was an actual goddess. Speaking of which...

“Do you have water gifts too then? If our father was a descendant of Anahita?”

The attention of both males fell on her. Probably because she hadn't said much throughout this dinner and had randomly interrupted their conversation.

Cethin pushed his empty plate off to the side, sliding his chair back slightly and settling back into his seat. “No. When two bloodlines come together, the child only receives the gifts of one. You and I are a bit of a special instance because there was an actual goddess involved, I suppose. But like anything else, the stronger the bloodlines are that come together, the stronger one's gifts will be, whatever they emerge as.”

“Like Eliza's fire magic,” Sorin mused.

“But Cassius has both Witch gifts and...whatever his father's gifts are,” Scarlett argued.

“He may have an affinity for potions and tonics, but those are gifts of nature. Anyone can learn them. Yes, there are certain potions his Witch blood will allow him to create, but his father's blood contributes to that as well. The Witches simply have an innate knowledge of which plants and ingredients are better suited for different potions. Same with wards. Any magic-wielder can create them. The Witches are simply more adept with them. I would venture to guess he cannot heal with a touch like his mother can or see the future like an Oracle,” Cethin replied. When her lips pursed as she thought about that, he added, “It is part of the balance. We get to be more powerful, but only with one set of gifts. But I would also venture to guess the sea calls to you.” She turned incredulous eyes to him to find a knowing smile playing on his lips. “You think best with the sound of the waves, yes?”

She nodded slowly.

Something wistful crossed his face, and Cethin took a drink of his wine. “Our father was the one who chose the new capital to be Aimonway. He wanted to be next to the water. Before the Wards went up, he would spend weeks at a time on the water. He would get agitated being cooped up in Elshira for too long, so far from the sea.”

Scarlett swallowed thickly, trying to piece together this picture of her father in her mind. She had assumed her love of the sea came from Eliné, from having her gifts. To know it came from her father did something to her she wasn't entirely sure what to do with. Eliné had told her that her father was a sailor. I guess it hadn't been a complete lie.

Love?

She glanced up, finding golden eyes filled with so much warmth and love staring back at her, and she gave him a sad smile.

Tonight is hard, she answered.

I know. What do you need?

I honestly do not know.

“The twin flame bond is a beautiful thing to witness,” Cethin said softly.

Scarlett started, her cheeks heating. She had briefly forgotten he was here.

She cleared her throat. “Yes, well, it can be a right pain in my ass at times as well.” Her cheeks flared hotter as she felt Sorin drag his magic along her skin, her magic lifting its head in response.

Cethin chuckled, reaching to refill their wine glasses yet again.

“Is your wife your twin flame?” Scarlett asked.

She saw him stiffen a touch, tipping the bottle to her glass. “No. Kailia is not my twin flame, but I assure you, she is just as big of a pain in my ass.”

Scarlett snorted. “I look forward to meeting her then. As soon as you deem me no longer a threat, of course.”

“And you, Starfire? Have I earned the same? Do you consider me the ally you hoped you would find when you set sail for these shores?” he asked, swirling his wine glass slowly.

She shrugged. “I suppose I would not consider you an enemy at this point. It appears we want the same things.”

“And what of your heritage? It will need to be announced soon that you are here,” Cethin said carefully. “Not only as a foreign Fae Queen, but as the princess of this kingdom.”

She jolted, wine sloshing over the side of her glass and onto the emerald green dress she was wearing. She swore, blotting at the spilled wine. “Why do we need to tell them that?”

“They will be joyous to hear such a thing,” Cethin answered. “I have kept your true identity a secret from most, but you will give them hope when they have not had any for centuries.”

“Hope for what?”

“They used to be able to move freely, Scarlett. Travel where they wished. But also, their access to the Fae was cut off.”

“Their access to their power sources,” she said, her tone hardening. “That is what this is about?”

Gods. Had Talwyn been right all along?

“Of course not. Not all of it, at least,” Cethin quickly amended.

“And how will my existence give them any hope?” she pressed. “I do not have any idea how to bring down these Wards. Even if I did, I doubt they want that just to let Alaric and the seraphs into these lands.”

Cethin set his wineglass down and got abruptly to his feet. “Come. There is something I want to show you.”

“Right now? We are in the middle of a conversation,” Scarlett argued, tentatively setting her glass down. Sorin was already standing, reaching for her.

“Yes, now,” Cethin clipped out. He held a hand out for her to take. Apparently they were Traveling again.

When they stepped from the air, she breathed deeply, the sea mist filling her senses. There were tall posts with soft glowing flames in them illuminating the area where they were standing. They were a little ways inland, but she could still hear the waves crashing against the rocks. Below her bare feet were dark stones, carefully arranged. Small bushes with blooming flowers ran along the edge of the circular area, and in the very center was a statue of a woman.

The statue was black stone, and easily six feet tall. Even taller because it sat atop a pedestal. Scarlett reached out, her fingers skimming the smooth surface of the base.

“This is nightstone,” she whispered.

“It is,” Cethin agreed.

“Who is she?”

Scarlett tilted her head back, trying to make out the details in the night. She wore a simple dress, her hair long and loose with slight curls to it as it cascaded down her back. She appeared older, like a mortal in the later stages of life.

“Her name was Sidora,” Cethin said. “She was a Witch with a gift of prophecy.”

“An Oracle then,” Scarlett said, trying to gather her thoughts amid the alcohol she had consumed.

“More than that,” Cethin said. “She was the one who created the spell that put the Wards in place around our lands. It was strong and powerful magic. Continues to be so because of her sacrifice. Our people were fearful and hopeless. The Great War had been raging on for decades, and our parents were desperate to save their people, willing to do just about anything to give them a reprieve while we regrouped. The Wards were that answer, and before they went up, Sidora gave one last prophecy.”

He pointed at the base where words were etched in the Avonleyan language.

When Ashes Meld with Shadows,

When Stars and Dreams Collide,

*When Night and Darkness Meet,
She will return with the fire of the stars.*

*Brother of the throne,
Hope will rise,
And the Prince will fall.
For Darkness takes it all.*

“This...could mean anything,” Scarlett sputtered. “Oracles are notorious for being vague and unhelpful.” She looked over her shoulder at the males behind her, their faces saying they already believed this to be her. She flung a hand at the inscription. “This could be Saylah herself. Maybe Temural occupies a throne where he is these days. The Prince could mean any one of the Fae Princes.”

“The people of Avonleya believed Selinya to be a descendant of Saylah. They do not know she was Saylah herself. Only our father and a few select others knew that. Sidora was one of those few. She came with Saylah when she came to this world,” Cethin said, his tone tense and impatient.

“Then how do they believe she died?” Scarlett demanded, whirling to face him. Her shadows rose up, the wine and her emotions making it too difficult to control them right now. “What kind of *queen* lets her people think she has died?”

“The kind who feels guilty for bringing this upon them in the first place,” Cethin spat back. “The kind who is doing everything in her power to fix this, to leave this world so her people can live the quiet lives they deserve.”

Darkness pooled around his feet like ink, blacker than the night in which they stood. It was night itself. He had shadows of his own, different from hers, but also somehow the same.

“Both of you need to take a breath,” Sorin ground out, fire flickering in his eyes.

“It’s just a little sibling spat,” Scarlett sneered, lifting a palm and letting white flames flare to life.

“Oh, look” Cethin smirked. “*Fire of the stars.*”

Scarlett instantly closed her fist, the flames extinguishing. “What?”

“Those white flames? That is starfire,” Cethin said. “A gift of Serafina herself. Our grandmother. It flows in our veins and manifested in you. Where did you think the name came from?”

“You have this gift too, then?” Scarlett asked.

“No,” Cethin answered. And then she felt her power draining as his darkness latched onto her shadows. “I inherited Arius’s gift of being able to sense power and end it.”

He released her then, and she sucked in a sharp breath. “Alaric can do that,” she rasped.

“He killed a Legacy of Arius to obtain that power,” Cethin answered. “It was a strategic move on his part, but also a foolish one.”

“Does not seem all that foolish to me,” Scarlett said. “He can literally take my power from me to strengthen his own.”

“True, but he would have been better off stealing a gift not found in this world,” Cethin answered, a sly grin filling his face. “Because I can train you to defend against him, Scarlett. Together we can free our people—both in Avonleya and those across the sea. Together, he will fall, and the Darkness will take it all.”

CHAPTER 27

SORIN

“S aylah is your mother,” Cyrus repeated.

They were all seated around the breakfast table back at the estate. Sorin and Scarlett had slept late after their night with Cethin. Scarlett hadn't even changed when they'd finally gone back to their rooms. It had been well into the night, and she'd simply slept in the dress she'd worn. Sorin was fairly certain she had been asleep before she'd even landed on the bed, too exhausted and overwhelmed by everything she had learned. Now it was mid-day, and she was eating a pear while the others stared back at the way she had casually dropped that she was the daughter of a goddess.

Because why not randomly reveal that nugget of information in between asking for the juice and taking a bite of fruit?

“I guess so,” Scarlett sighed, head resting on her hand with her elbow propped on the table. He could tell with only a quick glance she was only half here, lost in her own thoughts.

“The actual goddess?” Cyrus said.

“Yes, Cyrus,” she replied listlessly.

“The goddess of shadows and night? Daughter of Arius and Serafina?”

“Gods, yes!” she snapped, sitting up a little straighter. “I am glad you know your gods and goddesses, Darling.”

“So what does that make you? A godling?” Cyrus mused.

The pear left his wife's hand, flying at Cyrus's face. "Do *not* call me that," she snarled.

Sorin recognized that slow smirk that filled his Second's face as he leaned to the side to avoid the fruit.

"Of course not..." Cyrus said with feigned innocence.

Silence fell around the table. The others continued to stare at her, different expressions of shock on their faces. Scarlett either did not notice or did not care. He assumed the latter, as she began spreading jam on a piece of toast.

"Did you learn anything else interesting last night?" Cassius finally asked.

"More interesting than learning her mother is an actual goddess?" Cyrus quipped. "That is going to be pretty hard to top." He popped a few grapes into his mouth, grinning at Scarlett. "*Can* you top that, little godling?"

"I swear to, Saylah—" Scarlett stopped abruptly, a scowl forming as a laugh burst out of Cyrus, followed quickly by a curse.

"Stop being an ass," Cassius said.

"Here I thought violence was beneath you," Cyrus muttered, leaning forward and rubbing at, what Sorin guessed, was his shin. He could only assume Cassius had kicked him beneath the table.

Scarlett was mindlessly eating her toast. She'd hardly spoken all morning. He could feel... Gods, she was feeling so much right now, he couldn't decipher it all down the bond.

"We learned that Alaric's magic was stolen from a descendent of Arius," Sorin said, answering Cassius's question.

"Great. We will add it to the list of things we do not know how to prepare for," Eliza muttered, her mood seeming to be as sour as his wife's.

Fantastic. Two moody females were sure to make for a delightful day.

“Except that Cethin apparently possesses the same gifts along with shadows similar to Scarlett’s,” Sorin said, taking a bite of the ham on his plate.

“That would make sense,” Rayner said. “He is a descendant of Arius as much as Saylah.”

“And he can dream-walk. That was inherent to Serafina,” Sorin supplied. “Just like Scarlett’s...starfire.”

“The white flames,” Luan clarified.

“Yes,” Sorin said. Scarlett was not even trying to listen now.

He went on to fill them in on the prophecy and the little bit of history they had learned about the Wards and the Witch who had enacted them.

“Cethin is going to train her on how to defend against Alaric,” he was saying.

“Wait,” Eliza said, perking up. “We get to train with them?”

“We are meeting Cethin shortly to start. I do not think he intended to train everyone—” Sorin started.

“Let them come,” Scarlett said suddenly, getting to her feet. “If the Avonleyans are going to fight with us, we all need to train with them. Learn from each other. Understand each other’s fighting style.”

“Exactly,” Eliza said, practically jumping up from her seat. “I am supposed to train with Callan this morning. He can come too.”

“Where are the mortals?” Luan asked, as if he just realized they were not present.

“At Hale’s estate,” Briar said, setting down a glass of orange juice. “Tava was up before the sun to help Lynnea with breakfast. The children are not adjusting well to the Avonleyan schedule.”

“Understandably,” Scarlett said, yawning as she stretched her arms above her head. She looked down at Sorin. “Ready?”

“Did you eat enough?”

“Yes, Sorin,” she sighed. “I will sufficiently be able to hand anyone their ass in a training ring today.”

“That sounds like a challenge, godling,” Cyrus said, getting lazily to his feet.

Her eyes flashed to him, flames sparking in her irises. “Darling, you have no idea.”

They made their way to the front steps to meet Cethin, Callan and Drake appearing a few minutes before the king. Hale was with them, apparently curious to watch them train. Between Cethin and Razik, they Traveled their entire party.

Sorin blinked a few times against the brightness of the sun when they stepped from the air. They were in the middle of a stone arena. It was circular with a dirt floor and large enough for a hundred warriors to easily train without it being too tight. Scarlett was already bouncing from foot-to-foot beside him, needing to expel some energy and work through everything she’d learned.

“So what are we doing first?” she asked, turning to her brother. She rolled her neck, fingers flexing. He could feel her practically vibrating down their bond. She was *really* wound up this morning.

“We thought we would let you warm up a little. Then I could start draining you, and we can work on defensive maneuvers,” Cethin said.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when Scarlett said, “Deal.”

And her shadows slammed into Cyrus.

He swore, coughing from where he lay on his back in the dirt. She stalked up to him, pulling the spirit sword from a swirl of starfire. “Call me godling again, *Darling*,” she sneered.

Cyrus coughed again. “I really should have expected that.”

“You really should have,” she simpered, twirling the sword in her hand.

Cyrus chuckled, getting to his feet and brushing off his pants. He pulled a sword from flames. "Shall we then?"

Sorin watched as the two sparred, some of the others pairing off as well. Eliza was working with Callan across the arena. Sawyer and Cassius were sparring, and Briar and Luan were siphoning off some of their own magic. It still made him take pause every once in a while to see Prince Azrael Luan among their company.

"We need to discuss something," Rayner said, his voice low and quiet beside him.

"Oh?" Sorin asked. He kept his eyes fixed on Scarlett, but every other part of him was focused on his Third.

"There is someone here who can move among the winds or ashes. I have not been able to catch them," Rayner murmured.

"When did you notice?"

"I thought I felt them the night we arrived, but I wasn't sure. It was late. There was a lot going on." Sorin nodded, wincing as Scarlett knocked Cyrus to the ground again when her shadows looped around his ankle and jerked his foot out from under him. "Every time I sense them, they move before I can pinpoint their location."

"What do you make of it?" Sorin asked.

"I think they are just watching right now. Observing us. Likely reporting back to Cethin," Rayner replied.

"Are they here now?"

"In and out. They are beginning to linger longer."

Sorin nodded again. "I know you are extra protective of Tula right now, Rayner, but I need you to stay and figure this out. The Avonleyans have not given us any reason to distrust them yet, but we have only been here a few days. That does not mean anything."

"I can do both," Rayner said, and Sorin could hear the slight defensiveness that had entered his tone.

“I know, Rayner, but you can trust us to help keep Tula safe too. You know that, right? We have people with the children at all times.”

“That did nothing on the ship,” he retorted sharply.

Before Sorin could reply, Cethin and Razik were making their way over.

“I am going to draw from her,” Cethin said. “I want to prepare you so you do not become protective.”

“Thanks for the warning, I guess,” Sorin said tightly. This was going to go against every instinct.

“Razik is here to help...encourage you and her guardian to let this happen. Honestly, it would be easier if you guys would go, but—”

“Neither of us will allow that,” Sorin interrupted.

“I figured that would be the case.” His gaze cut to Razik. “Only if necessary, Raz.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Razik muttered, waving him off as Cethin began to make his way towards Scarlett and Cyrus.

“This is not a good idea,” Rayner said softly. “Cassius does not know how to control his power. If he thinks Scarlett is in real danger—”

“What do you mean he cannot control his power?” Razik asked harshly, his head snapping towards them.

“We do not entirely understand his gifts. He has only accessed them a couple of times, and only when Scarlett is in danger,” Sorin answered.

Razik swore viciously under his breath before shouting, “Cethin! Wait!”

He was rushing towards him, Cethin having paused and turned to look back at him. Sorin could see Cethin’s eyes widen slightly, his gaze darting to Cassius across the arena with Sawyer. The pair had stopped sparring and were speaking with Auberon, watching Eliza and the mortals.

“Why are they so concerned about Cassius?” Sorin muttered.

Scarlett and Cyrus had heard Razik yelling at Cethin, and they had stopped their sparring, making their way over. Scarlett was nodding at whatever Cethin was saying, and Sorin could already tell by the look on her face he was not going to like what she had to say when she began moving towards him.

“You and Cass need to go,” she said.

“Fuck no,” Sorin answered.

“Sorin,” she sighed. “Briar and Azrael can stay. Eliza. Cyrus. You can literally leave every other Fae and mortal here with me, but you and Cass will be too overprotective.”

“No,” Sorin gritted out. “This was all fine until they realized Cassius did not have control over his power. Cass can go if necessary, but I am *not* leaving you here with them.”

Her nose scrunched a little, her brow creasing. “Why would they be concerned about Cassius’s gifts?”

“I do not know. Perhaps we should ask them,” Sorin said.

When Scarlett did, Cethin answered, “Razik will have to interfere if Cassius’s magic takes over. That is something we would rather not do.”

“But you were prepared to do just that,” Sorin argued.

“When we were under the impression you all knew how to control your gifts,” Razik sneered. “How has he only accessed them a handful of times?”

“Likely because there was no one to awaken his gifts,” Scarlett hissed, stepping toe-to-toe with the male. Her tone was low and vicious. He was several inches taller than her, and she still somehow appeared to be staring down her nose at him. “Likely because he does not know anyone with his gifts, and likely because the two people who could probably help him have not acknowledged his existence yet.”

Razik’s blue eyes almost seemed to begin glowing, but he blinked, and it was gone. “You know,” he said roughly.

“And so does he.”

Sorin reached out and gently gripped her elbow, tugging her back a few feet.

“How long have you known?” Cethin asked, a hand going through his hair. The same thing Scarlett did when she was upset.

“Yesterday morning,” Sorin answered.

“How?” Razik gritted out.

“Our Fire Court *General* heard Magdalena asking you about Lord Tybalt. His mother told him his father’s name. It wasn’t hard to put it together,” Scarlett said. “I am assuming you are his half-brother then?”

Razik shook his head once sharply, hands clenching at his sides. “Tybalt is my blooded uncle, but he is the only father I care to acknowledge.”

Tense silence fell among them all, and Scarlett huffed a laugh of disbelief. “You have nothing else to say to that?”

“He did not want me to say anything until he was here,” Razik said. “He wants to meet him—is anxious to do so—but was called away on business before he could.”

“On business? What business is more important than meeting his godsdamn son?” Scarlett demanded, her voice rising. Sorin tightened his grip when she tried to step towards him again.

“Your mother,” Razik said snidely.

“Okay, that is enough for now,” Cethin said, stepping between Razik and Scarlett. “Cassius needs to go, or we need to find another time to train.”

Sorin looked down at Scarlett. *What do you want to do, Love?*

I want to wrap my shadows around Razik’s throat and let them bite a little bit.

“Let us have some time,” Sorin said to Cethin and Razik. “Maybe we can train tonight?”

Cethin nodded. “We will stick around though. If you do not mind?”

“Sorin, I need to train,” Scarlett interrupted.

“What you need to do is work through everything you are feeling before you unnecessarily set things on fire,” he replied, reaching for the sword Cyrus still held. His Second looked as irate as Scarlett, but he handed it over before stepping back.

“Sorin, I—” she started, but then a startled scream came from her. She leapt back when flames sprang up inches from her boots. “Asshole,” she snapped, white flames flaring down her sword.

“Fight me, Princess,” Sorin said with a wry grin. “You are snapping and growling at everyone else. I am beginning to feel left out.”

Her lip curled back in a sneer, and she lunged forward, his entire arm vibrating when he blocked the hit. “Focus on your Fae magic,” he said when they broke apart. “You are becoming too dependent on your shadows.”

“I know,” she gritted out, water springing from her palm to put out the flames he’d sent chasing after her.

They had been sparring for a few minutes when Briar’s voice rang out, instructing Scarlett in different ways to use her water magic. She was flawless, incorporating each suggestion and every change Briar suggested. Her fire met his, forcing his magic to bend to hers. It shouldn’t be this easy for her to do so. Even if she was part goddess, it should not be this easy for her to counteract his magic. He wanted to believe it had something to do with her being on Avonleyan soil, but he knew that wasn’t the case. He also knew he shouldn’t be expending this much power, but she needed this. He could already feel some of the tension leaving her as she moved, focusing more on her water magic than her fire today.

Some time later, Sorin’s tunic was soaked through, from her water magic or his own sweat he wasn’t sure, when thick shadows filled the arena.

“I thought we agreed on none of that this round,” he panted, blocking her blow.

“That’s not me,” she said, breathing just as hard, stray hair stuck to her forehead.

They both lowered their swords, looking around, and they both stilled when they found Razik holding Cethin back.

Because that was Rayner across the arena. He held a female before him, one hand holding her wrists behind her back. She had hair as black as the night and amber eyes that shone brightly, but even from this distance, Sorin could see the smoke and ash swirling in them.

She was an Ash Rider.

“He has three seconds to release my wife,” Cethin said, his voice so lethal it had the hair on the back of Sorin’s neck standing on end.

The female had a look on her face that was somewhere between amused and irritated, but Sorin quickly jerked his chin at Rayner. As soon as her hands were free, she was striding gracefully across the arena, almost seeming to float above the ground. She was short, her head barely coming to Cethin’s chest. Her black dress had deep slits up the sides, and a bow was slung across her back. She was barefoot, and she left ashy footprints with each step.

“I told you she wouldn’t be able to keep herself out of sight for long,” Razik muttered.

Those amber eyes darted to him, and she sent him a simpering smile as an arrow appeared amidst a puff of smoke at her hand.

“It has been a while since we’ve played, Lia,” Razik crooned and...was that smoke coming out of his nostrils?

“Fuck me,” Cethin muttered, fingers rubbing at his brow. “Can you two knock it off for five godsdamn minutes?”

“Do you think this is what we are like? Is this what others see when they watch us and our Courts?” Scarlett whispered, her head cocked as she watched the Avonleyans.

“I...do not know,” he replied, his muscles tense as he waited to see if Razik and the female were actually going to fight.

The female came to a stop in front of Cethin, and he reached out and snatched the arrow from her hand. “Tiny fiend,” Cethin sighed, fingering a lock of her black hair. “What am I to do with you?”

“I told you last night he was on to me, Cethin,” the female answered. “It was only a matter of time.”

“You could have just stayed away,” he argued.

“I am getting bored, Cethin.”

“Dear gods, nothing good ever comes from that,” Razik muttered.

The female was already reaching for the arrow Cethin still held. “Let me introduce you then,” Cethin said quickly, holding the arrow out of her reach and gesturing to the rest of them. The female turned, calculating eyes sweeping over them. “This is my wife, Kailia, Queen of Avonleya.”

“I already know all your names,” she replied far too sweetly. “Cethin has been having me follow you.”

“Really? After all the trust talk last night?” Scarlett asked, her brow arched.

“As if you have not been snooping around wherever you can since you arrived,” Cethin retorted.

He had a point. They had been doing that, and Rayner had been learning as much as he could. His reserves were still fairly depleted, but his eyes were swirling a little faster these days.

“You are an Ash Rider?” Scarlett asked. “Like Rayner?”

Kailia looked back to where Rayner still stood halfway across the arena, watching everything closely. When she turned back, she said, “I suppose so. In some ways.”

“Are there more of you here? More Ash Riders?”

“There are a few others with the gift to move among smoke and ashes, but the gifts of the descendants of Anala vary,” Cethin answered.

“Descendants of Anala?” Scarlett repeated slowly, and Sorin could already hear the satisfaction creeping into her tone. He knew exactly what was going to come from her mouth next. “So Ash Riders are Avonleyan?”

Cethin’s brow creased. “Of course they are Avonleyan. Some are stronger than others, of course, depending on lineage, just like the Fae. But to move among the smoke and ashes like they do, Anala’s bloodline would be strong.” Then his silver eyes widened. “You all do realize the Fae and Avonleyans co-existed until they were separated. There are many on your continent who would be able to claim some type of Avonleyan heritage.”

“Anyone with rare gifts then,” Scarlett continued. “Like a Wind Walker or...” Her gaze cut to Briar and Sawyer. “Water Gazers.”

“That is not possible,” Briar said. Everyone had moved closer when Kalia had arrived, a sort of impromptu meeting taking place in the center of the training arena.

“Yes,” Cethin said. “You truly did not know? Why do you think they rule the Fae Courts? When the Courts were originally established, they were ruled by an Avonleyan and Fae couple, usually an Avonleyan and their Source. Of course, after we were separated, Fae bloodlines would have become more dominant as the Avonleyan lineage was diluted.”

“But Sorin is not an Avonleyan,” Eliza cut in, then seemed to hesitate. “Right?”

“I cannot answer that without seeing family records,” Cethin said. “But I would guess not.”

“Why?” Scarlett asked.

“Because I can feel his power wells.”

Sorin tensed when Scarlett whirled to face him.

Are they depleted?

More each day. You know this, Scarlett.

Her lips pursed, arms crossing. *We need to talk to someone, anyone, about this. Why were you sparring with me?*

Because you needed it, and I will always give you what you need when it is in my power to do so. We can try Beatrix again. We really should speak with her anyway.

“Do they do this often?” Kailia asked, and Sorin’s eyes cut to her.

“Yes,” Luan answered. “It is annoying and rude.”

“Would you like us to create that super secret handshake, Azzy?” Scarlett asked sweetly. “Would it make you feel better?”

“Insufferable,” he grumbled.

“I think what we all need is some time to...” Cethin sighed, raking his hand through his hair again. “Fuck. I do not know what we need to do right now.”

“So...day-drinking then?” Scarlett asked.

Hale barked a laugh, covering it with a cough.

“We are not going to day-drink,” Sorin sighed.

“Stab things?” Kailia offered.

“No,” Cethin said quickly, and Razik snickered. “Let’s all just go separate ways and regroup after all the unexpected turns of the morning.”

Scarlett sighed deeply as everyone began to disperse. “Let’s get cleaned up and go into Aimonway. There was a sweets shop on one of the corners.”

“You want to go buy candy?” Sorin asked.

“Well, day drinking and stabbing things are off the table, so I guess candy and chocolate it is,” she replied.

Sorin suppressed his laugh, knowing it would likely earn him more violence. His arm fell around her shoulders, and he dropped a kiss to the top of her head. “Candy and chocolate it is,” he agreed.



“Is someone feeling homesick?”

Sorin turned and went rigid.

He was on the banks of the Tana River, north of the Fire Palace. He’d walked here with Scarlett on numerous occasions. Had watched her wrestle with her darkness here. This was where she had asked him not to let her drown.

How ironic that now he stood here and looked upon Mikale Lairwood holding her, back pressed to his chest, hand around her throat. Her eyes were wide and pleading, shining with apology.

“It is funny,” Mikale said, dragging the tip of his nose along Scarlett’s temple. “I have never been able to enter your dreams. I have tried. Numerous times. But not until this bond of yours was Anointed.” His other hand dropped, his fingers dragging over the twin flame Mark on Scarlett’s hand. “But I have been practicing bringing someone from their dreams into another’s for just this occasion.”

Sorin raised a hand, summoning his fire, but nothing came.

Mikale laughed, a low and ugly thing. “I control things here, Fire Prince.” His hand came up, and this time his fingers skimmed along her collarbone, between the valley of her breasts, down her torso where his hand splayed across her stomach.

“You know, I could not enter her dreams for quite some time either. Even before I was told what she truly was, I tried. It was why I needed her that night.” He smirked, fingers flexing around her throat, and he shrugged. “Part of the reason anyway. That night gave me a connection, even if it was only a physical joining. It gave me a way in.”

“You forced her—”

“She was given a choice,” Mikale cut in. “She chose the outcome of that night.”

Two tears were slipping down Scarlett’s face, and Sorin had never felt more helpless. He had never seen her so helpless. Was this what she faced every time Mikale entered her dreams? She had told him, but seeing it—experiencing it firsthand—was a completely different matter.

“Let her go,” Sorin ground out.

“No. I do not think I will,” he replied, hand moving from her stomach to her hip. “We tried to tell you she is not yours. Apparently we need to make the message a little clearer.” He tugged Scarlett back into his chest a little more, and a strangled whimper escaped her lips. “Good luck waking her.”

And then he was gone, Scarlett with him.



Sorin jolted awake, turning to Scarlett’s sleeping form beside him on the bed. Her face was pinched in pain, tears on her face exactly as they had been in the dream.

“Scarlett. Love.” He shook her shoulders, hand smoothing over her hair. “Scarlett. Wake up. I’m here.”

Her eyelids did not even flutter.

“Scarlett,” he growled, an order that she refused to follow even in sleep.

Scarlett!

Nothing. He could feel nothing down the bond. He could not feel her emotions. Could not hear her thoughts. He could not feel *her*.

He tried once more to wake her before he was out the door, slipping his pants on as he went. The front of his pants weren’t even buttoned when he was pounding on Cassius’s door.

“Cassius!” His fist hit the wood again, not caring if he woke the entire godsdamn house. “Cassius! She is in trouble!”

“Sorin?”

He twisted, the door across the hall opening to Cyrus’s room. He didn’t have time to process that Cassius was in Cyrus’s room at this hour.

“You need to Travel and get Cethin. Now!” Sorin said, rushing over to him.

“Sorin, calm down,” Cyrus tried, coming out behind Cassius.

“I will not calm down,” Sorin snarled. “Go, Cassius!”

“It is the middle of the night—”

“Mikale has her! Trapped in some godsdamn dream! I cannot wake her! Go and get Cethin!”

He turned from them, racing back into the suite. Scarlett hadn’t moved an inch.

It was only a few minutes, but it felt like hours until Cassius appeared with Cethin. Cyrus, Kailia, and Razik were with them. Sorin spent the entire time trying to wake her, pulling her into his arms, smoothing back her hair. He sent his fire trying to rouse her shadows, her starfire, anything.

“Tell me what happened,” Cethin said tightly as he took in Scarlett, his features tense. Kailia reached up, running her hand down his back while murmuring something to Razik.

“We were sleeping. Mikale— He brought her into *my* dream. Said he was going to keep her— Fuck! Just dream-walk and go get her!”

“They are getting smarter. I did not think he would be able to carry others when dream-walking,” Cethin murmured, reaching out and running his fingers along Scarlett’s brow.

“What are you waiting for?” Sorin demanded. “Go get her.”

“I can’t,” Cethin said, the agony of that statement clear in his tone.

“Why the fuck not?” Cassius asked, looking as helpless as Sorin felt.

“A number of reasons, not the least of which is that my reserves are not full enough for me to do such a thing. I do not have a Source to draw from,” Cethin answered. “But even if I could...”

“You would not,” Sorin spat. “After all of this, you still will not help her? We are finally here! What more do you want from her?”

“I did everything I could every time I saw her,” Cethin snapped back. “You think I did not want to tell her more? I was the one who awakened her magic. I was the one who made sure Shirina became bonded to her when *you* broke her heart. I told her to find a Source, find the keys, discovered the draining Mark. I was the one who risked the wrath of Arius to make sure you came back to her.”

“What?” Sorin said, lurching back.

Cethin’s mouth snapped shut, his silver eyes hard.

“Is there another way to help her, Cethin?” Kailia asked, utterly calm and collected. Sorin wanted to throw something at her. There was no way she understood the gravity of this situation. Did Cethin tell his wife nothing?

“You should be able to reach her with your twin flame bond,” Cethin said, rounding back on Sorin, accusation heavy in voice. “Nothing should be above that. The gods designed it that way.”

“This has happened one other time,” Cyrus said, seeing the violence simmering in Sorin’s eyes. “Mikale came to Scarlett in a mirror. She called for him down the bond, and he did not hear her.”

“Before or after it was Anointed?” Cethin asked.

“After.”

“Impossible,” the king scoffed.

“Not impossible,” Sorin ground out. “The bond has felt different since I almost died—”

“You *did* die,” Cyrus cut in.

“I thought it was because the bond was Anointed shortly after. Just an adjustment, but...” He trailed off, running his hand over her hair again. She was trapped in her head. With Mikale. Alone. The gods knew what he was doing to her.

“The cost,” Cethin said, his voice pained. “This was the cost for you to come back.”

“No,” Sorin said, shaking his head. “The cost was my power. It is slowly depleting. It is not as it once was and becomes less by the day.”

“Until there will be nothing left. Until you will, essentially, be powerless,” Cethin said, his tone growing softer, gentler. Placating. “Until you are merely a mortal with a longer lifespan. Mortals do not have twin flames, Sorin.”

“No,” Cyrus snarled. “That is...not possible.”

“It is,” Cethin said. “She said there would be a cost. I offered to pay it. I gladly would have, but she said it would not be me.”

Sorin could hardly breathe. He could scarcely hear them anymore. Sounds were muffled, and the voices were droning, mixing with one another until he couldn't tell who was speaking. *This* was the sacrifice required of him to stay with her? Their twin flame bond? His magic? Without it, he could not be her Source. And she could not claim another as long as he remained living. What kind of fucked up games were the Fates playing?

“Who? Who said that?” Cassius asked, cutting through the din of his spiraling thoughts.

“Serafina,” Cethin answered.

“Serafina,” Cyrus repeated. “You spoke with Serafina?”

“I dream-walked to Sorin beyond the Veil,” Cethin said. “I was searching for Arius, to beg for him to send Sorin back. I knew...” His voice was thick with emotion as he glanced down at Scarlett. “I knew that this would truly break her. That she would implode and take the world with her. I knew that

without you, she would have no hope, and we would all fall with her.”

Cethin cleared his throat, Kailia threading her fingers between his and leaning into his side. “Our mother sent me, gave me enough power to do such a thing. Dream-walk beyond the Veil. I was racing death itself, hoping to find you before it was too late, but Serafina found me first. I thought she was going to make me leave, take you to Arius herself. I begged her, on behalf of Scarlett. When she finally agreed, she said there would be a cost.”

“Did she say anything else?” Cassius asked, lowering to the bed beside Sorin and reaching for one of Scarlett’s hands.

“She told Sorin to go home, and that Anala would find it interesting that you were bonded to Amaré.”

“Why?”

Cethin shrugged. “My guess would be because he is not the most powerful fire Fae.”

“But he *was* until...” Cyrus argued.

“That is a debate for another time,” Razik said. “What do we do now, Cethin?”

“She is strong enough to break the dream-hold he has on her. I can feel her reserves,” Cethin said. “He should not be able to hold her there.”

“He controls her in those dreams. She has told me as much,” Sorin said.

“Then she lets him,” Cethin replied. “He may have had to kill a Serafina Legacy to get those gifts, but she is still stronger and more powerful.”

“Which means his hold on her is all mental,” Cassius said quietly, his eyes shuttering closed as he tipped his head back, hurting for her not as her Guardian but as her soulmate.

“What do I do?” Sorin demanded. “I cannot just sit here.”

“Keep trying to reach her down the bond,” Cethin said. “I have some books at home I can look through. See if there is

anything.”

Sorin did not bother responding. He’d summoned Cethin here for help, and he’d given him nothing. He did not give a shit what he did at this point. If he wasn’t going to help her, he could get out.

“I can stay,” Razik was saying. “Be the go-between in case they need something.”

“We do not need you,” Cassius said coldly, refusing to look at his cousin. Sorin was certain that had not been addressed yet, despite Scarlett telling Razik that Cassius knew everything.

“You came to us for help,” Razik retorted.

“And you can give us none,” Cassius snapped.

“Hey,” Cyrus interjected, stepping between the two. “Let’s just...” He sighed deeply. “It will be better if he stays, Cass. Cethin can send him messages if he finds something, and if something changes here, Razik will know how to reach Cethin.”

“Fine.”

“Cass—”

“I said fine,” Cassius bit out, angling his body away from them and focusing on Scarlett. “Are you still trying to reach her?”

“I have not stopped,” Sorin said, not caring what the rest of them did anymore.

Scarlett. Love. You are stronger than he is. You can fight this.

Nothing.

“Come on, Seastar,” Cassius was muttering.

And Sorin was flashing back to another time, in another room, when Cassius had been trying to wake her. When shadows had drifted from her palms as she had thrashed atop her bed, sweat matting her hair to her forehead. When her dreams had been of nightmares past. He’d been able to reach

her that time, had pulled her from that dark place. He'd reached her that time and so many others, promising to never leave her alone in the dark. He wouldn't leave her alone now either.

Scarlett Aditya, listen to me and hear me well. He does not get any piece of you. He does not get to keep any of what he has taken from you. He does not get to keep you from me. You are all mine. Every bright star and darkest crevice of your soul is mine. Do you understand me? You are mine. All the way through the darkness. Now, wake the fuck up.

There was a strangled gasp as she bolted upright, her cheeks already wet from tears suddenly coursing down her face. He was pulling her into his chest, her nails scraping against his flesh as she tried to grasp any part of him.

“Sorin.”

His name was a cry and a plea. He already knew what she was asking for.

“Everyone get out,” he said tightly, clutching her to him with one arm banded around her waist. His other hand was already at her throat, fingers tracing where Mikale had touched her in his dream.

No one said a word, and Cassius slowly rose from the bed. “If you need something...”

“I won't.”

Cassius nodded once before turning and following the rest of them out.

And as he went about replacing Mikale's touch with his own, reclaiming what Mikale thought he could take from them, a vow settled deep in his being.

Scarlett could have Alaric. She could claim his kill and make it as tortuous as possible. She could have Alaric and Lord Tyndell and every other Maraan Lord and seraph. But Mikale? He was claiming that death, even if all he had when the time came was a sword and his bare hands.

CHAPTER 28

CYRUS

“Scarlett can never see this place,” Cyrus said the minute they opened the doors.

“What? Why not?” Cassius asked, his brow furrowed in confusion.

Cyrus turned an incredulous gaze on him. “Do you know how many hours she spent in the library in Solembra? We will never get her out of here. She will get lost among the stacks, find a secret passage to hide away in, and then we’re stuck here and Alaric wins.”

Cassius was giving him a look of pure disbelief. “You are as dramatic as Nuri some days. I swear.”

“I liked her,” Cyrus answered as they made their way deeper into the library of the castle. “Before the whole betrayal thing and all that.”

Cassius gave some gruff noise of acknowledgment.

“We never really talked about that,” Cyrus said casually. “Nuri. The Blood Bond. Seeing her at the Eternal Necropolis.”

“There is nothing to say about it,” Cassius replied. “How, exactly, do you plan to find what you are looking for in here?”

“I’m looking for several things,” Cyrus said. “So I guess we see what finds us first.”

If that wasn’t the truth. What wasn’t he looking for at this point? They needed information on Sargon because Cassius’s asshole of a father still had not bothered to show up and meet his son. Razik still had not acknowledged his relationship to

Cassius either, despite Scarlett calling him out in the arena a few days ago. Of course he'd told Cassius about that. He wasn't about to keep something like that from him, and of course, Cassius's face had hardened, lips pressing into a thin line, and nothing had been spoken of it since. But they really needed to figure out his gifts if his own flesh and blood weren't going to help. They'd seemed genuinely concerned that he couldn't control his power in that training arena, but apparently not concerned enough to teach him how to do anything about it.

Then there was Sorin's waning power, coupled with the effect it was having on the twin flame bond. He and Scarlett hadn't emerged from their suite for two days after Mikale had somehow trapped her in that dream. Cassius had all but forced his way in the day after to check on her. She'd been curled on the sofa in their sitting room, a blanket pulled tight around her shoulders. She'd looked...haunted. Other than that, Cyrus had not seen them. They had left their room after lunch today to go find Beatrix which is where they were at now. He was all too anxious to learn how that conversation went and what else Beatrix might know.

And then there was the Source issue. It would affect them all— Scarlett not having access to a Source. Having to let her magic refill naturally, like the Avonleyans had apparently done for centuries. They would never win a war without her at full strength. But as pressing as that was, that was not the only Source issue that needed to be dealt with.

They had made their way to some shelves near a window overlooking the Nightmist Mountains that loomed at the back of the castle. Black mountains. Black waters. Everything seemed to be veiled in a layer of shadows. It made sense, he supposed, if Saylah truly was holed up in Elshira.

“Think you could Travel to that training arena without an escort?” Cyrus asked, pulling out a book from a shelf. It was in the Avonleyan language, and he suddenly realized this might be much harder than he anticipated if the books weren't in the Old Language or common tongue.

“Yeah, why?” Cassius asked, pulling a large book from the shelf opposite him.

“You need to train and practice with your magic. Seems like as good a place as any.”

There was a long stretch of silence before, “Yeah, I suppose.”

“So we can head there after here?”

“Sure.”

Cyrus didn't say anything else for a bit, working his way through books until he finally came to a section that was in the Old Language. Books on the Edria Sea. Not what he needed, but getting closer.

“There are books on family lineages here,” Cassius said, a way down the row from him. He'd pulled another book out, setting it on a nearby window ledge.

“Really? Anything on Sargon and his bloodline?”

“Not that I have seen yet.”

He'd been putting this off the entire time they'd been here, not wanting to face... Well, another rejection. That's what it was, wasn't it? When he'd offered to be his Source and Cassius had said no.

He cleared his throat. “So about this Source thing.”

Cassius's hand paused mid-page turn. “What about it?”

“You need one.”

“We still do not know that for sure.”

Cyrus sent a droll look over his shoulder at him, but Cassius was back to flipping pages in the book. Cyrus turned, leaning against the bookshelf and crossing his arms. “I think we do know that for sure. We could at least be looking at options.”

The thought of Cassius choosing anyone else as his Source made Cyrus want to vomit, but he pushed the feeling down. Cassius needed this, and if he wouldn't let him be this for him,

he would help him find another. Even if it felt like a dagger to the gut.

“No.”

“No to looking at options? Or all together? Because I know a few powerful Fae who might be a good fit—”

“No,” Cassius said again, the word harsh and gritty. “No to other options. No to all of it.”

“Cass,” Cyrus sighed. “My offer still stands. I am willing to do this for you.”

His hands were braced on the window ledge, and he was leaning over the book, his head hanging down. “Are you, Cyrus? Because you still do not sleep at night.” He turned, leaning against the wall, an ankle crossing over the other as he folded his arms over his chest, mirroring Cyrus. “We cannot hear the sea here.”

“This isn’t about me,” Cyrus retorted.

Cassius arched a brow. “No? You are not offering up the lifelong sacrifice of your power in a commitment to me? My mistake.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

Cassius nodded at him to go on.

“What do you want from me? I do not understand what it is I have to prove to you. Tell me, Cass. You’re the one who seems to think I’m not ready for this. So what will convince you otherwise?” Cyrus asked hotly, beginning to get agitated and not entirely sure why. If he didn’t want a Source, want *him* to be his Source, it shouldn’t be his issue.

Cassius was quiet for a long moment, studying him carefully. “I do not know,” he finally answered. “I just know that I will feel like an asshole if you wake up one morning and find this isn’t what you wanted after all. That I let you do this when you were clearly still working through some things.”

Cyrus dropped his arms to his sides, turning to pull a book from the same shelf Cassius had been going through. “You and Scarlett are such self-sacrificing martyrs. Despite what you

two seem to believe, it is, in fact, not your responsibility to take care of everyone else.”

“Scarlett is a queen. That is exactly her responsibility,” Cassius argued.

“Fine. Her circumstances are a little different. But you? You can be selfish sometimes, Cass.”

Cassius scoffed. “Not when it involves another person. Not when it involves someone that I—” He paused, a hand running down his face before he met his gaze. “Not when so much has already been taken from you.”

“My offering is different from something being taken from me.”

“And when you resent me for it some day? When you want out and cannot leave?”

“Why would you ever think that?” Cyrus asked incredulously.

Something shuttered across Cassius’s features, before he pushed out a long sigh and turned back to the book he’d been looking through. “Maybe I am not ready for this either.”

They hadn’t talked like this since the ship. Sure, they’d been spending the nights in the same room, drinking and playing cards, plotting and strategizing. Generally being a distraction for one another. Cassius distracting him from thoughts of Thia and Merrik; him distracting Cass from thoughts of his father and Razik. Both of them doing each other the courtesy of not bringing up the obvious issues they were both trying to repress.

He opened his mouth to push this issue further when Cassius said, “Does this drawing remind you of Tava?”

“Tava?” Cyrus repeated, moving to the window ledge, his shoulder brushing against Cass’s. He peered down at the book. “That’s not Tava.” He bent down more for a closer look because there was no possible way...

“I did not say it was her. I said it looked like her.”

“It’s not Tava,” Cyrus said again, eyes scanning the words written. This book was entirely in the common tongue. He flipped it over, his hand holding the page, while he read the cover before going back to the sketch. “This is Tava’s mother.”

The drawing was almost identical to the one he’d seen in the cabin on the ship that Cassius had shared with Drake. Cassius picked the book up so he could study the picture closer.

“It is remarkably similar,” he ventured.

“Not similar,” Cyrus argued. “That *is* her. I knew she’d looked familiar. By Anala, I cannot believe I did not put this together sooner.”

“What are you talking about?”

Cyrus pulled the book down some so he could point to a section of writing. “This. This right here is what I am talking about.”

Cassius’s eye began following the words, eyes widening with each one he read. “No,” he breathed.

“Yes,” Cyrus replied.

“Impossible.”

“Clearly possible.”

“Stop that,” Cassius snapped, turning and sinking down to sit on the window ledge. “Octavia Middell, wife of King Dalton and Queen of Rydeon. Died twenty-one years ago.” He looked up. “She cannot be their mother. Tava is not even twenty-one years old. She is the same age as Scarlett, granted older by half a year. And the prince died too. As far as I know, Drake still lives.”

“I am telling you, this is their mother,” Cyrus insisted, ignoring his sarcasm. “Octavia. Tava. They look nearly identical.”

“I am not saying the similarities are not there,” Cassius said, returning his attention to the drawing. “Another relation maybe? Aunt? Cousin of some sort?”

“If that picture Drake has is truly their mother, then so is this woman,” Cyrus said, tapping the page with his finger.

“It does not fit.”

“It *does* fit,” Cyrus argued. “Scarlett is going to agree with me.”

“She is not,” Cassius scoffed.

“I bet she does,” Cyrus said. “I bet you fifty gold marks she does.”

Cassius rolled his eyes. “We do not need to bet on everything.”

“But it makes it more interesting.”

“Then at least bet something equally interesting.”

“Like what?” Cyrus asked. “If I win, you let me become your Source?”

Cassius stilled. “That is far too important to leave up to a godsdamn bet.”

“You wanted to make it more interesting,” Cyrus said, shrugging innocently.

“Fine,” Cassius said, turning suddenly and crowding him against the wall, the book between them. “But if I win, I Travel us back to Aelyndee when it is safe to do so, and you show me where you and Merrik used to live.”

Cyrus jerked back from him, not going far given the stone wall behind him. “Why?” he balked.

It was fleeting, but Cyrus caught the flash of victory that glimmered in Cass’s eye before he said, “I face my demons, you face yours.”

He thought this was going to make him back down. Not that Cyrus was worried. Scarlett was going to see the connection the same way he did. Cassius might know her better overall, but Cyrus knew how her mind worked, was beginning to figure out how she strategized and looked at things. He wouldn’t lose this bet. He was sure of it. Fairly sure of it, anyway.

“Deal,” he finally said, thrusting his hand out. He fought the smirk at Cassius’s obvious shock at his agreement. “Do we need to make this a Blood Vow, or will you hold up your end of the bargain when I win?”

“Are you questioning if I keep my word?” Cassius asked, lowering the book a fraction so he could lean in a little closer.

“Not anymore,” Cyrus said with a pointed look at his still waiting hand.

Cassius slapped his own into it, pure determination on his face, and Cyrus prayed to Anala he didn’t have to go back to Aelyndee.



“There is no way this is going to work,” Cassius said, twin swords drawn and hanging at his sides.

They’d been sparring for nearly an hour, both of them having lost their tunics shortly after arriving at the arena to train. They’d come to the training arena after the library. With Sorin and Scarlett off speaking with Beatrix, it wasn’t as if they could go directly to them and discuss the discovery of Octavia Middell. They were meeting up with Cethin for dinner, and Cyrus was hoping to speak with Sorin and Scarlett beforehand. Maybe it should be mentioned to Drake and Tava first? It did directly involve them after all, but he would leave that decision up to the king and queen.

“Oh, sorry,” Cyrus said, straightening from the offensive position he’d been in. “I did not realize you had trained Fae to properly access and use their magic.”

“Fucking smart ass,” Cassius grumbled.

“The only time you have ever accessed your power is when protecting Scarlett, other than when it nearly overwhelmed you,” Cyrus said, only slightly irritated that they

were having this discussion yet again. “Assuming you do not want it to get to that point again, and since Scarlett is otherwise currently engaged and I cannot properly threaten her life, I will have to threaten yours.” He flashed the male a dark grin. “Your magic will manifest to protect you.”

Without warning, he sent a spiral of flames at him, and Cassius barked a curse, lunging to the side to avoid being burned and landing in the dirt. “Cyrus!” he snarled.

“Up,” Cyrus said, circling him. “I am not going to let up, Cass. Not this time. Let’s go.”

“You realize I could just leave your ass here, right?” Cassius retorted, getting to his feet.

He bent to retrieve the swords. “Leave them,” Cyrus said. When Cassius glanced at him in suspicion, he added, “It will make your magic surface sooner. It will sense how defenseless you are.”

“You really know how to make a guy feel good,” Cass muttered.

“I most certainly do,” Cyrus said wryly, and he did not miss Cassius’s eye darken. He’d taken the eye patch off because, hopefully, if this worked, he’d be able to see perfectly out of both of them shortly. “But I also know how to make you feel threatened.”

Flames encircled Cassius, creeping closer, as Cyrus continued to prowl around him, searching for any sign of his magic. The moment it appeared, he would back off. He needed Cassius to memorize how it felt, where it came from.

Small embers leapt from the flames, singeing Cass’s clothing, and Cassius cursed again, noticeably getting agitated.

“Come on, Cass,” Cyrus said. “You have to work with me here. Don’t hold your magic back.”

“I’m not,” he growled.

“You are,” Cyrus insisted, fire snaking closer. “You need to lose control in order to learn to control it.”

“I already told you this is not going to work,” he retorted. “I do not believe for one second you would actually harm me.”

Cyrus stopped mid-step. That was a fair point. He would never allow his flames to do any actual harm. His fists, however...

He leapt across the flames, tackling Cassius to the ground, a fist slamming into his side. More curses flew from Cassius’s mouth.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he demanded, blocking the next blow with his forearm.

“Fight back, Cass,” Cyrus ordered. “Better yet, let your magic do it for you.” He struck again, a punch to his ribs, and Cassius grunted.

“I am not going to hit you,” he gritted out.

“You are,” Cyrus said, this time his fist connected with his jaw, and Cassius’s head snapped to the side. “Pretend I am someone else if you need to. Pretend I am Alaric. Pretend I am Razik. Pretend I am your father who can’t be bothered to come and fucking meet you. He could bother to save you, send his pet dragon, but Daddy can’t find time in his busy schedule to meet the son he didn’t even know he had.”

Cassius caught his fist as it came for his face, a cold sneer on his lips. The next moment, Cyrus was rolled, his back hitting the dirt hard enough to drive the air from his lungs.

“Enough, Cyrus,” Cassius snapped, hands on Cyrus’s shoulders, holding him down.

But his eyes were glowing an amber-red, pupils shifted to vertical slits.

Cyrus’s hands clamped around Cass’s forearms, and he sent heat to his palms, burning him just enough to make him lurch back and release his shoulders. Cassius stared down at him in shock that he had actually burned him. And as Cyrus prepared to deliver a blow that he knew would push him over the edge, something twisted in his gut. Forcing the words past his lips was like trying to speak underwater.

“You were so worried he wouldn’t approve of what you have become, but it hurts more that he cannot be bothered to show up and find out if he approves at all. You could handle his disapproval, but you can’t handle the obvious indifference to your existence,” Cyrus said, his voice softer than he’d intended, knowing how much these words were going to sting, were going to cut the deepest part of him.

But they did what they intended.

Wings ripped from Cassius’s back as his fist came flying for Cyrus’s face, wreathed in black flames. Cyrus scrambled to get a shield in place, gasping when it took everything in him to hold it in place when Cassius’s fist connected with it. Cass’s palm flattened, black flames slowly breaking down the shield.

“Cassius, stop,” Cyrus grunted, pouring every ounce of power into holding that shield as it melted a little more with each passing second. He’d seen that fire disintegrate a seraph on the spot. He knew he would feel the burn of those flames if they connected with his flesh.

Violence and rage danced in glowing red eyes, black wings arching over Cassius’s shoulders, wicked sharp talons at the top of each one. And yeah, Cyrus recognized he’d gone too far, pushed him too much to get to his magic. Now Cassius was lost to the call of his power, and Cyrus wasn’t entirely sure he was going to be able to reach him until it flared out.

“Cass,” he pleaded, beads of sweat running down his temples as his shield fractured more. He could feel the intense heat of those black flames. “Cass,” he rasped again, his eyes screwing shut as he braced to feel the pain of the burns that were sure to come.

His shield buckled completely, but it wasn’t the heat of flame on his skin he felt. It was the heat of lips on his, fierce and insistent, and forcing his mouth open. Hands framed his face, holding him in place, and Cyrus gripped the back of Cassius’s neck, tugging him closer as their tongues met. He’d kissed others since Thia’s death, had taken a few Fae to bed a handful of times, but it had never meant anything. No kiss had made him *feel* since Thia.

But he felt this one. Felt the desperation in it, of a male who was trying to ground himself. Felt the glide of his tongue against his as they fought for dominance, Cassius fighting to gain back a shred of the control he'd lost. Felt the rumble of his chest when Cassius growled low, the sound vibrating through him where Cassius still straddled him in the dirt of the arena.

He felt it all. It was as intoxicating as it was terrifying. And as the fingers of his other hand dug into Cassius's side where he gripped him, he suddenly realized Cassius had been right. He wasn't sure he was ready for this. To *feel* something like this again. Because they were about to head into war, and neither of them were guaranteed to survive.

But he was just as equally sure it would kill him to never kiss him like this again.

Cassius's hands slipped from his face, palms flat in the dirt on either side of his head as he pulled back, but Cyrus kept his grip on his neck, not letting him move back very far. Amber-red eyes bore into his. The anger and violence still shone there, but something fractured and raw glimmered behind it too.

"Do not push that way again, Cyrus." His voice was gravel and just as raw as the look in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Cyrus said, squeezing the nape of his neck. "Cass, none of that is true. Him not coming to meet you? That is his loss. No one who knows you is indifferent to your existence. *I* am not indifferent to your existence."

The sound of a throat clearing had both of their heads jerking toward the sound to find Scarlett and Sorin, along with Razik. Cassius swore under his breath, Cyrus dropping his hand from the back of his neck.

Cassius got to his feet, reaching down a hand and yanking Cyrus up. Scarlett was studying them both, and Cyrus wasn't sure what she was thinking as she watched them approach. Sorin's gaze, however, was burning into him, and he couldn't bring himself to look at his best friend at the moment. By the gods, how long had they been here?

Scarlett opened her mouth, but before she could say a word, Cassius said shortly, “Don’t.”

Her lips pursed for a moment, then she said, “Did you fly?”

“What?” Cassius asked, his brow furrowing.

Scarlett jerked her chin. “Your wings. Did you fly?”

Cassius looked over his shoulder as though he’d forgotten about the dragon wings that had appeared. Although, to be fair, Cyrus had forgotten about them too, somewhere between the heat of his mouth and the taste of his tongue.

“No, I did not fly,” Cassius replied. “I just don’t know how to...put them away or whatever.”

Scarlett barked a laugh, inching closer, her eyes darting warily to Cyrus. “Put them away?”

“Is there a reason you are here, Darling?” Cyrus drawled.

“Maybe I came to supervise your training sessions the way you used to supervise mine,” she mused, slinking to Cassius’s side and lifting a hand toward one of his dark wings. “May I?”

Cyrus bristled at her teasing jab, because, yeah, he was more than interested in how that would have played out if they hadn’t been interrupted. Gods, he had been a real prick to Sorin, hadn’t he? Getting in his way all the damn time.

“So you can isolate the shift from the flames?” Razik asked, his arms folded across his chest.

“No,” Cassius said from between gritted teeth, Scarlett’s finger lightly tracing the edge of a wing. “It seems like it’s all or nothing.”

“You came up here and accessed your full well of power? You are fools,” Razik said. “You could have killed him.”

“Burned me maybe, but my own magic is fire,” Cyrus retorted.

Razik snorted in amusement. “Your fire would do nothing in the face of dragon fire. The only thing stronger is starfire.”

“Dragon fire?” Cassius asked.

“The flames,” Razik said, lifting a palm and black flames flared. The heat was intense. Cyrus could feel it from where he stood a few feet away from him. “Surely you figured out that is what it is?”

“How did you know we were here again?” Cyrus asked, ignoring Razik, but he was the one to speak again.

“I thought you understood you were being watched?”

“She is still following us around?” Cyrus asked.

“I guess so,” Scarlett supplied. “You should try flying. I’ll go with you on my shadow dragon.”

“No,” Sorin said, stepping forward. “We did come here for a reason.”

“Oh yes, that,” Scarlett said with a dramatic sigh, followed by a sympathetic look at Cassius. “Commander Tybalt has returned.”

Cyrus was fairly sure Cassius stopped breathing.

“My—*your*—father is hoping to meet you,” Razik said.

“When?” Cassius ground out.

“Now.”

“Now?” Cyrus repeated. “He shows up and assumes Cassius will drop whatever he is doing and go meet him?”

“Well, naturally, we assumed you two were training up here. Not that he was doing y—” Razik started.

“I’ll go,” Cassius said, Scarlett drawing her hand back at the sharp cut of his words. “Where does he want to meet?”

“He is at the castle. There will be more privacy there,” Razik said.

Cassius looked down at Scarlett. “You will come?”

“Of course I’ll go with,” she replied, a sad smile pulling on her lips.

“It does not need to be a godsdamn spectacle,” Razik muttered.

“It won’t be,” Cassius replied, reaching out and grabbing Scarlett’s hand. “Just me and Scarlett.”

Scarlett tried to keep the surprise from her face, but Cyrus saw it before she was able to get her features under control. He felt it too.

Cassius was asking her to go with him. Her, not him. It shouldn’t affect him like it did. Those two were close, had been there for each other their entire lives. Best friends. Soulmates. Ward and Guardian.

“Let’s go then,” Razik said at the same time that Sorin stepped forward.

“No,” Scarlett said, holding up a palm and stopping both males with that single action. “You don’t get to come because you’re a prick,” she said, pointing at Razik. Her finger moved to Sorin. “And you, I’ll be with my Guardian. You and Cyrus can pace the halls in unwarranted, overprotective worry together.”

With that, she was gone, Cassius with her.

Razik muttered a curse before turning to them. “You two staying up here, or are you ready to go?”

Not having another way back to the estate, Cyrus grabbed his tunic and Cassius’s, along with the twin swords, before Razik Traveled them all back. He immediately went down a hall, disappearing behind a door and leaving Cyrus and Sorin alone in the front foyer.

“How did it go with Beatrix?” Cyrus asked, his hands still full.

“It didn’t. We could not find her. But I am currently more interested in how training was going,” Sorin said, reaching to take the swords from his hands.

“He summoned wings and fire, so I would say it went well,” he answered, moving towards the stairs.

“Cyrus,” Sorin called after him. He fell into step beside him as Cyrus made his way up the staircase.

“It’s not your business, Sorin. And even if it were, it’s not something I wish to discuss right now,” Cyrus said. He saw Sorin pause out of the corner of his eye, but the Fire Prince didn’t say anything else. Just continued silently up to their rooms at the end of the hall.

When Cyrus reached for his door handle though, Sorin said, “He will be good for you, Cyrus. After everything you have had to endure, you deserve happiness. You deserve someone like Cassius.”

Cyrus’s hand was frozen on the handle, and he said nothing in response, just pushed through into his room, closing the door behind him. He tossed the tunics into the corner, crossing straight to the alcohol on the dresser and pouring a measure of liquor before knocking it all back in one shot.

He will be good for you.

He already was. He might not sleep at night, but the nights were at least bearable again with Cassius here, even if all they did was drink and play cards. There was no doubting that Cassius would be good for him.

But would *he* be good for Cassius?

He’d pushed him too far today, hurt him in an attempt to get his power to appear. Sure, it had worked, but it had been too much. It was no wonder he had asked Scarlett to go with him instead.

You deserve someone like Cassius.

The last time he’d decided he was deserving of someone, the Fates had snatched her away.

A sardonic, flat smile pulled at his mouth as he poured another measure of alcohol, glancing down at his left hand where a Mark had once stood out starkly against his skin. Here he sat, alone in his room again. Feeling everything. Feeling too much. Feeling...

Just feeling.

And maybe he wasn't ready for this, just like Cassius had said.

Because all he was feeling right now was pain and grief and sorrow that he worked so godsdamn hard to keep locked away, as if that's what the Fates had found him so *deserving* of.

There was a knock on the door before it opened without invitation, and Sorin came in, shutting the door behind him. He'd changed into more casual clothing and had lost his boots, barefoot now. He moved to the dresser, pouring himself some liquor, before tossing some silver and gold marks onto the small table beneath the window where cards were still scattered from last night. Dropping into the chair, he began to gather cards.

"What are you doing?" Cyrus finally asked.

"Shuffling cards."

Cyrus's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"I need a distraction from my wife meeting someone I have never met and know nothing about. I have a best friend who is lost inside his own head at the moment, likely believing things that are not true. And I have a purse full of coins that I intend to double after I hand you your ass in cards," Sorin answered, beginning to deal.

Cyrus walked stiffly to the table, sinking into a chair, fully expecting him to try to talk about things more. Sorin was a fixer. He problem solved, always looking for the way everyone could win and everyone would be happy. It was part of what made him an excellent prince.

But it made him annoying as fuck when a person just needed a minute to breathe and think and—

"I also have these," Sorin said. There was a burst of flame on the tabletop. When the fire receded, two rolls of mugweed sat there.

"No shit," Cyrus said, a true grin spreading across his face as he reached for one. "Don't we have important meetings or something later today?"

Sorin shrugged, snatching up the other one and lighting it with a flame from his fingertip. "I'll be fine for dinner."

Cyrus lit his own before picking up his cards and scanning the hand he'd been dealt.

Maybe that hand wasn't as bad as he'd thought.

CHAPTER 29

SCARLETT

Scarlett stepped from the air with Cassius beneath the largest arch of the castle. She knew where Tybalt was waiting, but she hadn't been expecting to be the one to accompany Cassius here. Not with how close he and Cyrus had been getting, and certainly not when they'd arrived at the arena to find the two with their lips locked together.

"Cass?" she asked tentatively. "Are you sure you want me here with you?" *Instead of Cyrus*. She didn't add it, but he would know that was what she was asking.

"I did not mean to kiss him," Cassius said, looking past her out at the ravine that separated the castle from the other side. "My magic was just so...out of control, and I knew if I didn't, I would hurt him, and gods..." He met her gaze, his eyes still red, and pupils vertical. He still had his wings. They'd felt leathery and were almost iridescent when the sun hit them just right. "I would not be able to live with myself if that happened."

"Oh, Cass," she said, looping her arm around his and resting her head against his shoulder. "It is okay to want something for yourself. You do not have to justify—"

"I do need to justify it, Scarlett," he said. "He is working through his own shit, and instead of giving him the time and space to do that, I..."

"Listened to him? Was there for him in his darkness?"

"Scarlett," Cassius sighed. But before she could argue further, he said, "Let's get this over with."

“Yeah, all right,” she said, unwinding her arm and taking a step back from him. She was looking forward to this as much as he was. Commander Tybalt hadn’t known of Cassius’s existence until a few months ago, so fine, she was willing to excuse him for not being there for Cass. But they had been here for five days, and he was only now seeking out his long-lost son?

Her own family discoveries had been pushed to the side after everything that had happened with Mikale. How he had trapped her in that dream, touched her, been about to do more when she’d heard Sorin calling for her, pulling her from that dream like he had a year ago. She’d spent the entire next day wrapped up in him, in their bond. She hadn’t cared about anything else. Not about her new brother, her parents, anything she’d learned lately. It had been just him and her and the calm that came from being in their own little world.

They’d talked some the next day, but more so about Sorin’s waning power levels and what they were going to do about it. Sorin had told her all about how Cethin had dreamwalked beyond the Veil, begging Serafina for help. Then he had told her what the cost of coming back likely was.

They had been sitting on the sofa in their sitting room, Scarlett wrapped tight in a blanket as she’d listened to him. His face had fallen into his hands, and it was perhaps the first time Scarlett had ever seen him so vulnerable. She’d unwound the blanket from herself and crawled into his lap, straddling his hips, and taken his face in her hands. Tears had glimmered in his eyes, and she’d leaned in, brushing her lips against his.

“I am so sorry, Love,” he’d whispered against them.

“Sorry for what?”

“I promised you there would always be a you and me.”

“Are you planning on leaving me?” Her head had tilted, a kiss landing on one corner of his mouth.

“Of course not.”

“So there will still be a you and me, even if we do not find an answer.”

“Scarlett, I will not have any magic. You will not be able to take another Source as long as I live.”

“But you will live, Sorin,” she’d interrupted, hands sliding into his dark hair and tilting his head back even more so she could look down at him. “If that is the cost of having you here with me, then we will pay it. I am not in love with you because of your power. I do not love you because a bond requires it of me. I love you because you saved me from myself, Sorin. I love you because you pull me from the river when all I want to do is drown. I love you because you came for me, and I will always come for you. I love you all the way through our darkness, even if you cannot light it up with your fire any longer.”

There hadn’t been much more talking after that.

“Fuck it. I can’t figure out how to make them go away,” Cassius muttered, turning to stride up the steps. Scarlett hadn’t realized he’d been trying to banish his wings.

She snapped out a hand, catching his and pulling him to a stop. She moved up a few steps so she was eye level with him. “Close your eyes. Deep, even breaths.”

“Cyrus tried this,” Cassius said, closing his eyes anyway. “It did not work.”

“Because you have control issues,” she chided.

“*I* have control issues? Look in the mirror, Seastar,” he said, his eyes opening back up.

“We both have control issues,” she amended. “It was ingrained in us to always be in control. Alaric made sure of that. But your control and my control are very different. You like to be in control of yourself to make sure everyone else is safe and taken care of. I like to be in control of myself to make sure *I* do not make everyone else unsafe with my daggers. There’s a difference.”

“By the gods,” Cassius muttered.

“Stop speaking and close your eyes,” she commanded again.

Cassius sighed but did as she ordered, glowing eyes falling closed once more.

“Focus on your breathing. Your magic is as much a part of you as your arm, your leg. You control it just as much as you control your body, but it works best when you let it do what it was made to do,” she said, her voice soothing and coaxing. Her gaze was fixed on his wings, knowing how much it was going to bother him if he had to meet his father with them still visible. “Picture them gone, and see it in your mind. When that fills your vision, reach out and take it.”

It took several minutes after she fell silent to give him time to concentrate, but eventually those wings disappeared. There one moment, gone the next, as if they’d never been there at all. When he opened his eyes, the glow had dimmed, the color and pupil returning to normal. He pulled his patch from his pocket, and suddenly appeared to realize he was still shirtless.

He sighed in resignation, sliding the patch on and grabbing her hand, led her up the steps and into the castle. She took over then, taking him to a small sitting room near the back that looked out at the Nightmist Mountains. She pushed open one of the double doors, stepping through to find Cethin near a window, speaking with another male.

They both looked up when they entered, but her eyes were on the other male. He was tall and had the same brown hair that Cassius and Razik had but shorter, and his eyes were the same warm, chocolate brown as Cassius’s. He was broad and muscled and appeared no older than Cethin, which suddenly had her wondering if Cassius would go through a Staying like she would or if he would age but slowly like the Witches.

She snuck a glance at Cassius to find his features cold and impassive, his eye fixed on his father.

“Scarlett,” Cethin said, moving towards her. “This is Commander Tybalt Greybane. Tybalt, my sister, Scarlett Aditya.”

“Princess,” Tybalt said, his head bowing. His voice was deep and gruff, and Cassius’s hand tightened around hers. The first time he had heard his father speak.

“Queen,” she returned brightly, her smile wide and sharp. “Queen of the Western Fae Courts, and this is my Hand-to-the-Queen and Guardian, Cassius Redding.”

“Cassius,” Tybalt repeated, a look of awe settling over his features. He took a step towards them and seemed to falter. “I did not know. I did not know until Ranvir sensed you.”

“That’s what she said,” Cassius said tightly.

“I would have come for you. I would have found a way. I would have...” He trailed off, staring at Cassius as though he were afraid to blink, afraid he would disappear from his sight.

He did not look like a male who was indifferent about his son. He looked like a male full of regret at not knowing. He looked like a male who was beating himself up over something he had no control over. She knew that look on his face because she had seen it on Cassius’s so many times.

When Cassius didn’t say anything, Tybalt cleared his throat. “I wanted to be here when you arrived. I am sorry I was not.”

“You could not find a way to be here, but you think you would have found a way to get to me across the sea?” Cassius asked coldly.

Tybalt looked taken aback by the comment, but quickly schooled his features, and Scarlett couldn’t help but feel sorry for the male. She knew Cassius’s defenses were up, especially after Hazel, but this all felt so different from that.

“You are a Guardian. You know that when your Ward needs you, you cannot fight that call,” Tybalt replied, his shoulders squaring.

“But Razik said you were with Saylah,” Scarlett said, wincing at intruding on the moment.

Tybalt’s gaze cut to her. “I was.”

“You are *her* Guardian? She is a goddess.”

“I am well aware of what she is,” Tybalt said, irritation flickering in his eyes. “I am also well aware that she gave you two the Guardian bond all those years ago.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Scarlett asked.

“Because that means your mother knew of my existence, and, if he is to be believed, did not tell him,” Cassius answered.

Tybalt nodded slowly, his eyes back on his son.

It took everything in Scarlett not to ask the male about her, about how to go and see her. She had questions of her own that needed answering, but this was not her time. It was Cassius’s. She squeezed his hand again, willing to do whatever he needed from her right now.

“Are you Avonleyan then?” Cassius asked.

“No,” Tybalt answered, clasping his hands behind his back. “My mother was mortal, but my father is Sargon.”

“So you are a demigod?” Scarlett asked.

“I am.”

“How did you meet the High Witch?” Cassius asked.

Tybalt blinked at the question before he gestured to some armchairs before a hearth. “That is quite a tale. Can we sit?”

Cassius released her hand, letting her move to a chair first before slowly lowering into one beside her. Tybalt took one directly across from him, while Cethin remained standing near the window.

“When the Wards went up, I was on your continent. We were trying to get all of our people back home safely, but we ran out of time. I still had warriors in a few territories, including the Witch Kingdom. One of them was a male, and you know how the Witches can be about males,” Tybalt said, his eyes rolling slightly as if annoyed. “They get that from the goddesses their powers come from. They never once took a male as a lover.”

“Wait,” Scarlett interjected, tossing Cassius an apologetic look. “The Witches’ gifts came from the Sorceress.”

“Who is a descendant of one of those goddesses,” Tybalt agreed. “The High Witch at that time was no different. She had

detained my warrior. I offered myself in exchange.”

“You became a prisoner so that one of your men could be free?” Cassius asked, his grip on the arms of his chair slackening some.

“Of course I did. What honor is there in abandoning your own warriors?” Tybalt answered, and from the fierceness in his tone, Scarlett knew he believed that wholeheartedly. “I was a captive there for centuries, but they made good use of me. Made me train their covens. How do you think they became so skilled and ruthless? One of the High Witch’s daughters was particularly dedicated. She was always early to training and stayed far later than the others. Her sister wasn’t as skilled and was always annoyed when she would stay late.”

“Hazel,” Scarlett said softly.

Tybalt nodded, clear fondness crossing his features. “She was fierce and strong. She was a warrior through and through. If I had not known she was a Witch, I would have sworn she was a descendant of Sargon. It was she and I that figured out how to catch and harness the griffins they now ride. All under the guise of imprisonment, of course. But when she became the High Witch after her mother Faded, I was no longer a prisoner. Just her secret.”

“What happened?” Cassius asked.

“I am bound to Saylah. My Guardian Bond still supersedes all else other than a twin flame bond, and Hazel and I were not that. We were just two warrior souls who found each other on this side of the Veil. Ranvir came for me, delivered a message that they had found a way to get me back inside the Wards. I had to go, but it killed me to leave her.” Tybalt’s gaze darted to the darkened hearth. “I suppose after me, she went back to believing males were useless, only ever wanting one thing. That they become a weakness to be exploited.” He looked back at Cassius. “There was no way for her to tell me of you, but if she could have, I am not entirely sure that she would have done so. The Witches are spiteful enough that she would punish me with such a thing, but I would like to think she is still different from the rest.”

Cassius stared back at his father, and Scarlett was inclined to do the same, even though she had a million questions swirling in her mind. She glanced at her brother who had been silent this entire time. His attention remained fixed out the window.

Tybalt shifted in his seat. “I understand you learned who I was and who Razik is in a way I did not intend, and for that, I apologize. It was never my intention to keep information from you. I assumed you would have questions, and after all this time... Perhaps it is selfish of me, but I wanted to be the one to answer them, to tell you your history. And Razik can be rather difficult at times.”

Scarlett snorted. “At times?”

A small smile tilted up on Tybalt’s lips. “Point taken, your Majesty. However, I would be remiss not to come to his defense. Razik has faced his own trials and hardships. We were separated for centuries when I was trapped beyond the Wards, and his mother and father sacrificed much, including being here to raise him. He has not had an easy life, as I am sure yours was not.”

The pained expression on the male’s face as his attention settled back on Cassius had Scarlett falling back into her chair. He was not what she had expected at all. She had expected a male as arrogant and stand-offish as Razik was. A harsh Commander like Lord Tyndell had always been to everyone aside from her and Tava. A male who did not care that he’d sired a son across the sea. But Tybalt... He seemed to truly care.

“I will answer any questions you have,” Tybalt was saying. “As best I can anyway, but I am hoping to also hear tales of your own.”

“The only good memories I have involve the woman—sorry, female—sitting next to me, and very few of those memories are happy ones,” Cassius said.

“Anything you are willing to share, I want to hear,” Tybalt answered. “I understand there is a dinner happening in a few hours, but I will be home for the foreseeable future. I will be

around the estate, and I do not wish to have to avoid my son for the sake of avoiding awkwardness. I will, however, do as you wish and will understand if you wish to relocate to the castle or another manor.”

“You want us out?” Cassius asked.

“By the gods, no,” Tybalt said, bolting forward in his chair. “That estate is your home, Cassius. You will always have a room there. I told Magdalena to prepare a suite for you in the private wing the moment Ranvir reported of you to me. All I am saying is if you need time, I understand. I do not want to do anything to make you unduly uncomfortable.”

“Scarlett, can I show you more of the castle?” Cethin asked suddenly. “This is, after all, your home, just as the estate is his.”

“Oh, I...” She bit her bottom lip, looking at Cassius. She didn’t want to leave him. She was here for him, but he already looked far more relaxed than he ever was when Hazel was around.

“It is fine, Seastar,” Cassius said. “I think...this will be fine.”

“If you need me—” She paused as she got to her feet. “Actually, I do not know how you would send a message.”

“The same way your husband does,” Tybalt said with a smile a moment before there was a burst of dark flames near her head.

She reached up, plucking the parchment from the center and opening it to read:

Thank you.

She smiled softly, nodding once. Squeezing Cassius’s shoulder as she passed, she followed Cethin from the room.

As her brother pulled the door closed quietly behind them, he asked, “Is Sorin going to be upset that you are with me by yourself?”

“Probably,” Scarlett said with a shrug. “He will get over it.”

Cethin shook his head, guiding her to a set of stairs. “I feel conflicted at the moment, wanting this time with you while simultaneously understanding how he is going to feel when he learns of this.”

“Because you are just as much of an overbearing ass?”

“Says the female who was literally going to burn the world to ashes when her mate had a foot beyond the Veil,” Cethin said, a teasing note to his voice. “You are as overbearing and possessive as we are, Starfire.”

“I am not,” she scoffed, but yeah, she could see that she supposed. “Where are we going?” she asked when he motioned down a long corridor.

“I thought I would show you your chambers. Should you ever wish to stay here,” Cethin said.

He stopped at the end of the corridor in front of two large double doors. The wood was etched with silver stars and flames. “The entire floor above this is the king’s private floor, but this entire wing is for the princess.”

He pushed the doors open, and Scarlett stepped in and stilled, her mouth falling open. This was a receiving room, beautifully decorated in soft greys and a blue so dark it was nearly black. Silver accents were scattered throughout and when she moved beyond into the sitting room, it was all warmth and comfort and casual ease. Elegant and somehow simple all at the same time. Two sofas faced each other in front of a hearth, a set of four armchairs off to a side with a low table between them. Through another doorway she glimpsed a dining table.

“This is stunning,” she said, finally finding her voice as she moved further into the room.

“The staff did excellent work,” he agreed. “I do not know you well, so I had to guess on what you would prefer.”

“It is wonderful, Cethin,” she assured him, moving over to a bookshelf to look at the titles.

“There is a small washroom off this room,” he said, then pointed through a doorway in the back. “There are two bedrooms and a bathing room down that small hallway along with the master chambers and a private bath at the end.”

He was quiet, letting her explore the space, and when she came back out from the bedrooms, he was lounging in an armchair. He stood when she entered the sitting room. “Anything you would like changed or added?”

“No, Cethin,” she said with a huff of disbelief. “It is beautiful and perfect and completely unnecessary.”

“Of course it was necessary. You are the princess of this kingdom,” he replied. “I do not know if you and Sorin have discussed your plans for when this is all over, but as Tybalt said to Cassius, you will always have a place here.”

“We have not discussed the future much,” Scarlett admitted. “There are so many pressing things in the present that have demanded our attention. Surviving this war. Sorin’s gifts. What to do about everything we have learned.”

She sank into one of the grey armchairs, Cethin lowering back to his. “How do you feel about everything you have learned?”

Scarlett propped her head on her hand. “I have answers, but so many more questions,” she admitted. “Thank you for not throwing it all at me at once. For letting me ask and process at my own pace.”

“I will tell you now I will not be able to answer all of your questions,” Cethin said. “Saylah may be our mother, but she is still a goddess. She can be as uncaring and cold as the rest of them, even if she does love us in her own way.”

“That is not even remotely comforting.”

“I was not trying to comfort you. I was being upfront and honest. Qualities I know you value,” he replied, his posture mirroring hers.

“I do,” she agreed. “I have had enough secrets about myself kept from me.”

“From my understanding, that was to protect you, despite my efforts to convince her otherwise when I learned of you.”

“You can visit her?” Scarlett asked, sitting up straighter.

“Not whenever I wish. Twice a year. When she can fill my reserves,” Cethin said. “The last time I saw her was right before you became bonded with Shirina. It took much of my magic to stay with you that long and see that through. Although she did exhaust herself by lending me more to go bargain with Serafina and Arius on her behalf. Without her, he would not be here, Scarlett. Remember that when you do finally get the answers you seek from her.”

“And when will that be?”

“When her reserves have refilled enough.”

“Vague as usual.”

Cethin winced slightly. “Not intentionally. I swear, Scarlett.”

She hummed in response, her eyes falling to the thread she was twirling between her thumb and forefinger. “Why haven’t I seen Shirina since coming here? I haven’t seen any of the spirit animals since Altaria.”

“They rest and prepare for war like the rest of us,” Cethin answered.

“They will fight with us?”

“As much as they can, yes. But they are separated from their true bonds and thus are weakened.”

“The gods and goddesses?”

“Yes, they became trapped here when the Wards went up. The Sorceress’s doing,” Cethin explained.

“Other than Saylah, you mean?”

A sad smile formed on Cethin’s lips. “Saylah severed her bond with Shirina to make sure you could be bonded to her, to help protect you.”

Scarlett felt the shock of that statement ripple through her. “Why would she do that?”

“Whatever else you may learn while here, remember that she does care, Starfire. In her own way, our mother still seeks to protect us, no matter the cost.”



It was an hour before dinner when Scarlett and Cassius were walking down the hall back at the estate, each weighed down with their own thoughts after more family time than either of them had ever experienced in their lives. They each went to their own doors, but they both paused when they heard laughter coming from Cyrus’s room. Sorin’s laugh to be exact.

“What the...?” she murmured, abandoning her door and moving to Cyrus’s, Cassius right behind her.

She didn’t bother knocking, pushing the door open to find Sorin and Cassius seated at the small table along the wall. Silver and gold marks were scattered across the table, playing cards forgotten in a pile on the floor.

“Hey, Love,” Sorin said, a huge grin on his face. “You look pretty.”

Her brow furrowed. “What is wrong with you?”

Cyrus laughed, raising a glass to her in a cheers motion. “He likes you. What is he supposed to say?”

She had nothing to say because she had no idea what was going on here.

Cassius, however, seemed to have a pretty good idea.

“Did you take my mugweed?”

Cyrus sat up a little straighter. “Do you have some you’ve been keeping from me?”

“You know I have some for my leg when it gets too bad,” Cassius said, his eye narrowing.

“Mugweed,” Scarlett repeated. “Like the plant people smoke?”

Cassius nodded, eyeing the males warily.

“Sorin!” she admonished, whirling back to face him. “We have dinner in an hour. With my brother and our Court and everyone else, and you two are...” She waved a hand at their current state, words failing her.

“We’re relaxed and fine, Darling,” Cyrus drawled lazily.

“This is all your doing.” She glared angrily at the Fire Court Second.

Cyrus just laughed. “It’s not though. *He* brought it to me.”

“I did,” Sorin said matter-of-factly.

And Scarlett didn’t know what to do or think. Sorin Aditya, responsible and steadfast Prince of the Fire Court, sitting here high on mugweed before dinner with a foreign kingdom.

For the love of Arius, Sorin, she sighed down the bond.

“Did you tell her about the Tyndells?” Cyrus asked.

“What about them?” she demanded, turning to Cassius.

Cassius pushed out an exasperated breath. “We went to the castle library earlier today, and we found a book of mortal bloodlines. There is a picture in there of the last Queen of Rydeon. She looks like Tava and Drake’s mother.”

“She *is* their mother,” Cyrus cut in.

“She cannot be,” Cassius gritted out.

“You went to a library without me?” Scarlett asked in outrage.

“I just told you that Drake and Tava are likely related to Rydeon royalty, and *that* is the first thing you say?” Cassius asked in disbelief. “Are you sure *you* didn’t smoke any mugweed while you were off with Cethin?”

“What?” Sorin demanded, pushing to his feet, his eyes instantly darkening. “You were with him by yourself?”

Scarlett glared up at Cassius. “Yes, Sorin,” she answered. “Cassius needed some time alone with his daddy.”

“Fuck off,” Cassius snapped.

“You deserve it for telling him that,” Scarlett retorted.

“Wait. You left Cassius alone with his father that he just met? What the fuck, Scarlett?” Cyrus barked, now on his feet and glowering down at her.

“Oh my gods,” she moaned, dragging a hand down her face. She turned back to Cassius. “This is your fault.”

“Can we focus on what is actually important here?” Cassius asked.

“Which is what? The fact that Sorin and Cyrus are apparently smoking mugweed while we were being emotionally pummeled?”

Sorin’s brows knitted together, worry creeping across his features. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” she snapped.

“Psh,” Cyrus said, waving him off. “She’s just mad we didn’t save any mugweed for her.”

“Of course I am upset about that,” Scarlett said. “But that is not the point here.”

“No,” Cassius said, his voice rising to be heard over the squabbling. “The point is that Drake is likely the heir to the Rydeon Kingdom, even if Queen Octavia was his aunt. They are likely the closest living relatives of King Dalton.”

“That is not the—” She grabbed Cassius’s forearm, gripping tightly, her nails digging in. “Drake is the rightful heir to the Rydeon throne?”

“We cannot know for certain, but it would seem that way,” Cassius said slowly. “If, by some chance of the Fates, they are direct descendants of Dalton and Octavia, he would be the

prince. If Octavia is of another relation, most likely an aunt, he would still likely be the next in line.”

“Callan in Windonelle. Hale in Toreall. Drake in Rydeon,” she breathed. “A mortal king for each of the mortal thrones.”

“Yes. I suppose that would be the case,” Cassius said.

She turned back to Cyrus, a grin spreading across her face. “Darling, I expect a very nice summer solstice gift for what I am about to give you.”

“Darling, your twin flame is right here,” Cyrus said slyly with a wink.

Sorin immediately reached out and punched him in the arm. “Jackass.”

Scarlett snapped her fingers twice in their faces. “Can you two focus for two seconds?”

“Literally no,” Cyrus answered. “Why do you think the cards are on the floor?”

She gave a frustrated growl, turning to leave the room. Before she left, she looked over her shoulder and said, “Fine. When I go to take down the wards around the mortal lands, you two can stay here and enjoy your mugweed.”

“What?” Cyrus said, his face falling slack at the same time that Sorin yelled, “Scarlett!”

She shut the door in their faces and looked up at Cassius. “You need to work with Razik and get that magic under control. We’re going to make a move against Alaric.”

“There is no way they are going to let you go without them,” Cassius replied, the door flying open behind them, Cyrus and Sorin practically falling out of the doorway. They were both demanding explanations, but she ignored them.

“Show me this book you found,” she said to Cassius, following him across the hall and into his room. Her shadows shoved Cyrus and Sorin back so she could shut the door, but not before she said, “Next time, save some for me, you pricks.”

CHAPTER 30

CALLAN

“I ’m going to win,” Scarlett announced, bouncing on her toes in the yard.

“Not everything is a competition, Love,” Sorin sighed, rubbing at his temples as if he had a headache.

“Don’t be stupid,” Eliza retorted. “Of course everything is a competition.”

“In that case, I am going to win,” Razik drawled lazily.

“I will do anything and everything in my power to make sure that is not the case,” Eliza spat back.

Razik’s gaze shifted to her, a half-grin forming that was sure to rile the general. “Anything?”

Callan choked on a laugh at the colorful words that came from Eliza’s mouth while Razik’s grin became a full one, a clear challenge alighting in his eyes.

“They are a riveting group,” Hale said from a few feet away, observing all the Fae and Avonleyans gathered about.

“I often marvel at the fact that they are the leaders of such powerful Courts and Kingdoms,” Callan said, watching Scarlett and Prince Azrael bicker about where the starting point should be.

They were all gathered at Hale Coventry’s estate around the huge hedge maze. Everyone outside of Rayner, who was with Tula, and Kailia, who was presumably watching Rayner. Hale had had the maze modified over the past few days, just as he’d said he would. It had been brought up at dinner this

evening, immediately intriguing the queen, and now here they all stood outside the maze as the sun was setting. At some point after they'd arrived, it had become a competition as to who would reach the center first.

"No magic," Cassius was saying. "That's an unfair advantage over the mortals."

"And those of us who cannot get airborne," Auberon agreed.

"There are four entrance points," Azrael said. "We draw to see who starts from which spot."

"Azzy, I did not know you were so competitive," Scarlett said, batting her lashes at him.

"Fae are naturally competitive," he retorted. "It is in our being."

"What is the prize for winning this thing?" Sawyer asked.

"It needs to be something good," Cyrus agreed. "Maybe a *super special mirror*."

Sawyer's eyes narrowed on the Second, and Callan had no idea what that was about.

"Do we really need something other than bragging rights?" Sorin asked.

"Yes!" rang out from so many people, Callan couldn't decipher who had all shouted the word.

A minute later, Azrael was walking towards them with what appeared to be stems in his fist. He held the bunch out to them. "A flower will bloom when you draw," he explained. "Whichever color blooms determines which entry point you use."

"Did they decide on a prize?" Drake asked, reaching out and taking a stem. A blue flower immediately opened at the end.

Azrael looked back at the group of Fae engaged in a heated discussion. "It appears that is still being discussed."

Callan took a stem, the flower blooming red, and Hale took the next, his blooming purple. Azrael extended the stems to Tava, who had quietly been standing next to her brother, but she held up a hand, taking a step back. “Thank you, but I think I will pass, Prince Azrael.”

Azrael shrugged, moving on to the others.

Hale turned to Tava. “You do not wish to see the maze?”

“It seems overwhelming, your Majesty,” she replied, her cheeks coloring as she looked at the ground.

“You may still call me Hale,” he said warmly.

“That was before I knew you were a king. I could not possibly,” she replied, her head shaking in refusal.

“You could. I insist,” Hale said. “I also insist you try the hedge maze. I swear to you, you will not get lost, especially with so many of us in the maze tonight. And now we are all on even footing.”

“I know that was my reasoning before, and I am sorry you went through all this trouble—”

“There is no trading flowers!” Scarlett cried, her voice carrying over to them. “That defeats the entire purpose of drawing them!”

“By the gods. This is madness,” Drake muttered.

“Yes,” Tava mused. “One would think centuries old beings would not be so...”

“Childish?” Callan supplied, as Scarlett and Cyrus began to squabble again.

A laugh bubbled from her lips. “Yes. I do believe that is the perfect word.”

She met his gaze for a moment before her eyes darted away again, but for that brief moment, the impending night hadn’t seemed so dark.

Hale was waving Azrael back over, two stems left in his fist. “Just take one,” he said to Tava. “If you change your mind, then you have it.”

“If you insist,” she said with a polite smile. She reached out, plucking one of the stems, and a purple flower immediately bloomed.

“There. See,” Hale said, nodding at the flower that matched his. “Now I can personally ensure you do not get left alone within the maze.” When she still looked hesitant, he teased, “You just sailed across the Edria Sea, and you are fearful of a maze? I thought you were more adventurous.”

If he only knew what kind of *adventures* the Lady got into back in Baylorin, he would not be teasing her. Sneaking out to the slums and getting them necessities in the dead of night. She might be pure light, but she wasn’t afraid of the dark by any means.

“I am not fearful of it,” she chided. “I simply wish to casually wander the maze, not partake in a competition to win...whatever the prize is.”

“A sword,” Commander Tybalt announced. He had been standing off to the side, observing the melee with amusement. Callan had met the Commander at dinner. He had been different from what he’d expected, warmer and more welcoming than his adopted son, but there was no doubt that if trouble found him, that calm exterior facade would shatter instantly. The fact that he was related to Razik, and apparently Cassius, only served to confirm that fact. He had never seen Razik use his magic, but he’d heard what Cassius had done during the battle with the seraphs, and he’d never accessed his magic before. He could only imagine what his father and cousin could do with centuries of training.

There was a burst of dark flames from which the Commander drew a sword, and it was a sword unlike Callan had ever seen. The blade was a deep shade of blue, the hilt silver with a sapphire the color of the blade embedded in it.

“What kind of material is that?” Sorin asked, stepping closer. All the magic-wielders were fixated on the weapon as if they were about to brawl over it here and now.

“Material not found here,” Tybalt replied, balancing the sword on both palms and holding it up for them to inspect. “It

was brought from another realm eons ago.” In a blink, the hilt was in his hand, and he slashed it through the air, black flames igniting down the blade.

“It is like the spirit sword,” Eliza said, jaw dropping open.

“It *is* a spirit sword,” Tybalt replied with a smile.

“How many are there?” Scarlett asked.

“What do you care? You already have one,” Cyrus said, eyeing the sword. “In fact, you should be disqualified. Who needs two spirit swords?”

“What? No!” Scarlett cried in outrage.

“He has a point,” Azrael cut in.

“I will show you *my* point,” Scarlett growled, shadows twisting into snakes at her feet.

“Love,” Sorin sighed, a hand coming to her back.

“Do not *Love* me,” she snapped, jerking away from him. “I’m still mad at you.”

Sorin tipped his head to the darkening sky as though he was asking the gods for patience.

“Whoever makes it to the center first wins the sword,” Tybalt said. “Seems fair and simple enough.”

“No magic. No Traveling or portals. Feet must remain on the ground at all times, which means no climbing the hedges to see from the top,” Cethin said, looking at Razik as if this had been an issue in the past. “With the Ash Riders absent, we do not need to set specific rules for them. Anyone have any objections or additional rules that need to be discussed?”

“I will patrol for anyone who tries to get creative,” Tybalt said. “Get organized at your starting points. I will place the sword and be back to signal the start.”

He disappeared a moment later. Scarlett threw a handful of white flames into the air, and they hovered above the maze, illuminating the area as the sky got darker. Azrael started directing towards starting points, calling out flower colors.

“What shall it be, Tava?” Hale asked, extending his elbow in her direction. “We do not need to throw our lot in for that sword. We can simply wander the maze. The longest I have ever been lost is three days, but I do not think that should be an issue with so many others inside.”

“Three days?” Tava gasped, a hand fluttering to her chest.

“I jest, Tava,” Hale said with a chuckle. “Tybalt will make sure none of us gets stranded within.”

Callan watched as she glanced quickly at Drake before linking her arm with his. “If you insist,” she said with a small laugh.

“Solgard.”

Callan turned at the sound of his name, finding Prince Azrael by the south entrance, a red flower in his hand. He sighed, moving in his direction as Tava and Hale disappeared around a corner. A moment later, there was a burst of black flame that signaled the start of the apparent race. Azrael, Cethin, and Sawyer took off at sprints into the maze, and Callan ventured in himself at a much slower pace.

He was so godsdamn tired. He was sleep deprived, unable to get more than an hour of sleep at any given moment before waking to memories of Finn and Sloan. They weren't even always memories of their deaths. Just memories of training together. Their friendship. The normalcy it all once was.

Or memories of his parents. Of time spent at one of their private estates, just their family and personal guards. Of his mother telling him stories when he was younger. Of his father taking him riding and teaching him to hunt.

Of Alaric slitting their throats.

All these years spent preparing him to take the throne, but no one ever prepared him for this. He'd been taught how to strategize and plan for battles. He'd been taught proper manners and the history of his kingdom. He'd been taught politics and the art of negotiation. He'd been taught numerous dances and artful fencing and what type of nobility would

make a partner suitable enough to be queen. Why hadn't anyone taught him how to deal with this?

Why hadn't anyone taught him how to manage grief when your loved ones were murdered in front of your eyes? Why hadn't anyone prepared him for the possibility of having to raise his younger sister? Why hadn't anyone prepared him to make the hard call of staying and dying or abandoning your people to go get help? Why hadn't anyone prepared him for godsdamn real life?

A streak of silver hair raced past the intersecting paths he was coming up on, laughter tumbling from the queen's lips as she took a corner at speed.

And for the briefest of moments, Callan envied her and her upbringing.

How much of a mess had his life become that he was envying being raised by an Assassin Lord, taught to take and kill, instead of being raised in the comfort of a castle?

He was so tired of all of it.

He'd been wandering around the maze for at least twenty minutes when voices carried to him. They must have been directly on the other side of the hedges.

"Have you traveled much among the continent?"

"No," Tava answered. "I rarely left Baylorin. My father was rather protective."

It was subtle, but Callan could hear the inflection in her voice when she said 'father' and 'protective.' As if the words were questions rather than part of her explanation.

"Going to the Black Halls was the first time I had ever left Windonelle," Tava continued.

"And here you are. Across the Edria Sea," Hale replied. "How are you liking Avonleya?"

"I have not seen much of it," Tava answered. "Other than the trip from the docks when we first arrived."

“Well, that will not do. You finally get a chance to see some of the world, and you are sequestered away to estates.”

“I suppose that is the nature of my position.”

Callan halted. He hadn't realized he'd been moving along beside them on this side of the hedges.

“It would be my pleasure to take you into Aimonway in the next day or two. Let you see some of the city,” Hale was saying, his voice getting farther away as they continued on.

“That sounds lovely,” Tava said. “As long as Lynnea is provided help in my absence.”

“You enjoy being with the children each day?”

“I do not mind it,” Tava answered. “It is a place where I can contribute and help. One less thing for the others to worry about. Or at least I hope that is the case.”

Callan hurried to catch back up to them as they moved farther down the path. He had been trying to spend at least a few hours at the Coventry Estate each day and helping where he could. But he was also training intensely with Eliza for a few hours every day, attending various meetings, and getting updates from the others. Tava, however, was normally there before the sun was up and stayed until she returned to get ready for dinner. Rarely did she attend any meetings anymore, and it never failed to bother Callan some. She should be there. She had insights that they tended to gloss over or not even see. She was just as valuable to those meetings as the rest of them.

“You seem close with Princess Eva,” Hale said.

“Perhaps too close,” Tava said. “Perhaps I have overstepped in that area, but I know what it is to grow up without a mother. I know what it is to have a father or brother trying their hardest but wishing you had a mother to talk to. I do not wish to replace her mother, and Callan is wonderful and is doing the best he can. I just...want her to know she has someone else.”

“And Callan?”

There was a pause in their conversation, and Callan found himself holding his breath.

“What of him?” Tava asked.

“Princess Eva seems to think you will marry him.”

Another pause, and gods, Callan wished he could see her face. He would know where to look, what little tells to watch for as she answered.

“I can understand why she would think that,” Tava said slowly. “It is all quite complicated for something that should, to be frank, be so simple.”

“That can be said of many things in life,” Hale replied.

“Indeed it can.”

Their voices trailed off as they continued on whatever path they were wandering. Callan, however, found himself at a dead end, unable to follow, and wasn't that godsdamn poetic?



“Are you sure she didn't cheat?” Razik grumbled, his eyes fixed on Eliza as she slashed the spirit sword she had won through the air, her orange flames swirling around the blade and arcing with the swing.

“You know she didn't, Razik,” Commander Tybalt said sternly, eyes narrowed on his nephew.

“You are just upset she beat you to it by mere seconds,” Cethin said with a dark chuckle, slapping Razik on the back as he made his way over to the Fae princes.

They had all eventually found their way to the center, which housed a large fountain with several benches surrounding it. Callan had been sure he would be the last to arrive, immediately spotting Hale and Tava seated on a bench across the clearing when he found the center, but to his

surprise, it was Sorin and Scarlett. Who arrived together. Smirking like fools.

Apparently after Eliza made it known she had won the sword with her celebratory fire into the sky, the king and queen had found another prize to claim, ending whatever feud they'd been having.

Cassius was taking a turn with the sword, Cyrus standing nearby speaking with Auberon, but his eyes kept darting to the Queen's Hand. Razik stalked off towards them. He was about to turn and ask Drake if he was ready to go back to the other estate where they were staying, when Scarlett appeared at his side, making Callan nearly jump out of his skin. He hated when she did that.

"Drake, I was hoping to speak with you and Tava."

Drake's brows rose. "Sure. Of course."

"I know it is late. I meant to speak with you after dinner, but then the maze and well..." She was aimlessly braiding her hair as she spoke, and she shrugged as she trailed off. "I thought we could all use some fun amid the chaos."

"Let me get Tava," Drake said, looking for his sister.

"This cannot wait until morning?" Callan asked.

"You do not need to attend, Callan," she replied, tying off the end of her braid. "But I think this is something Drake and Tava would prefer to learn privately and not around a breakfast table or in a council room full of others."

Drake reappeared with Tava, curiosity sparking in her turquoise eyes. A little later, Scarlett was traveling a small group of them back to the estate and directly into the sitting room of her suite. She immediately bent down to remove her boots, Sorin snagging them and moving them to a spot beside the door. Cassius and Cyrus had joined them as well, and Callan's interest was more than peaked at this point.

They were all settling into armchairs and onto the sofas when Scarlett approached with a book in her hand. She perched on the arm of the chair Sorin had settled in, his arm instantly sliding around her waist.

“Before we start,” Cyrus said, “I just need to clarify. You agree with Cassius on this?”

Scarlett rolled her eyes. “For the hundredth time, Cyrus, yes. I agree with Cassius.”

Cyrus crossed his arms, a look of dismay on his face, but he didn’t say anything else. Scarlett’s attention shifted to the Tyndell children, who occupied a sofa to her right, while Callan was seated in another armchair. “This is going to be a shock for you two,” she said bluntly.

“At this point, I would expect nothing less,” Tava said, her feet tucked up under her as she leaned into her brother’s side.

“That is a fair point,” Scarlett agreed. “But this... Well, just look.”

She opened the book to a page she had marked with a piece of parchment and held it out to the siblings. Callan couldn’t see what they were looking at, but Drake went utterly still and Tava’s face drained of all color.

“What is this?” Tava whispered, her hands shaking as she reached for the book.

“A book of mortal bloodlines,” Scarlett said, her voice quiet and sympathetic.

“But why is this drawing in here?” Drake asked, sounding hoarse as Tava drew the book to them, placing it in their laps. The siblings both leaned over it, Tava’s finger tracing over something Callan could not see.

“That was the last Queen of Rydeon,” Sorin said. “Cyrus and Cassius found this book earlier today in the library. We believe she is of some relation to you, for obvious reasons.”

“Are you saying they are related to the Rydeon royal line?” Callan asked, moving to the edge of his chair to try to get a better look at the book.

“It would certainly appear that way,” Sorin answered.

“What was your mother’s name?” Cyrus asked.

Drake looked up while Tava continued to run her finger along the page. Drake was shaking his head, his lips pressed into a thin line, clear denial in his eyes. “No. There has to be some other explanation for this.”

“There might be,” Scarlett answered. “But as of right now, that does not appear to be the case.”

“What was her name?” Cassius asked again, more gently than Cyrus had.

“Octavia,” Tava whispered. “Our mother’s name was Octavia Tyndell.”

“That is not a coincidence,” Cyrus said, sitting back on the sofa, an arm spreading across the back behind Cassius.

“The last queen died before Tava was born,” Cassius said. The exasperation in his voice told Callan this had been discussed several times already.

“That we know of,” Cyrus countered.

“We thought she might have been a sister of your mother’s or some other close relation,” Scarlett said. “But if her name was Octavia...”

“This is not possible,” Drake said harshly. “Our mother died of a wasting disease shortly after Tava was born.”

“The Middell Family supposedly died of the same,” Tava said softly, her eyes glued to the book.

“The last Rydeon king had a son who also died when the queen died,” Drake retorted, and Callan was certain he had never heard him speak to Tava like that. “There was no Rydeon princess.”

“I do not see another reasonable explanation, Drake,” Tava said calmly, turning the page to read.

“Tava. There *is* another explanation,” he snapped.

Her eyes flashed up, connecting with her brother’s. “Are you telling me you know something of our mother I do not?”

“No, that is not what I am saying,” Drake said. “But if there is not another explanation, then you are— And I am—”

“Well,” Tava said, snapping the book shut and pushing to her bare feet. “I do believe the only person who could give us another explanation has been pretending to be our father for the last twenty-some odd years.”

“We can keep looking into it,” Sorin said. “We can speak with Cethin. See if he knows of any other records we can compare those to.”

“I would like to assist with that research,” she said, hugging the book to her chest.

“Of course you can, Tava,” Scarlett said gently.

“I need a moment. Excuse me, please.”

They all watched as she hurried from the room, Drake moving to follow, but Callan was already up and striding to the door. “I will go.”

“I do not think that is the best idea,” Drake said, reaching his side. His voice dropped low. The others shouldn’t have been able to hear him, but with their damn enhanced hearing, they would. “She told me of your conversation.”

That didn’t surprise Callan. The siblings were close, and who else did she really have here? She and Scarlett were friends, but Tava had said before they were not close, especially with Scarlett constantly being pulled into meetings or off risking her life.

“You are both reeling after some unsettling news,” Callan replied. “You are both upset. Let me go talk to her.”

“If she tells you to go...” Drake warned.

“I will do as she wishes,” Callan agreed.

Drake nodded once, and Callan slipped out the door before he changed his mind. He went down three doors, stopping at hers and knocking softly, hoping this is where she had gone. If she went anywhere else inside or outside the manor, it would take some time to track her down.

“Tava?”

There was movement on the other side that told him she was there, and a moment later the door opened a small amount. She still wore her dress, but her hair was down and flowing over her shoulders. Her face was flushed, and she had definitely been crying.

“May I come in?” he asked.

He thought she was going to argue, to tell him no, but then her shoulders curled inward and she pulled the door open, turning and retreating back into the room. It was the same layout as his, large and spacious. A sofa and armchairs before a hearth. A small table and chairs were along another wall. A door at the back leading to a bedchamber.

Tava moved to stand in front of the sofa, hugging herself tightly. “What can I do for you?”

Callan shoved all the awkwardness of what they had become aside before he could think about it, and in a few long strides, he was before her and pulling her into his chest. She stiffened for the briefest of moments before melting against him, her face burrowing into his tunic. He stroked her hair as he slowly lowered them onto the sofa, not saying anything. The book was lying open on the cushion beside them, a drawing of a woman who looked nearly identical to Tava staring back at him.

“This is incredibly embarrassing,” she murmured after several minutes, her words muffled as she spoke into his chest. She pushed back, wiping at her face. “I apologize.”

Callan blinked at her. “There is nothing to apologize for, Tava. Anyone would be feeling numerous things at learning what you did tonight.”

“Yes, well,” she started, smoothing her hands down the skirt of her dress. She cleared her throat. “This is inappropriate behavior for a Lady and even more inappropriate behavior for royalty, if that is indeed what I am.”

“I thought we agreed a long time ago that we were past such formalities?” He reached out to tuck her hair behind her

ear, but she leaned away from him, and his hand fell back to his side.

“That was before,” she said faintly. “Before everything changed in that throne room. Before our talk on the ship. I am not yours to worry about anymore.”

Callan swallowed thickly. “I know things between us are unknown right now, Tava, but that does not mean I do not care. That does not mean I will not be here if you need me.”

She reached for her throat, for an amulet that no longer sat there, before her hand fell back to her lap. “Do you know that when I sleep at night, I see you?” And, gods, the knife in his chest twisted in a little farther. “I see you on your knees as Alaric slowly drains the life from you. I know I should be haunted by the murders, by the violence that took your parents and Finn and Sloan, but I’m not.” Her voice broke in a small cry. “I do not sleep because I see you dying before me when I close my eyes, and you have not been here for any of that, Callan.”

She moved to stand, but Callan caught her hand, keeping her on the sofa. “I am sorry, Tava. I—”

“I am not seeking your apology,” she interrupted. “You are going through things just as horrific. More than horrific. I am not selfish enough to demand something of you when you are processing your own grief. I just cannot have an in-between, Callan. I cannot handle being able to depend on you for some things and not others. I cannot handle only having you when you allow me to.”

“Tava,” he breathed. “I did not know. I did not—”

“How could you know when you would not come around?” she asked, more tears spilling over. “And maybe I *am* selfish for wishing you would have come around more, but I waited. I told you I wouldn’t wait, but I had been. I waited, trying to give you space and time, trying to help with Eva, trying to do and be what you needed. But the waiting hurts, Callan. It hurts, and I wish I were strong enough to endure it. I wish we did not have to leave things the way we did on that ship, but it seemed like the fastest way to end the hurt.”

She was speaking so fast, nearly in hysterics, more and more tears coursing down her face. Her eyes were wide and full of the pain she was speaking of, and Callan had never seen her like this. He had seen her bright and full of light. He had seen her frustrated and irritated. He had seen her so upset she had thrown a teacup and shattered it against a wall. But he had never seen her so raw and inconsolable.

That entire conversation on that ship had new meaning, and he should have seen it then. He should have seen the double meanings in her words, what she was truly trying to tell him. Another failure to add to the list as of late.

But right now, he would not fail at this. He pulled her back into him, and when she tried to resist, he held her tighter, dragging her right into his lap. She settled against him, her entire body shaking with her sobs, and he was fairly certain this was the first time she had cried since that throne room. She'd held herself together, trying to be what everyone else needed her to be, trying to be what she thought *he* needed her to be.

He didn't know how long he held her until she fell asleep. What he did know as he stirred the next morning, Tava still in his arms on that sofa, was that it was the first night he had slept for longer than a few hours at a time.

The sound of movement had his eyes flying open to find Drake asleep in Tava's bed, and he had no idea when he had come into the room. Drake shifted in his sleep again before falling still once more, and Callan worked to keep his breathing slow and even, not wanting to wake Tava.

The book still lay open across the sofa, turned to the page of the drawing of Octavia Middell. The Tyndell siblings could try to deny it all they wanted, but as he stared at that picture, there was little doubt in Callan's mind that he was holding the Princess of Rydeon in his arms.

The real question was how had they gotten there, and why had Lord Tyndell saved them?

CHAPTER 31

TALWYN

A brax snorted a huff of dismay when she stepped from the air. It was the middle of the night, but it was the first time she had been able to get away from Tarek.

Someone was with her at all times now, likely Alaric's doing, she assumed. He hadn't drained power from her since the first time she had been brought to the Southern Islands, probably because he hadn't had to use his power. No need to top off something that wasn't being used regularly.

They had searched the jungle of this island for hours that day before Lord Tyndell had finally Traveled them all back to Baylorin. Talwyn hadn't been able to Travel back to the White Halls for nearly two days. It had been another two days before she'd had enough power to make it here, but she'd been pretending otherwise. She'd been pretending her power was taking far longer to refill, not leaving her bed and asking Tarek for help with stupid things she absolutely did not need help with.

There had been one time when Nuri had stayed with her while Tarek had gone to report to Alaric. The look Nuri had given her told Talwyn the Night Child knew she was putting on a show, but she had been the one to tell her to "play the game" so she was going to godsdamn play it.

She had seen the small opening in the cliffs the moment they had set foot on the island four days ago. She had seen the way the vines that covered it moved unnaturally along the cliff wall, just the smallest amount, in a breeze that did not seem to touch anything else. Ashtine would not be in the middle of a

godsdamn jungle. She would stay near the water where Abrax could help her escape if needed.

So she'd followed the others deep into the trees and swampy waters, looking for clues of this mysterious source of power, and played the game.

"I am here to help her," Talwyn said to the spirit animal, raising her palms placatingly. "I only want to help."

"Let her pass, Abrax."

The water horse stomped a hoof but moved to the side to reveal Ashtine standing barefoot in the rolling waves washing onto shore. She wore a pale blue, sleeveless gown that stopped at her ankles, and it was fitted enough to show the tiny bump that had formed at the bottom of her abdomen. Her long, silver hair flowed down her back, and in the moonlight, she looked like a goddess, even if she looked exhausted.

"Ashtine." That was all Talwyn could think to say at finally laying eyes on her friend, seeing she was truly all right.

The princess's head tilted. "I have no news, no insights, and the winds still do not speak to me. I still refuse to aid you unless you tell me what you require in the prison, and Nasima has not returned."

"I did not come for any of that," Talwyn said, taking a small step towards her.

"Those are the questions you have asked the last several times we have spoken. I simply desired to get them out of the way."

Ashtine turned away from her, moving among the water. Her fingers moved lightly at her sides, and the water danced below them. Siphoning off extra power, Talwyn realized. She was already feeling the effects of the small life growing inside of her.

"I came to help you," she said, and gods, did it sound pathetic coming from her mouth. Offering to help her when she was the reason Ashtine was doing this herself.

“You cannot help me,” Ashtine lilted, not bothering to look at her.

“I can,” Talwyn insisted. “I can...bring you clothing, food. I can come check in as often as I can. What do you need, Ashtine?”

This time, Ashtine did turn back to her, and Talwyn wished she hadn't. Her face was blank and eerie in the night, her sky-blue eyes narrowed on her. “What I need, Talwyn, you cannot give me. Please leave.”

“Are you eating enough? Have you been sick?” Talwyn asked instead, taking a few more steps towards her.

“Go home, Talwyn,” Ashtine replied, turning away from her once more.

“Please, Ashtine. Let me do something to help,” Talwyn all but begged.

Ashtine whirled back around, her gown swirling around her legs. “It is not required of me to give you some task to help assuage your guilt.”

Then one hand was on her stomach while her other covered her mouth, before she dropped to her knees and vomited into the water. Abrax moved closer, lowering his head and nuzzling at her shoulder, and Talwyn took the opportunity to move closer too.

She lowered to her knees in the waves, her pants soaking through instantly as she gathered Ashtine's long hair in a hand. Ashtine wiped at her mouth, two tears slowly rolling down her face.

“I am not here to assuage any guilt. I deserve to feel it for the rest of my days. I am not here to ask for forgiveness. I do not deserve such a thing. I am here to take care of you because Briar is not here. And while that is my fault, I would like to think I would be here either way, Ashtine,” Talwyn said, pulling a leather strip from her pocket and tying it around Ashtine's hair to keep it back.

Ashtine leaned her head against Talwyn's shoulder, both of her palms resting on her stomach. “I would like to think that

too,” she said hoarsely.

The two knelt in the water for a long stretch of time, the only sound the gentle roll of the waves.

“There are two,” Ashtine said quietly into the night.

“Two what?” Talwyn asked.

“Two babes.”

Talwyn twisted to see her face. “You are carrying twins?”

Ashtine nodded, moving to stand. Talwyn quickly got to her feet to help her up.

“I have to ask, Ashtine,” she said when they were both standing. “Does Briar have any idea?”

“No, and it must stay that way. If he knew, he would do whatever possible to return to my side.”

“But he would come here. Be with you. Be here for you. You know he would do everything in his power to keep you safe,” Talwyn argued.

“I do know this. As much as I desire his presence and comfort, he needs to be there right now. He needs to aid in this war,” Ashtine answered, and Talwyn could hear the pain in her voice.

“You are more important to him than this war.”

“I know this, Talwyn. I also know that these babes deserve to grow up in a world free of war and strife, but will likely be born into one full of those things all the same,” she replied. “But I will do what I can and sacrifice what I must to give them every chance at something different.”

Something twisted in Talwyn’s chest at her words. “You cannot do this on your own, Ashtine. One babe is hard enough, but two?”

“This conversation means nothing. We cannot reach them,” Ashtine said.

“But Abrax could.”

“Abrax does not leave me unprotected, and I would not ask him to.”

“If I find a way to reach him, do you want him to know?” Talwyn asked. When Ashtine did not immediately reply, she added tentatively, “He deserves to know, Ashtine. If something happens before you can tell him... He deserves to know.”

“Just because we deserve something does not mean it is handed to us,” Ashtine replied, turning and beginning to walk back up the beach towards the cliffs.

“I know that,” Talwyn retorted. She knew that all too well. She deserved to no longer be living, but the Fates wouldn’t simply hand her death. It was being drawn out, to make her suffer as long as possible before Scarlett came for her. She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. “They are looking for you, Ashtine. Alaric can sense power, and between you and the babes, he can apparently feel it from Baylorin at times. They think there is something powerful here they can use since they cannot reach Scarlett. I am doing what I can to keep them occupied, but Ashtine, you will need him.”

“And when that time comes, I trust the Fates will bring him to me,” Ashtine replied. She was at the base of the cliffs now, Abrax beside her. She reached out, laying a palm against the rocky side. Water swirled up around her, winds flowing from beneath her palm, and an archway appeared behind her. Before she disappeared into the darkness of the cliffs, she added, “But when that time comes, tell him to ask the Ash Riders how to find me.”



Ask the Ash Riders.

Talwyn only knew of Rayner. What if more than one was needed? She supposed she could spend time searching for another, if it would help Ashtine.

That was what consumed her thoughts as she stepped into her rooms at the White Halls. A quick glance at the bed found it empty, and she scanned the room for Tarek.

But a hand clamped around her throat first, a dagger poised at her side, digging in between her ribs.

“Foolish queen,” a voice hissed. “I thought you were going to play the game?”

Talwyn would never understand how she always knew where to be and when.

“I am playing the game,” Talwyn rasped out around the nails digging into her windpipe.

“Then you have lost.”

Nuri stepped back suddenly, hands dropping to her side, as Tarek appeared in the room. He was fully dressed despite it being the early morning hours before the sun had risen. He leaned against the doorframe, trying to appear relaxed and casual, but Talwyn could see the tenseness in his muscles.

“Talwyn. Where have you been?”

“I was unaware I answered to you,” she replied coldly, moving towards her closet. Her pants were still wet from kneeling in the surf on the beach.

“He felt your magic leave this continent,” Tarek said.

Talwyn paused the act of removing her boots. *Shit.*

“It is why one of his Wraiths is now waiting to help escort you to Baylorin.”

“Neither of you can Travel,” she said, resuming her movements. “I do not think either of you will be escorting me anywhere.”

“No. That is why I am here.”

That voice made her blood freeze.

“You know, Scarlett made me come collect her myself a few times.” Alaric appeared in the doorway of the dressing

room, trapping her inside it. “Her recovery times from those encounters varied.”

“Depending on how much power you drained from her,” Talwyn sneered, standing upright to face him.

An indulgent smile appeared on his face. “That did play a role. Did you wish to continue changing, or shall we go?”

Talwyn gritted her teeth. “Get out while I change.”

Alaric scoffed, turning to face the bedroom but remaining in the doorway. “I drove such propriety out of my Wraiths. Flesh is flesh.”

While Talwyn agreed with that statement, the thought of Alaric seeing her in a state of undress had her feeling even weaker in his presence. She quickly slipped into new pants and a fresh tunic, not wanting to use any part of her magic right now. She needed to save all of it. Every drop. She did not know what to expect, but she was going to make sure she had every advantage available to her.

Until she stepped from the dressing room and found Nuri holding a set of shirastone shackles in her hand. She held them up, her maniacal smile in place. “New leash,” she hummed, moving forward.

“You cannot be serious,” Talwyn said, her fists clenching at her sides. Two vines appeared in them, sharp thorns along the lengths.

“That is precisely why,” Alaric said. “Fae tend to be so temperamental. I would not want you to do something you would regret.”

Nuri was suddenly behind her, a manacle snapping closed around one wrist and then the other, the vines dropping to the floor. Tarek stepped forward then, a hand clamping gently around her upper arm, as if he actually cared. Neither of them had brought up what she said on the beach, and that was fine. There wasn't anything left to say on the matter.

A moment later, they were stepping from the air, but they were not at the Windonelle Castle. They were outside the

Black Halls. Specifically, they were directly above the Underwater Prison.

“Queen Talwyn?”

Her head whipped to the side at the shaky voice. There were four Fae lined up, each with shirastone on their wrists. They were all on their knees, and the female who had spoken was trembling.

“What is the meaning of this?” Talwyn demanded.

“We are exploring all possible workarounds,” Alaric said simply, striding away from her to where Mordecai stood.

“With my people?” She moved to stalk after him, but Tarek’s grip tightened on her arm. “When I let you into my Courts it was with the understanding that my people would not be harmed.”

“When you let me into your Courts, it was with the understanding I would help you and you would help me,” Alaric replied, his tone going cold. “I would have entered the Courts with or without you. You simply chose wisely that day.”

“I *will* help you,” Talwyn said. “Let my people go, and I will help you.”

“You already have, your Majesty. You refilled my power to make this possible.”

Mordecai handed Alaric a book already opened to a specific page. The Maraan Prince ran a finger along some text before glancing up at the Fae on their knees. “One of each element, yes, Mordecai?”

“As you commanded, my Lord,” the seraph answered.

“Good.” He snapped the book shut, handing it back to him. He strode purposefully towards the Fae, back straight, and in the faint coming light of day, Talwyn could see the coldness of his features. “The Fae Queens control the ins and outs of the prison. Perhaps blood of each element will grant me the same.”

“This will not work,” Talwyn said, panic rising. “The wards and spells around the prison are too strong for something so simple to overcome them. And even if it does, it still will not get you inside.”

“I agree,” Alaric said, head tilting as he studied the Fae on their knees before him. “But I do like to make sure I have tried every possible solution, even the ones that seem futile.”

Before she could make another argument, Alaric’s fist was closing, the four Fae gasping in unison before they slumped forward, the light gone from vacant eyes that stared up at the lightning sky.

“Spill it all,” Alaric said, stepping back so Mordecai could move in front of him. A sword went across throats, blood soon pooling on the ground in puddles. No one spoke while the blood continued to slowly creep along the dirt, eventually covering the space Talwyn stood on.

She was standing in the blood of her people.

Alaric hummed in disappointment. “Perhaps it needed to be done at dusk and not dawn.”

“What?” Talwyn balked, tearing her gaze from the dead Fae to stare at him.

“Perhaps I got the timing wrong. We can try again this evening.” He had moved far enough away that his own boots were still clean, free of blood and dirt.

“This will not work,” Talwyn spat. “I told you I would help you. Leave them alone. Tell me what you need, and I will do what I can.”

“I am done asking, your Majesty. Now I just take.” He jerked his chin, and Tarek was forcing her to her knees before the Maraan Prince. Alaric moved slowly toward her, his boots splashing softly in the blood she knelt in. He reached out, running his fingers along her jaw. She held his gaze the entire time, refusing to look away. “Such strength and power,” he tsked. “You would have been sought after in my world. So many would have fought for the opportunity to take your life and, thus, your gifts.”

“Your world sounds dreadful,” she sneered.

“Oh, it is,” he agreed. “It is why I desire this one so fiercely. This world is my prize when I complete the task he gave me. I thought we had the same goals, wanted the same things.”

“I wanted my people safe. You have sacrificed them.”

“You would know about necessary sacrifices, wouldn’t you, your Majesty?” he said mockingly. His fingers drifted into her hair before he gripped it tightly, yanking her head back farther, and she bit down on the grunt of pain. He would not get that satisfaction from her.

Alaric smiled as if he could see her resolve, and he leaned down so he could speak into her ear. “I have broken spirits stronger than yours, Talwyn. You will be easy to sway, easy to break. You have already proven such. Proved it years ago when you believed you could be worthy of a twin flame.” She pressed her lips together, refusing to give him any reaction, but his words did what they intended. His cheek pressed to hers as he continued to whisper to her. “I have been taking what I needed from you for years, Talwyn, and you have been happy to hand it over so long as your *revenge* was promised. Too young and naïve to see the bigger picture.” His hand loosened some, fingers spreading to gently cup the back of her head. “You were never meant to be a queen, Talwyn. Surely you know that by now?”

She did know that, didn’t she? She had been coming to realize she had just been a place-holder all this time. Maybe Sorin had known all along that she would not remain in her position. That was why he had cared more about Eliné than her when her aunt had disappeared. Maybe her aunt and Sorin had prepared her just enough until someone better came along. They had seen she would never be what her mother had been, would never be good enough for this, no matter how much she tried and devoted herself to her people. She only wanted what was best for them, and it was becoming clear that was not her.

“I will still obtain that revenge for you, Talwyn,” he said, moving back slightly. His fingers were still wrapped in her

hair. “But only because it serves my own purposes at this point. You, however, will continue to give me what I need.”

She felt the shirastone leave her wrists the second before she felt Alaric’s power latch onto hers again, yanking it from her very soul.

She cried out, falling forward and barely catching herself with her hands, blood splashing up her arms. “It is not fully replenished,” she gasped. “Not even close.”

“I am well aware, Child,” Alaric said, smiling down at her, his hand slipping from her hair. “But it is full enough to top off my magic for tonight, and I will take enough to ensure you stay where you are supposed to.”

“Please don’t,” she rasped, nails cracking as they scraped along the ground in the blood. “They are innocent people.”

“Remember that blood is on your hands,” Alaric said coldly. “And when more is spilled tonight and tomorrow and the following day, they are all on your hands too. Until you give me what I need, Talwyn.”

There was another solid yank on her magic, and it had her arms giving out. She felt the blood on her face, still warm, before he dug his power in even deeper. Then she felt nothing at all as darkness enveloped her.

CHAPTER 32

SCARLETT

“You know how to take down the wards around the mortal lands,” Eliza repeated from where she was sitting on the lawn.

It was the next day, and they’d all decided to help out at the Coventry Estate for the morning with the children. Or rather, it was more so Scarlett wanting to check in on them and feeling like a shit queen for taking so long to do so and forcing her family to tag along. Magdalena had been kind enough to pack small breakfast baskets for them, and now they sat on blankets in the mid-morning sun, watching the children run and play.

“I’m fairly certain,” Scarlett answered, watching Rayner pretend to spar with Tula. She was using the small wooden sword Nuri had given her for her birthday. They were a few feet away, but still close enough that Rayner could hear and be part of the conversation.

“I would prefer more than fairly certain if we are going to Rydeon again,” Rayner said. “Especially with my network of spies there nonexistent at the moment.”

“It is not something we need to worry about right now. Cethin let us in the Wards, but I have not been told how we leave,” Scarlett replied with a frown.

“That is concerning,” Auberon said. “I do not want to stay here.”

“Not to your liking?” she asked, plucking some grapes off a stem.

“It is not enjoyable being the only one of my kind present,” he grumbled, taking a drink from a metal cup.

“But you get Fae blood on tap,” she argued.

Auberon bared a fang at her. “You are godsdamn hilarious.”

“You flatter me,” she said, bringing her hand to her heart dramatically.

“Back to the matter at hand,” Sorin cut in. “When we learn how we can leave the Wards, the mortal kings will be coming with us.”

That was the trickiest part about this. Scarlett had found a Mark she thought would work for removing the wards around the mortal lands that prevented magic from being used. Deimas and Esmeray had enacted them somehow, citing mortal safety by preventing magic-wielders from being able to access their gifts. The Avonleyans had already been locked away behind their Wards so they hadn’t been worried about them. This was where the Semiria rings had come into play. Eliné and Henna each created one to be able to access their magic wherever.

Of course, Tarek had taken her ring from Sorin in that throne room. She’d take that back when she killed him and Talwyn. She’d take both those godsdamn rings. They wouldn’t be needed anymore if this worked, but the satisfaction of taking them off their dead bodies?

“You look murderous, godling,” Cyrus said, cutting into her thoughts.

She dragged her eyes to him. “Likely because you keep calling me that.”

“Nah. You looked ready to stab something before I said anything,” Cyrus replied. He shifted, slipping his hands behind his head where he was lying on another blanket.

“We have to bring all three?” Rayner asked, getting them back on track like he always did, even while pretending to be stabbed by a wooden sword. Tula giggled in delight as Rayner

slowly and dramatically sank to his knees, clutching his hand where she'd hit him as if it was a fatal wound.

Scarlett let her shadows out, the panther forming that always held the Sorceress's spell book. She found the pages she'd marked and read it again. "Since the wards are around three separate kingdoms, we need a mortal king from each. Since a Marran Lord sits on each of the thrones now, we need to bring all three mortal kings."

"And we have to go back to Rydeon for this?" Cassius asked, leaning over to take the book from her. He couldn't read it as well as she could, but he'd been trying to study it daily. "One would think it would need to be done in each kingdom."

"I thought so when I first started looking at it too, until we went to take care of that tracking Mark," Scarlett explained. "I think, if we do it at the center of the continent like we did before, because of that being central, it should take all the magical wards down."

"Even the ones containing the Courts and Night Children?" Azrael asked. He, of course, wasn't sitting on a picnic blanket eating breakfast. He was standing around, moody and irritated, dressed as though he were going into battle.

"No," Scarlett said hesitantly, studying the text. "This Mark will reinstate access to magic in the mortal lands. Magic is already accessible in the Courts. We would need to do something different for those wards. Like I did for the Shifters and Witches, but that was tied to the keys."

"That seems like it would be a wise idea," Azrael said, rubbing at his jaw. "So our people at least have the option to flee if necessary."

"And go where?" Eliza asked. "The mortal lands? To the people who fear us? The Shifters might take them in, but the Night Children and Witches?"

"Hazel would take in refugees," Scarlett said instantly, ignoring the way Cassius's face hardened at the mention of the

High Witch.

“And the Contessa?” Auberon asked.

“Nuri would take them in,” Scarlett answered confidently. “Alaric would not let her.”

“So we have four Courts trying to take refuge in two territories?” Eliza said. “Assuming they can even get there.”

“Do we have any reports of what is happening back home?” Scarlett asked, glancing around at all the Fae. “Nothing?” When silence still greeted her, she said, “Is there anything we can do? Any way I can contact Hazel? The Alpha and Beta?”

“We can try to summon Amaré,” Sorin said. He was leaning back on his hands, legs stretched out beside her, ankles crossed.

“You have not heard from Ashtine?” she asked, looking at Briar.

Briar shook his head. “I sent Abrax to her with a message of Nakoa’s death, but he has not responded to my summons since.”

“Cethin said the spirit animals are resting and preparing for war like the rest of us,” she mused. “He also said they are separated from the ones they are truly bonded to. Almost as if we are stand-ins. He said they are trapped here.”

“Trapped how?” Briar asked.

“I am not entirely sure. We have so many things to talk about when I am with him. We often start on one subject and find ourselves on another within minutes. Important things get missed and saved for next time,” she said. “But I do wish Ashtine were here. She was perplexing, but her insights were invaluable.”

“I am wary of trying to contact her,” Briar said. “I do not want to make it appear as if she is working against them.”

“I understand,” Scarlett replied.

Her gaze moved back to Rayner, where he was down on one knee, adjusting Tula's grip on her toy sword. The little girl was listening intently, face serious as she watched him move her fingers into place.

Shadows fell over them, blocking the sun, and she looked up to find Cethin, Razik, and Kailia standing above them. They were all wearing training gear, and the wicked grins on their faces had the hairs on the back of her neck rising.

"Lord of Night," she greeted with a mocking smile of her own. "Just the person I was about to go look for."

Cethin's brow arched. "For what?"

"To ask how we leave."

"What?"

"We need to go to Rydeon."

"Fuck no," Cethin said. "That is not happening."

"Shit," Cassius swore as Cyrus chuckled darkly. Sorin was lurching forward, but not fast enough. Scarlett was already on her feet.

"You seem to be confused, *brother*. I wasn't asking," she sneered, her shadows beginning to swarm behind her.

Cethin rolled his eyes at her. "You forget you are not the only one with darkness here, Scarlett," he replied, his dark shadows pooling at his feet.

"We should take this discussion somewhere else," Razik cut in, his voice tense, and Scarlett turned to find his eyes had shifted to vertical pupils and were glowing bright blue.

"We were about to suggest training anyway," Cethin gritted out.

Scarlett was already Traveling to the arena because she was putting two and two together, and the fact that Cethin had not told them *this*? In addition to refusing to tell her how they could leave? Oh, she was more than ready to *train* with him.

By the time Cethin arrived, her shadow armor was in place, and she had an arrow of ice and starfire flying straight

for him.

And as she expected, a motherfucking dragon stepped into its path, snatching the arrow out of the air with his godsdamn hand.

Smoke was furling from Razik's nostrils, wings like Cassius's having appeared at his back. His tunic had ripped to accommodate them, exposing parts of his chest. But Razik was shifted far more than Cassius had ever been. The faint outline of scales could be seen on his skin, as if they were part of his flesh, and those were definitely claws at the tips of his fingers.

Razik rolled his neck as if trying to gain control, ripping the rest of his shredded tunic from his chest and tossing it to the ground before those sapphire eyes settled back on her. The arrow went up in black flames as he snarled, "Bad idea, Princess."

"You are his Guardian," she sneered, her shadows slowly beginning to twist behind her. She brought her hands up, spreading her palms wide, starfire flaring to life. "Why the secret?"

"My father is your mother's Guardian. My cousin is *your* Guardian. This should not be a surprise. The Sargon line has always guarded and protected the Arius line," Razik growled, beginning to circle her. "Cethin went on and on about how clever you are. I am beginning to question his comprehension of the word."

Cethin stepped to Razik's side. "Let's all take a breath and talk for a second."

"Do you know how we can leave Avonleya?" Scarlett asked.

Cethin hesitated before he said, "Yes."

"Are you going to tell me?"

"No."

"Wrong answer," she snarled, sending the starfire hurling their way.

“Godsdamnit!” she heard Cethin growl as Razik shoved him to the ground before he leapt into the air, his wings flaring wide.

She was already on her shadow dragon, hovering level with Razik some fifteen feet off the ground. The male cocked his head, seeming to study her. “Why don’t you ever do this?” he called out, and Scarlett glanced down to see Cethin back on his feet, silver eyes hard as he stared up at her. “You always leave the airborne antics to me.”

Suddenly, another set of wings came out of nowhere, tackling him, and Scarlett was watching as Cassius and Razik were falling to the hard ground of the arena. She winced when they landed because that had to hurt, but fists were already flying. She twisted to find Sorin, Cyrus, and the rest of her Court. Cassius must have Traveled them all here, but with that many, it had taken him a while. That was fine. Cassius could keep Razik busy while she had a little *chat* with her brother.

She dove for the ground, her shadows dissipating as her feet hit the dirt, and she strode smoothly towards him, starfire winding up her arms. She didn’t falter when Kailia appeared at his side, smoke swirling around her, and an arrow already nocked in her bow, aimed directly at Scarlett.

“I like you,” she said calmly. “But I will not hesitate.”

“Good. It would be the last thing you did if you do,” Scarlett retorted.

“Scarlett, stop,” Cethin said. “You will not win this...” He trailed off as his eyes lifted to something over her shoulder.

She didn’t need to look to know her Court was behind her. All of them. Three Fae Princes. A Fire Second and General. A Water Second.

She smirked at her brother. “Mine’s bigger than yours.”

Kailia looked up at her husband, before she leveled Scarlett with a look so dark, it reminded her of Nuri. “Mine’s stronger.”

Before Scarlett could process her words, Cethin had a hand raised, his fist closing...

And she was on her knees, along with everyone else in her Court, her power being pulled from her being.

He stopped as quickly as he'd started, and she glared up at him. "I cannot believe you did that," she rasped, still feeling the effects of having her power drained.

Razik came to his side, spitting blood to the ground as he sneered down at them. "You all need to train. You will not defeat anyone this way. And *you*." He looked over to where Cassius was getting to his feet like the rest of her Court. "You need to master your power."

"What would you know about battle?" Azrael demanded. "Neither of you were alive before the Wards went up."

"We were facing our own trials while you were facing yours," Cethin said darkly.

Scarlett was still on her knees when she felt Sorin behind her, a warning ringing out as Cethin approached.

"I am not going to hurt her," Cethin snapped, lowering to a crouch before her. "This is why you cannot go to Rydeon. Alaric will win."

"We defeated him on the water," she retorted.

"You call that defeat? And at what cost?" he countered. "How many did you lose, Scarlett? Are you willing to lose even more? Because you will. From my understanding, he was not prepared for Cassius. Now they know of his gifts. You lost the element of surprise regarding Sorin's survival. They will be prepared for all of that next time. You need to be prepared too. You need to train to defend against his gifts, against my gifts. It would be stupid to go back and not make adjustments."

"You cannot keep us here," she retorted.

"When you can best me, I will tell you how to leave," Cethin replied calmly, pushing back to his feet. His gaze cut to Sorin. "But you need to learn to do so quickly."

Because soon she would not have a Source, and this would become infinitely more difficult.

She let Sorin help her up, and he brushed her hair back. “Love,” he sighed. “The shadow dragon? Again?”

She huffed a laugh. She reached up and cupped his cheek as she said softly, “You held back on your power.”

“You let your temper get the better of you...again.”

“I know.” She blew out a long breath. “I had been thinking of Talwyn, and then he showed up and told me I can’t leave... I immediately felt caged.”

“I promised you no one would ever cage you again. I will keep that promise, Scarlett,” Sorin said, hands on her hips, pulling her towards him.

“I know it was a petty argument, and I was picking a fight. I needed to get out the anger crawling under my skin. He was a convenient target until I can unleash it on her.”

His features tightened. “I thought we agreed you would not kill her?”

She flashed him a sardonic smile. “No. We agreed to discuss it more. Which we are currently doing. I still plan to kill her for killing you.”

“But I lived,” he insisted.

“And she will not,” Scarlett replied, dropping her hand from his cheek and stepping from his hold.

She turned back to Cethin, Cassius having made his way over to her. Razik had already shifted back, his wings and scales gone, pupils normal. Cassius had not, and she could tell by the irritation rippling off of him, he was annoyed by that fact.

“How are we going to do this? If either of us attacks each other, our Guardians will come out to play,” Scarlett said, hands going to her hips.

“Before you lost your temper, we were coming to discuss training,” Cethin chided, his arms folded across his chest.

Kailia was beside him, eyeing them all. She still had an arrow nocked, but her bow was lowered by her side. “The Ash

Rider stayed behind?” she asked.

Scarlett looked up at Sorin. “He was taking Tula back to the caregivers,” he explained.

“The wild child?” Kailia asked, her head tilting with the question.

“Yes,” Scarlett answered, but then processed what she said. “What do you mean the ‘wild child?’”

“She is a Shifter.”

“We know that.”

“The Shifters answer to Temural, god of the wild and untamed,” Kailia said. “Has she Shifted yet?”

“No,” Scarlett answered slowly, not quite sure how they had gone from discussing training to Tula.

“She will soon.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

“Because the Shifters answer to Temural.”

Scarlett stared back at her, uncertain of how to respond because the female was not making any sense.

“There is another training arena in the Nightmist Mountains,” Razik said into the silence that had descended. “My... *Our* father is meeting us there. It is more conducive to training while airborne. The arena is also carved into the mountains itself, and the nightstone is more resistant to dragon fire.”

“While Cassius is training there, you and I can train here,” Cethin said. “This way the Guardians are not nearby.”

“But he will sense I am in danger,” Scarlett argued.

Razik sent her a sharp smile. “He will be too busy to come to your rescue, I assure you.”

“The only other issue was your twin flame,” Cethin said, then he looked down at his wife. “Kailia will stay to intervene if necessary.”

“Cyrus—” Scarlett started.

“I’m going with Cassius,” he said before Scarlett could ask him to do just that.

“You good, Cass?” she asked, turning to him.

Cassius nodded sharply, and a moment later, the three males were gone, Razik Traveling them out.

“Use your Fae gifts for training for now,” Cethin said, already striding for her, rolling up the sleeves of his tunic. “You need to limit drawing from your Source.”

The others had dispersed, moving to different areas of the arena to do their own training. Kailia was standing next to Sorin, who was watching them with his arms crossed.

“How much smaller are they?” she asked quietly. She knew Cethin would understand she was asking about Sorin’s power.

His eyes met hers, his lips pressing into a tight line. “The sooner you master this, the better.”

That was answer enough.



Every part of her body hurt. She had not ached like this after training since Sorin had trained her in Baylorin. Training with Cethin was just as torturous. She didn’t think anyone could be as brutal in a training ring as Eliza and Nakoa.

Cethin had proved her wrong.

Every time he drained her, it made her very soul ache, and that pain carried over in physical form. To make matters worse, she hadn’t been able to free herself from his magic even once. At least with Alaric she had been able to stop using her magic, pull it back into herself and give him nothing to draw from. Cethin latched onto her gifts as if he had claws, dug them in deep, and refused to let her power go. He said

Alaric would be able to do this, depending on how full his reserves were. But even if he couldn't, Scarlett knew if she could learn to defend against Cethin, it would make defending against Alaric that much easier.

But right now she was sitting at a dining table wanting to lay her head on her arms and sleep. She'd devoured the roasted chicken that had been prepared, had eaten an entire loaf of bread herself, and had inhaled at least three pear tarts. Cassius looked as exhausted as she felt seated a few chairs down from her. She hadn't gotten a chance to talk to him yet and hear how his day had gone.

"I think you broke them," Kailia commented, lifting a chalice to her lips.

"They've just spent too much time lazing about on ships these last weeks," Razik said, reaching for another helping of chicken.

"Fuck you," Scarlett spat, reaching for her chalice of wine. She'd taken a bath before dinner, but she was already dreaming of another one, the hot water soothing her aching muscles.

"Razik," Tybalt said sternly from the other end of the table.

A muscle ticked in Razik's jaw, but he said nothing else, and Scarlett was surprised to see the male respected at least one person at this table.

Scarlett stabbed at another pear tart Sorin had slipped onto her plate as she asked, raising her voice to be heard above the various dinner conversations, "Can I ask you a question, Commander Tybalt?"

"Of course," he answered. "And please, call me Tybalt. Only my warriors call me Commander."

She nodded at that as she said, "Why would a goddess need a Guardian?"

The small chatter around the table died out, the Fae as curious as she was, and the Avonleyans were obviously interested to see how Tybalt would answer the question.

Tybalt picked up his mug of ale (which Scarlett had absolutely adored when he'd been served, the staff already knowing he'd want ale over wine), settling back in his chair with it. "I do not know that a goddess *needs* a Guardian per se," he answered.

"She was just selfish enough to want one?"

At those words, both Cethin and Tybalt tensed. "Sargon descendants are natural protectors," Tybalt said. "It is in our nature. The Guardian bond is not a burden to us. Many feel as though a piece of themselves is missing without it."

She had continued to stab at her pear tart while he'd spoken, but she looked up at that. "You asked for the bond?"

"No, but I was not against it. None of us who are selected as Guardians are against it," Tybalt said.

The sound of a chalice dropping heavily to the table had them all looking at Razik, whose features were hard and sharp, his pupils already vertical and eyes glowing a faint blue.

Tybalt cleared his throat. "I understand you know far less of the gods' history than we anticipated. We did not realize how thoroughly the Maraans had managed to rewrite and control history over there these past several centuries."

"You were outside the Wards," Scarlett argued. "How could you not know?"

"I was secluded to the Witch Kingdoms as a prisoner. Keeping a male apprised of things happening on the continent was not a priority for them," Tybalt replied.

Scarlett hummed in acknowledgement, resuming the stabbing of her pear tart. She frowned when she realized it was now crumbs on her plate and no longer edible. Setting her fork down, she leaned back in her chair. Sorin's arm was draped across the back of it, and his fingers immediately began brushing along her shoulder and neck.

"Why does Razik's shift look different from Cassius's?" she asked.

Tybalt's arm froze midway to bringing his ale to his mouth again. He glanced at Razik, and when Scarlett did the same, she found hard, cold sapphire eyes glaring at his plate like it had personally offended him.

Tybalt cleared his throat, slowly lowering his mug. "Their gifts look different because of their differing bloodlines."

A chair scraping against the floor echoed in the room, and Razik was striding for the balcony doors that overlooked the mountain range. No one said a word, but Cethin, Kailia, and Tybalt all watched him go with some variation of pain lingering in their eyes. From where she sat, she could see Razik step up onto the railing as he pulled his tunic over his head and tossed it to the ground. He leapt, his wings appearing at the same moment, then he was soaring for the mountains.

"His father is my brother," Tybalt said. "His mother is a Shifter. Because of that, he is able to balance his Shift. He can shift into a full dragon when he desires, or he can call forth certain elements of it. Cassius will only ever be able to partially shift."

"And you?" Scarlett asked.

Tybalt smiled warmly at her, evidently fine with indulging her curiosity. "I either look like this or am a fully shifted dragon. There is no in between for me."

Well, that was something she wanted to see.

"Can all descendants of Sargon shift in some way then?" Sorin asked, beginning to wind a piece of her hair around his finger.

"In some way or another, yes," Tybalt answered. "It was how we were designed."

"Designed by the Fates?" Scarlett drawled, rolling her eyes.

"The Greater Gods created the Lesser Gods," Tybalt said, and Scarlett had to admit, his patience seemed infinite. What she imagined a decent father would be like. Would her father have been like him? Patient and kind and warm? "They each had their favorites though. Sargon was Arius's. They were

close. Like brothers. Together they created the dragons, and thus Edjer and Ranvir. It is why the dragons are brothers. But only those created by Sargon can shift into dragons. They are Arius's elite guardians and where the Guardian bond comes from."

"Like the Maraans are to Achaz?" Scarlett asked, her fingers drumming on the table.

"Clever girl," Tybalt answered with that same warm smile. "Yes. The seraphs were Achaz's answer to the dragons, and the Maraans were his answer to the elite guardians."

She hummed in thought. "And you are close to my mother, then? Since you are her Guardian?"

Tybalt and Cethin exchanged loaded looks again before Tybalt said, "We are close in that she is my Ward and I protect her, but we are not close in the way I have witnessed you are with Cassius or the bond between Razik and Cethin."

"She does not confide in you?" Scarlett asked, her fingers pausing.

"No. She does not. If she did, I would hope she would have told me about Cassius as soon as she had discovered him."

"So you do not know why she deemed it necessary to hide me across the sea with a Fae Queen?" Scarlett said bitterly.

He gave a small, sad smile. "I do not know the answers you seek, Scarlett, but the Fae Queens? They came with Saylah to this world."

"What?" Cethin and Scarlett demanded at the same time.

"Why have you never spoken of this before?" Cethin asked.

"By the time I returned to this side of the Wards, it did not seem relevant," Tybalt said. "Esmeray and Henna were gone. I did not know Scarlett was hidden with Eliné until long after she had been killed. Queen Talwyn was the one we needed to worry about."

Queen Talwyn.

Scarlett's lip curled back at the mere mention of her.

Easy, Love, Sorin soothed down the bond.

“What do you know?” Cethin asked, and Scarlett could hear the annoyance in his tone. She couldn't blame him.

“I wish I could give you more insight, but I know little,” Tybalt said. “I was not sent here until after Saylah had been here for a century. I did not come here until Achaz discovered her whereabouts. It was then that Arius decided his children required Guardians.”

“Why?” Scarlett asked, leaning forward slightly.

“Because the war in this world? It is nothing compared to the war that has been raging for a myriad of years beyond this realm. The war in this world will merely be a battle in a much bigger war. But the outcome of the war here? It will not only determine the fate of the world here, but it will also determine the course of war there.”

CHAPTER 33

CYRUS

“Do it,” Scarlett demanded.

“No,” Sorin gritted back, folding his arms across his chest.

Her eyes moved to Cassius. “You do it,” she urged, holding a bow and quiver out to him. Cassius stared back at her, sternly shaking his head. “Cyrus?”

He took in that pleading look on her face and bit down on his laughter. Pushing off the wall of the arena he’d been standing against, he reached for the bow. “Fuck it. Why not?”

“No, Cyrus,” Sorin growled, stepping forward and snatching the bow and quiver full of arrows from her hands.

“Please, Sorin.”

And Cyrus didn’t hold back his laugh at the sound of Scarlett Aditya, Death’s Maiden, Princess of Avonleya, and Queen of the Western Courts, whining and begging.

Sorin stared back at her, unimpressed. “Even your elusive manners will not convince me of this.”

“I’m Avonleyan. My mother is a goddess. I should be able to catch an arrow in the air,” she said before tossing a hand in Cass’s direction. “So should he.”

Cassius was suddenly staring intently at the ground, and Scarlett’s eyes narrowed. “You didn’t,” she hissed in an eerie whisper.

Cassius turned his palms up helplessly. “It just happened, Seastar. We were training, and it came out of nowhere, and I just...sort of caught it.” He was scratching at the back of his head, refusing to meet her gaze.

Cyrus had seen a lot of ridiculous shit over the centuries, but this was nearing the top as one of the most inane things he’d ever seen. Speaking of which...

“And you say the Fae throw tantrums,” Cyrus mocked. “I think a godling takes the prize for that one.”

“Cyrus, I swear to—”

“Mommy dearest?”

Her eyes narrowed on him, but before she could respond, Cethin, Razik, and Kailia strolled in the training arena. They all paused as they observed the stand-off.

“Are we interrupting?” Cethin asked, eyes darting between Scarlett and the three males.

“I want to try catching an arrow out of the air, but none of them will shoot one at me,” Scarlett grumbled.

“I’ll do it,” Razik said, reaching for Kailia’s bow that was strung across her back.

The female spun so quickly, Cyrus almost missed it, an arrow nocked and aimed at Razik’s throat before he took his next breath.

Cethin sighed, reaching over and pushing her arm down without even looking at her. “Razik, you know not to touch her bow. It makes her exceptionally violent.”

Razik chuckled darkly. “I know. I’m in the mood for some violence.”

Scarlett turned to glare at Cyrus, Cassius, and Sorin, hands on her hips. “Are you happy now? The dragon prick is my new favorite person.”

Cyrus scoffed. “We all know Eliza is your favorite person.”

“Eliza would shoot an arrow at me if I asked,” she retorted. “She also enjoys violence.”

She had a point there.

Scarlett turned to Cethin. “What are you doing here anyway? I thought we weren’t training until later.”

“Training is going to be a little different today,” Cethin said. “Razik says Cassius is gaining more control over his power. You two need to train together. Learn to depend on one another.”

Cassius started to say something, but Scarlett cut him off. “You want Cassius and I to learn to fight together?”

Razik was already pulling his tunic over his head, presumably so he didn’t ruin yet another when his wings appeared. Cyrus had seen that happen more than once over the last week that he had been going with Cassius up to the Nightmist Arena to train. Razik was right. Cassius was getting better. It had taken him a few days to figure out how to summon his magic. Tybalt had been the one to instruct him on that, while Razik had been the one to talk him through isolating the Shift from the fire. The male might be a dick, but he was unexpectedly patient with Cassius. Cyrus could admit he might have been able to help him gain control of his magic, but that Shift? It would have taken months they did not have.

Cassius picked up on things as quickly as Scarlett did once he figured out how to bring his magic to the surface, and while it still flared out of control often enough, he was mastering it more and more every day. The fact he was the grandson of Sargon obviously aided in that too.

“We know you can fight together, but it is different when your magic comes into play. Cassius needs to learn to not only protect you but also aid you, and you need to let him,” Cethin said with a knowing look.

She scowled back at him, but he made a damn good point. Scarlett was always concerned about everyone else. It was why she’d wanted Callan to stay below deck when the seraphs attacked. And, yeah, that was the smartest move for various

reasons, but even she had known she would be distracted by making sure he was safe. Sorin nearly dying already split her focus when he was fighting beside her. And there was no denying that Cassius might be her Guardian, but she would gladly hurl herself in front of danger to save him.

“I am not going to try to drain you. Not this time,” Cethin was saying. “We just want you two to spar with us. Kailia will keep your twin flame busy if necessary.”

The Avonleyan Queen was circling Cyrus and Sorin, and Cyrus wondered if she ever wore shoes. She left ashes in her wake every time she took a step. Rayner did not do that, even barefoot. Kailia caught him studying her, and the little smirk that tilted on her lips told him she knew exactly what he was thinking about. How were she and Rayner the same and yet different?

“Use your shadows today, Scarlett,” Cethin said, drawing Cyrus’s attention back to the match that was about to take place. “You will need them. When we start attacking each other, Raz and Cassius are going to be driven to defend their Wards. It is going to get messy.”

Scarlett nodded, her and Cassius exchanging some weapons before falling into positions beside each other so easily. It was clear this was not the first time they had done this. Cyrus had been watching the male before him train for the last week. He knew he’d trained Scarlett. He could see it in how similarly they moved, even if Scarlett’s own training had progressed when Sorin showed up on the scene and then more so when she had come to the Fire Court. Cassius had laid the foundations for her. They had been fighting beside each other since Scarlett could pick up a sword, and to see how they had grown now? Yeah, Cyrus was eager to witness it.

“Ready?” Cethin asked.

Scarlett’s answer was a burst of starfire from her palm directly at her brother, which in turn had Razik snarling and shoving Cethin to the side. Cethin and Scarlett were both godsdamn laughing while Cassius and Razik were staring each other down. And by the gods, the King of Avonleya and the

Queen of the Western Courts were more alike in that moment than Cyrus had ever witnessed.

Cassius had shifted, his wings appearing and eyes glowing amber-red while his cousin's glowed bright blue. When Scarlett sent starfire at Cethin again, Razik had had enough. Twin short swords appeared in his hands amid flares of black flames, and he was advancing on Scarlett, while her shadows tangled with Cethin's darkness. Then Cassius was stepping into his path, sword in hand, and black flames flaring to life in his other palm. It was seamless, and Cyrus couldn't help but smile at how comfortable he was becoming with his gifts.

Razik and Cassius leapt for each other. They spared in the air while their Wards dueled it out on the dirt below. Cyrus saw what was going to happen a second before it did. Scarlett glanced up, checking in on Cass, and Cethin capitalized, his inky darkness winding around her and yanking her to the ground. She coughed, rolling onto her hands and knees, the wind having been knocked out of her when she'd landed on her back.

"No, no, Fire Prince."

Cyrus turned to find Kailia with an arrow aimed at Sorin's back. He was so tense, he was visibly trembling, fire flickering in his palm. Kailia circled around to his front, her head tilting as her arrow remained trained on him.

"They're sparring, Sorin," Cyrus said, reaching over and clamping a hand down on his shoulder, squeezing tightly. "She's not in real danger."

"I would not go that far," Kailia said thoughtfully.

"Not helping," Cyrus ground out when Sorin somehow managed to go even more rigid.

Kailia just shrugged her shoulders in apathy.

"Trust him to defend himself," Cethin was saying to Scarlett as she stalked towards him, starfire flaring down her spirit sword.

The ground shuddered when Cassius landed beside her, Razik hitting the ground beside Cethin at the same moment.

“Fight together,” Cethin ordered. He threw a hand out, shadows swirling around Razik, and Scarlett glanced between them before understanding seemed to cross her face. She did the same, shadows and fire surrounding Cassius that were thick enough to shield him to some effect, but still gave him plenty of space to move.

Cethin nodded in approval before he and Razik attacked again. Razik’s dragon fire tore through the makeshift shield, and Cassius grunted, having to summon his fire to stop the attack.

“More,” Cethin demanded. “Maintain it while you fight me. Don’t look. Trust your magic, and trust him. When you face Alaric, you cannot have your focus split.”

Scarlett gritted her teeth, more shadows swirling around Cassius as the Sargon descendants took to the air once more.

“She will not be able to do this,” Sorin was muttering beside him. “She worries too much about everyone else.”

“I think that’s the point,” Cyrus replied. “What is she going to do when it’s you fighting beside her again? You think I haven’t noticed that she freezes when you are in danger? She can’t do that, and you know it. It’s only going to get worse as —”

“As I weaken,” Sorin finished for him. There was a thick silence before he said, “The only time I have ever seen her fight without worrying about anyone else is with Nuri and Juliette.”

“Because they were so in tune with each other,” Cyrus said. Sorin nodded. “Something like that only comes with time. We can’t force it.”

“But they’re obviously going to try,” Sorin said. “I know Cass trained her, but they rarely did missions together. It was always her and the Wraiths.”

Razik Traveled then, reappearing behind Scarlett. The shadows shielding him seemed to coil up, a dagger appearing, and Cyrus realized Cethin had *sent* him the weapon through the shadows. The dagger appeared at Scarlett’s throat, and

even from where he stood, Cyrus could hear Razik growl, “We win.”

The four took measured steps back, all of them breathing hard. Razik disappeared, appearing again a minute later with four waterskins. While they all drank, Cethin said, “Your reserves are still plenty full. We go again in a minute.”

This went on for the next two hours, and Sorin was so on edge, Cyrus thought he was going to have to haul him out of there. Scarlett and Cassius were back-to-back, having started to share weapons the way Razik and Cethin did. They were picking up on the tricks they observed, but Sorin was right. This wasn't going to happen overnight.

On top of that, Scarlett was getting frustrated. Cyrus could tell it in her movements. Frustration, coupled with the exhaustion she was surely beginning to feel, was causing her to make small mistakes that were only adding to her annoyance. And Cassius? He just looked flat-out tired.

They hadn't spoken of what had happened in this same training arena the day he'd met his father. Cassius was so exhausted after training all day, he ate dinner and was asleep before the sun had fully set. Scarlett was no different. Had it been a fluke? Had the kiss happened just as a way for Cassius to ground himself? Was it more than that? Did Cyrus want it to be more than that? The answer to those questions seemed to change with the wind. One moment, he wanted to track Cassius down and see if the kiss would be as intoxicating as the first. The next moment, the thought of becoming something more, of becoming that involved with someone again, made him want to vomit.

“I think that is enough for today,” Cethin finally said when he'd knocked Scarlett's sword from her hand. Cyrus was fairly certain she was about to try and drive said sword through his gut for real.

Sorin shoved past Kailia, already dragging a dagger down his forearm to refill Scarlett's reserves. Cyrus watched as Scarlett held her palm up to him while she spoke with Cethin. If anyone should be fighting together, it should be Sorin and

Scarlett. Those two would be able to communicate down their twin flame bond, sense each other's presence. It's why twin flames were so powerful.

Except they wouldn't be twin flames much longer.

What was that going to look like? To be twin flames one moment and the next, nothing? Would it be like losing your twin flame to death? Soul-consuming mania and grief? Or would it simply feel like something was missing? Like they would never quite be whole again?

Sorin cut her palm, guiding it to the Source Mark, and the minute their blood mixed, her gaze snapped to his as their power merged. She stepped into him, his arm wrapping around her waist.

"Thank you, tiny fiend," Cethin said, dropping a kiss to the top of his wife's head as Razik and Cassius made their way over too.

Kailia looked up at him, stowing the arrow away in her quiver. "Do not forget your promise," she said, eyes narrowing.

"Do I ever?" he countered.

A small smile played on her lips. "Not once." She reached up, tracing a Mark along his chest with her nail. He'd lost his tunic at some point during the sparring session.

"Is there a particular reason you have not taken a Source yet?" Razik asked.

Cyrus and Scarlett both whirled to face him. Cassius's face was hard, an empty waterskin hanging from his fist.

"I was not sure if I needed one," Cassius replied tightly.

"Why would you *not* need one?" Razik asked.

"Because I am only half-Avonleyan."

"Do you not refill your reserves by drinking the blood of a Fae?"

"Yes."

“Then you need a Source.”

Cassius crossed his arms over his bare chest. “This seems to be working just fine.”

“I’ve tried to tell you it’s not the same,” Scarlett cut in quietly, her eyes on the ground, boot toeing the dirt.

“You asked him to bring this up?” Cassius demanded.

She met his gaze. “I asked him if you needed one the other night.”

“Why?”

Scarlett’s palm was still pressed to the Source Mark, but she took a small step towards Cass. “Because it is important, Cassius. I understand the hesitation with it. I promise, I do, but —”

“This is nothing like you and Sorin, Scarlett. *Nothing*,” Cassius snarled.

Well, that answered the question about the kiss last week.

“Cassius, it is not nothing and you know it,” Scarlett insisted, obviously not backing down on this subject today.

“You drink Fae blood daily, yes?” Cethin cut in.

“Yes,” Cassius gritted out.

“The same amount? Every day?”

“Since we have come here, yes.”

Cethin stared back at him, appearing to wait for something. When Cassius didn’t speak, he said, “I can feel your reserves, Cassius.”

Scarlett stepped fully away from Sorin at that. There was a thread of panic in her voice when she asked, “What does that mean?” She spun back to Cassius. “Are your reserves getting smaller like Sorin’s?”

“No, Seastar,” Cassius said, his tone instantly softening at her dread. “That is not what is happening.”

“Then explain,” Cyrus said shortly.

“There is a reason the Legacy take Sources instead of continuing to drink like the Night Children,” Cethin said. “Eventually, a Legacy needs more and more of it to fully replenish their power reserves.”

“You are saying Cassius hasn’t been filling his reserves fully?” Scarlett asked.

Cethin nodded, and Cyrus rounded on Cass. “Why *the fuck* haven’t you said anything?”

“It has been fine. I have been training and doing everything else just fine. Nothing has to change,” he said defensively.

“By the gods, you are as stubborn as your Ward,” Cyrus snapped, dragging a hand down his face.

“It may be fine now, but eventually, it will not be,” Cethin said. “Eventually, your magic will grow restless and seek out more sustenance. The thirst of the Night Children? That is what will happen if you do not take a Source, Cassius.”

“Cassius—” Scarlett started.

But Cass turned to her, snapping, “You couldn’t leave well enough alone, could you?”

Then he was gone, disappearing into the air.

Scarlett dragged her hand through her hair, fingers tangling in her plait, and Sorin reached over to pull the tie from the end. He gently unwound the strands, and from the look on Scarlett’s face, Cyrus could tell he was speaking through their bond.

He turned to Cethin. “How full have his reserves been?”

“In the mornings, before he goes to train with Razik, they are just over half-full.”

Cyrus felt his mouth fall open. “He’s been training that intensely with half-full reserves?”

Cethin nodded.

“I’ll go talk to him,” Scarlett said.

“He’s pretty upset with you right now, Darling,” Cyrus said, shaking his head. “I’ll go.”

“We don’t even know where he went,” Sorin said.

“His room,” Cyrus and Scarlett said in unison.

His room. His space. Some place he had complete control over.

Scarlett bit her bottom lip, but nodded in agreement, reaching out to take his hand and Travel him back to the Greybane estate. She took them to the foyer, and before she released his hand, she looked up at him. Her eyes were a pale silvery-blue, clearly not fully replenished after the short draw from Sorin.

“This needs to happen, Cyrus,” she said earnestly. “For so many reasons... He needs this, but *we* need this too. With Sorin getting weaker...” She swallowed thickly, looking away from him. When she met his gaze again, tears glimmered in his eyes. “I don’t know how any of this will turn out, Cyrus.” Her voice was a whisper, and it trembled as she spoke. “I don’t know what will happen, but if we can get him to accept a Source, at least he will be taken care of. At least this one thing can go right, even if nothing else does.”

Cyrus reached over, thumbing away the lone tear that was sliding down her cheek. “You and Cassius,” he murmured. “Always so worried about taking care of each other, you forget there are other people who want to take care of you too.” She closed her eyes for a brief moment, and Cyrus said, “Go see your twin flame, Scarlett. Trust me to take care of him and to take care of this for you.”

She nodded, disappearing a moment later, and Cyrus turned to the stairs, climbing slowly to the floor they were staying on. He stopped outside Cassius’s door, directly across from his. Taking a deep breath, he rapped his knuckles against the wood a few times.

“Cass?” When there was no answer, he added, “I know you’re in there, Cassius.”

A few seconds later, the door opened a crack, but when Cyrus pushed it open further, Cassius was already walking back to the desk across the room. He didn't say a word. Just sat down and pulled a book towards himself, picking up a piece of charcoal.

Cyrus leaned back against the closed door, crossing his arms. Apparently Cassius was taking a page from the dragon handbook and doing the whole silent-and-broody thing.

"Why didn't you say anything about your reserves?" Cyrus asked, his voice tense with restrained fury.

"It was fine," he muttered. "I was doing fine in training. It wasn't affecting anything."

"Except it would have eventually and likely already was."

"I did not know. Now I do. I will make adjustments accordingly." He wrote something down on some parchment before focusing on the pages again.

"Make adjustments," Cyrus repeated.

"Yes."

"Like getting a Source?"

Cassius's shoulders tensed, and Cyrus knew the motion. He was fighting the Shift, his emotions making it hard to control his magic. Cyrus had watched him struggle with this for days during training. He knew where wings would appear between his shoulder blades. He knew his pupils were likely vertical, eyes on the verge of glowing an amber-red.

Cyrus dropped his arms, taking a tentative step into the room. "I would have given you more blood if you'd have asked. You know that, right? All you needed to do was say something."

"Of course I know that," he barked, the piece of charcoal slamming down onto the desk. "You would give your life if it would be more convenient for someone else."

"This isn't about me," Cyrus argued.

“It’s not?” Cassius asked, finally twisting to look at him from the chair. Cyrus had been right. Vertical pupils bored into him. Cassius stood then, leaning back against the desk, his hands gripping the edge behind him. “You are not about to suggest to me, yet again, that you should be my Source?”

“You need one, Cass. For all the reasons Cethin said and more. Scarlett is worried. We’re all worried. If you don’t want it to be me, fine, but we need to find you one.”

Cassius ran a hand down his face. “Can we talk about this later? I just need some time to think.”

“So think with me,” Cyrus said, moving to the small sofa against the wall and sinking down onto it.

Cassius sighed, settling back down at the desk without another word. But he didn’t tell Cyrus to leave, which meant he’d eventually say something. Cyrus just needed to wait for it.

When he finally did speak a half-hour later, it’s certainly not what he was expecting him to say.

“You know you deserve more than being someone’s Source of power, right?”

Cyrus had been absent-mindedly tossing a ball of fire into the air and catching it. At Cassius’s words, he dropped the damn thing, singeing the rug beneath his feet before he could put it out. He cursed under his breath.

“We all deserve more than what we’ve been dealt,” he replied, prodding at the burn mark with the toe of his boot. “We all deserved parents who stuck around. Sorin didn’t deserve to watch his parents killed in front of his eyes. Neither did Callan. Eliza didn’t deserve to be cursed by her father or to lose Nako. Scarlett didn’t deserve to have so much placed on her shoulders, and you don’t deserve to be forced into doing something you clearly don’t want. But we don’t get to choose what we deserve. We only get to make the best out of what the Fates decide we get.”

“Maybe,” Cassius mused, and Cyrus heard him shift in his chair. “But there is something to be said for not settling and

fighting for what you deserve.”

“I know you want to wait, but we’re running out of time, Cass,” Cyrus said. “Scarlett wants to push Cethin for answers on how to leave. She’s getting impatient and wants to go to the mortal kingdoms and take down the wards. We’re going to need everyone at their full power for that.”

“And what exactly is it you think I am waiting for, Cyrus?”

“I…” He still hadn’t looked at him, focusing on the scorch mark below his boot, but he looked up and met his eye now, his pupils having returned to normal. “I honestly don’t know, Cassius. Someone you won’t mind having by your side for the next few centuries? Someone who’s more than nothing when you kiss them?”

A heavy silence settled over the room, and Cyrus immediately regretted saying anything because this wasn’t about him. This wasn’t about the swirling thoughts in his head when it came to Merrik and Thia and Cassius. This was about making sure Cass was taken care of, and he needed a Source for that.

“I may not have meant to kiss you that day, but it doesn’t mean I didn’t want to,” Cassius said, a strange, low rasp to his tone. Cyrus swallowed thickly at the admission, but Cassius went on. “Everyone keeps telling me that I can be selfish. You. Scarlett. You keep calling me a self-sacrificing martyr, but what about you?” He pushed back to his feet, crossing the room in a few long strides. He stood over him, forcing Cyrus to tilt his head back to look up at him. “You call me self-sacrificing, but you? You willingly give up every part of you without question as to the cost because you think you are unworthy of anything more. You think it is all you are *deserving* of.”

“Stop.” He meant to say it with some bite behind the word, but it came out as more of a pained rasp.

Cassius bent down, bracing his hands on the back of the sofa on either side of Cyrus, bringing his face inches from his. “If you were anyone else, I would go to Scarlett right this second and ask her to give you the Source Mark. If you were

anyone else, this would have been taken care of weeks ago. If you were anyone else, Cyrus, I would be selfish. But that's the thing. I *am* being selfish. Because you aren't nothing. You are *everything*. I don't want this with anyone else, but I also don't want you bound to me because you are worthy of so much more than being a Source. It is me who is not deserving of you, Cyrus. Not the other way around. And if you can't value yourself enough to see that, then I will value you enough for both of us."

His lips crashed into Cyrus's, and Cyrus reached up to fist his tunic and drag him closer, only to be met with hard muscle. Cassius was still shirtless from training, and a low growl came from Cassius at the touch.

Cassius broke the kiss after only a few seconds, both of them breathing hard. "I'll take a Source when you go back to Aelyndee."

"Why?" Cyrus asked, his fingers slipping from Cassius's flesh as Cassius pushed himself upright.

"Because that was the last place you felt truly deserving of something, and that was also the place where you began to believe you were unworthy of anything good. That it would eventually be taken from you. Losing Thia just solidified that thinking," Cassius replied, turning and striding back to the desk.

"Everything good in my life *is* eventually taken from me," Cyrus snapped. "Sorin would have been next if it weren't for Cethin and Scarlett. I know the Fates did not spare him because of me."

"How *deserving* you must be to know the inner workings of the Fates."

"Fuck off," Cyrus snapped, getting to his feet. "I don't know why you think this is your call to make."

"I don't know why everyone else thinks it's their call to force me to take a Source," Cassius countered, sitting back down at the desk.

"You *need* a Source, Cass!"

“And you need to be able to let me in completely before I can ask you to be that for me,” he retorted.

“You are as infuriating as your Ward,” Cyrus sneered. “Thinking you know what is best for everyone around you.”

“She is rarely wrong,” Cassius said with a shrug.

“And you?”

Cassius shrugged again, turning back to the desk and pulling the book forward. “I’ll keep reminding you how deserving you are until you start to believe it.”

CHAPTER 34

SCARLETT

“Good morning?” Cethin came to stop as he entered the dining room on the king’s floor of the castle.

“Kailia let me in,” Scarlett said sweetly, raising a cup of tea to him in greeting. “Hope you don’t mind.”

“Of course she did.”

The Avonleyan Queen had appeared from smoke and ashes the moment Scarlett had stepped into what was apparently the princess’s wing of the castle. Kailia had studied her for a long moment when Scarlett had told her what she wanted, before she’d finally said, “He will argue with you on this.”

“Lucky for me I am in the mood to argue then,” Scarlett had replied with a sharp smile. “Unless you want to tell me what I wish to know?”

“Why do you think I would know the answers you seek?” Kailia had asked.

“Because I see the way he looks at you. You keep nothing from each other.”

Kailia’s lips had twitched slightly. “A blessing and a curse, I suppose.”

“I could not agree more,” Scarlett had said knowingly.

She had been sitting in Cethin’s small, intimate dining area since then, eating from his breakfast spread and sipping tea.

Scarlett watched as he lifted a palm, a message disappearing amid shadows, presumably going to Kailia. “To

what do I owe this early morning visit?” he asked, moving towards the table. He was dressed in his usual immaculate black tunic and black pants, but his boots were missing which made for an interesting picture.

“I need to speak with you and felt some of what I need to discuss might be better done between just the two of us,” she answered, setting her teacup down on the table.

Cethin poured his own cup of tea. “And Sorin is fine with this?”

She rolled her eyes. “He is not my keeper.”

“Of course not,” he said with a smirk.

She sighed. “He was not overly thrilled with the idea, but he understood my argument. He is also waiting to see if Cyrus was able to convince Cassius to take a Source.”

Cethin nodded, taking a seat across the table from her. “I do not understand Cassius’s resistance to this. Most Avonleyans would sacrifice much for the opportunity to have a Source.”

“Do I need to be worried for the safety of the Fae I have brought with me?” Scarlett asked, deceptively casual.

“Has any harm come to them yet?” Cethin countered. “But I will not deny that Kailia has picked up chatter, even in cities farther inland. They know a Fae Queen is here and brought Fae with them. Rumors are swirling. They will need to be addressed soon.”

She chose to ignore all the stuff about announcing her as the Princess of Avonleya, instead answering his prior question. “Cassius and Cyrus each battle their own pasts. Cyrus has ghosts that haunt him, and Cassius had many of the same *lessons* ingrained in him by Alaric that I did. It is not as simple as asking and becoming a Source. It wasn’t for me and Sorin either.”

“Do you think it will eventually happen?”

“I think a lot will eventually happen when it comes to Cassius and Cyrus,” she answered. “But that is not what I

came to discuss this morning.

Cethin's brows rose. "By all means, do not keep me in suspense."

He was reaching for a pastry when Scarlett said, "I need to go take down the wards around the mortal lands." She held up a hand as he began to protest. "I know the decree you laid down about being able to best you before you'd share that secret, but if you do not tell me, I will start looking in earnest for the work-around. And I will find it, Cethin."

He sat back in his chair, pastry forgotten on the platter. "I have no doubt you will find it, but you will not be willing to pay the cost of the work-around to leave these Wards."

"You know the work-around?" Scarlett demanded.

"Of course I know the work-around," Cethin said, his fingers drumming on the table. "There were two work-arounds. Only one remains."

"The Avonleyan Keys?"

Cethin nodded. "The seven keys hidden on your continent were hidden before the Wards were put up. They were meant to be a safeguard that Eliné and Henna knew about, in case things went terribly wrong."

"Things *did* go terribly wrong," Scarlett said.

"There is nothing that can be done about that now."

That was true, but he spoke of it so...cavalierly.

"So those keys could have taken down the Wards?"

Cethin shook his head. "No. Those keys would have allowed the holder to pass in and out of the Wards, along with anyone they allowed through."

"Then how do we take down the Wards?"

A muscle feathered in Cethin's jaw, and he glanced out the window. "Saylah will not tell me. I know it is connected to the mirror gates, but other than that..." He met her gaze again. "I have not been able to learn much more than that."

“The mirror gates?” Scarlett repeated. “You said they are mirrors, not literal gates.”

“Most of them are.”

“*Most?*”

“All but one from my understanding.”

“I am going to need you to be more forthcoming with information, Cethin,” she ground out. “I do not enjoy prying it from your lips.”

His fingers drummed again at the same time Scarlett drummed hers. The two locked eyes at the unified mannerism.

“Him or her?” Scarlett asked, bringing her hand to her lap.

“Our father always did that,” Cethin answered. “When he was deep in thought.”

She nodded, resisting the urge to bring her hand back to the table.

“Why do you feel the need to take the magical wards down around the mortal lands now? Why not wait until you can properly defend against Alaric?” Cethin asked.

Scarlett bristled at this entire exchange. She hated that she was basically asking her older brother for permission to leave this continent. She hated even more that him telling her she could not leave made her feel trapped, even if the cage was as large as the continent the kingdom spanned. She forced herself to shove her frustration down.

“Because I know Alaric and you don’t,” she answered. “They are getting smarter. I guarantee he has plans for his plans. So do we. But I cannot implement them if I am stuck behind these Wards. If I can take down those magical wards around the mortal lands now, it strikes a blow against him. He will have to take the time to address the issue, buying me more time here to learn to defend against him. And,” she continued, raising her voice when Cethin tried to interrupt. “It will give my allies there the ability to carry out their own attacks.”

Cethin’s fingers drummed on the table again. “You speak of the Witches and Shifters.”

“I do,” she agreed. “And Princess Ashtine is still there. I know she stayed for...*her*, but if I know the princess at all, she will aid us when it matters most. The Fae will be better able to defend themselves. *Everyone* will be better able to defend themselves there while I am hiding out here.”

Cethin’s features shifted at her words, softening some. “You are not hiding, Scarlett. You are preparing.”

“And while I sit here, protected behind wards *preparing*, my people suffer. You cannot tell me you would not fight for the same if roles were reversed. You love your people as much as I do.”

“You understand if you do this and are caught, the fate of this entire world hangs in the balance?” he asked after a long moment of silence.

“It already hangs in the balance, Cethin,” she replied. “And it will continue to do so until someone makes a move. I would prefer that someone be us instead of them, but I guarantee he has already been making small moves that we know nothing about.”

Cethin said nothing, reaching once more for the pastry and taking a bite. It took everything in Scarlett to sit silently while he ate the entire damn thing. He poured himself a glass of juice and took a long drink before he finally spoke again.

“The Avonleyan Keys were created as a safe-guard for the Fae Queens, but the *true* keys were created by our parents. I control who can enter the Wards, but we learned too late that I can only allow Avonleyans in.”

Scarlett’s nose scrunched in confusion. “Then how did the Fae come with me? And Auberon? And the children?”

“Honestly, I do not know. I was hoping that since they traveled with you that would be enough to get them in. I am assuming since you are...who you are, it made a difference,” he answered, watching her carefully.

“What does that mean?”

“I control who enters the Wards. *You* control who leaves, Scarlett. *We* are the true keys.”

Scarlett sat back in her chair. “If I control who leaves, why the hell was I stashed away across the sea?”

“A question we would all like an answer to, but one Saylah refuses to give.”

“If you could get me in with your blood, why were you so insistent on me finding the keys before I came?” Scarlett asked.

“The work-around needed to be destroyed. As you said, the Maraans are getting smarter, more creative,” Cethin said. “That option needed to be eliminated.”

“Why would they make children the true keys? Why lay that responsibility on our shoulders?” Scarlett asked, more to herself than Cethin, but he answered anyway.

“I do not believe it was their intention. From what I have been able to learn over the decades, they did not completely understand the cost of this.”

“A goddess did not understand the cost?” she asked skeptically.

“She may be a goddess, but she does not control the workings of magic and power. She does not control the balance,” Cethin answered. He held out a bowl of fruit to her. “Did you get enough to eat?”

She swiped a pear, taking a bite as she mulled over everything he’d told her. “I came here for two reasons,” she said when the fruit was nearly gone.

“Oh?”

“I would like Razik to come with me, and I need...” She set the pear core down in front of her. “I need Sorin to stay behind.”

Cethin barked a harsh laugh. “Sorin will never agree to such a thing.”

“I know, but I cannot have him there with me, Cethin. You were right yesterday. My focus will be too split if he is with me. He is weakening. I will have to fill my reserves before we go, which means I will have to draw from him, making him

even weaker.” She swallowed down the tears burning at the back of her throat. “I need Razik to come, and Sorin to stay.”



“Hey, Love,” Sorin said when she stepped from the air into their rooms back at the Greybane Estate. She tried to smile at him, but of course he saw through the effort. He stood from the sofa he’d been sitting on, quickly crossing the room to her. “He did not tell you.”

She settled into his chest as his arms came around her, listening to his heartbeat beneath her ear. The sound, along with the twin flame bond, soothed something deep in her soul. She felt his lips brush the top of her head, his fingers winding into her hair.

“We will find the work-around, Love,” he said softly. “We will figure this out.”

She shook her head, her fingers flexing into his back where she clung to him. “He told me how to leave, Sorin.”

A gentle tug at her hair had her looking up at him. “He did?”

She nodded. “It’s me. I’m the key. He is the key to get in. I am the key to leave.”

He blinked at her once before saying slowly, “That is a good thing then. We can leave whenever we wish.”

“Yes,” she replied, but he picked up on the hesitation in her voice immediately.

“What else, Scarlett?” he asked, unwinding his arms and leading her to the sofa he had just vacated.

When they were both seated and she had tucked her feet up underneath her, angling to face him, she said, “I will need to fill my reserves before I go.”

“That is a given,” Sorin answered, reaching over and tucking her hair behind her ear.

“You will be weakened even more.”

She felt the guilt down the bond, and she reached over, her fingers running along his jaw. “I will not survive losing you again, Sorin.”

“Love, that is not—”

“Do not tell me it will not happen, Sorin. You cannot promise me that.”

He tensed, and she could see the moment he realized what she wanted. “What are you trying to tell me, Scarlett?” Her eyes darted to the window, but he gripped her chin, guiding her gaze back to his. “Say it.”

“I need you to stay back,” she whispered.

“No.”

“Sorin, I—”

“What if you need your Source?” he interrupted, shooting to his feet and beginning to pace in front of her.

“Cassius will be there. And Cethin said Razik could come too.”

“That is not the same,” he growled.

“No, it is not,” she agreed, reaching for his hand. “You will be here when I return, to take care of me.”

“Do not do that,” he snarled, yanking his hand from her. “Do not try to appease me in that way. You are asking me to stay behind while my wife, my Court, my family, go into danger. What am I supposed to do here, Scarlett? Knit a godsdamn scarf?”

“Only if you make a matching pair of mittens.”

“Not the time for that smart tongue of yours,” he snarled.

She reached for his hand again, snagging his fingers this time and tugging him closer. “We have had this planned for days, Sorin.”

“Plans mean shit, Scarlett. You know that. We can plan for every possibility and still face something unexpected.”

“All the more reason for you to stay back,” she insisted. “I do not want this. You have to know that.” She got to her feet, standing toe-to-toe with him. Reaching up, she framed his face, holding his gaze. Embers flickered in his irises as he stared back at her. “In a perfect world, you would be by my side, Sorin. We would take on Alaric and the Lords and all the seraphs together. We would take it all. But the world is not perfect. Not yet. And taking down these magical wards? That is one step closer to righting the balance. You know all the reasons this needs to happen.”

His fingers wrapped around her wrists and he tugged sharply, pulling her against his chest once more. “You do not understand what you are asking of me, Scarlett.” It was an agonized statement, and she could see the same on his face. “It goes against every instinct. Everything I am as a Fae and as your twin flame.”

“We will figure it out, Sorin,” she whispered, her fingers brushing over his cheekbone. “I swear we will find an answer to your power, but until then...” Her thumb slid over his bottom lip. “If I lose you again, then this was all for nothing. The world will not get a second chance. I will burn it all.”

His mouth crashed into hers, and she didn't fight when his hands slid beneath her thighs, hoisting her up against him. There was no slow work up. This was fast and harsh and full of the anguish they were both feeling. It was tongues sliding together and teeth grazing skin.

She grunted softly when he pressed her up against the wall, her fingers tightening in his hair as his fingers tugged at her tunic. He made a sound of frustration to find a band around her breasts, quickly taking care of it with a burst of flames.

“Sorin,” she gasped.

“Love, I am going to use my power as long as I still have it,” he rumbled into her mouth, his lips finding hers once more before they moved down her neck and to her now bare breasts. She tipped her head back when he took one into his mouth, his

thumb flicking over the nipple of her other. Her legs were still wrapped tightly around his waist, and he rocked into her, heat flaring from every part of her.

He slowly moved back up her throat to her mouth again, then his brow fell against hers. “You speak of what will happen if you lose me, but have you thought of what will happen if you do not come back to me?” he rasped, amber eyes searching hers. His flames scraped against her soul, and her shadows wound around them, pleasure darting down her spine.

“What?” she gasped, trying to think through her lust-addled mind.

“What will happen if you do not come back to me, Scarlett Aditya?”

Her hand slid from his hair, cupping his cheek. “That’s an easy one, Prince. You will end the stars themselves to find me again, fire in your veins or not. You are mine, and I am yours.”

“All the way through the darkness.”

Then he was kissing her again, the rest of their clothing burning away amid his fire.

“Stop burning everything,” she murmured against his lips. “We need clothing.”

“I’ll knit you something new while you’re gone,” he replied.

She hummed in response, bringing her feet back to the floor. “Make sure there are extra pockets for daggers,” she said, lowering to her knees in front of him. His hands trailed up her ribs as she went, brushing the sides of her breasts. His fingertips traced along her jaw as she looked up at him, wetting her lips.

Then, with a wicked smile, she held his gaze while she brushed her tongue along his tip.

His golden eyes went even darker, hips pushing forward slightly as he chased her mouth. “As many dagger pockets as you want, Love,” he said roughly, thumbing her bottom lip.

“Whatever you want,” he added, the head of his cock pushing against her lips in an insistent request.

She huffed a laugh as she took him between her lips, sucking on him for a moment before trailing wet kisses along his length. She dragged her tongue back up the underside of him, and he groaned when she finally drew him in deep. He fell forward, one palm bracing himself on the wall above her, while the fingers of his other hand threaded into her hair, cupping the back of her head. His heavy-lidded eyes watched as she drew back, maintaining the pressure of her lips as she went. She swirled her tongue around his tip before her mouth slid back down him. Her other hand came up, gripping his base, and he cursed low under his breath, his hand beginning to guide her as she worked her fist in tandem with her tongue. She could feel his thigh quiver the smallest amount under her other hand, and she slid her palm around to dig her nails into his ass, humming around him as he thrust deeper into her mouth.

Gods, she could get drunk off the taste of him— the cloves and honey and smokey taste of his blood and kisses merging with salt and heat of him. She’d be lying if she said she didn’t get drunk off the power of this. Of watching him come undone from her knees. Of watching his eyes falling closed, his breath getting sharp and uneven, his chest heaving as he muttered another curse when she felt him hit the back of her throat.

She knew he was close, his fingers fisting tighter in her hair and pulling at the strands as he swelled even more between her lips, but then he was tugging her off of him. She protested as he drew her up to her feet, herding her back to the bedchamber.

“You are going to possibly face Alaric tomorrow. There are no guarantees about how everything will turn out. If you think I am coming anywhere but inside of you, you are delusional,” he growled, kicking the door shut behind him. She was already on their bed, leaning back on her elbows, watching as he prowled towards her. He stepped between her legs hanging over the side of the bed. Calloused palms landed on her knees, pushing them wider, before dragging up her

thighs. His thumbs brushed along her aching center before his hands moved on and gripped her hips. She whimpered in protest again, but it quickly turned into a moan as he bent down, taking a peaked nipple into his mouth. She arched up into him, seeking any type of relief between her legs, but she found nothing.

He chuckled low against her skin, canines nipping at her other breast. "I know what you want."

"Then give it to me," she demanded breathlessly, reaching between them and wrapping her fingers around his cock and stroking him.

"Gods," he barked as she dragged him along her slick center, some kind of a garbled sigh coming from her throat at feeling him press against her. He had a breast in each hand now, kneading them with his fingers as she ground herself against him, taking any friction she could get.

"Please, Sorin," she said, her voice a keening thing as she arched up again when he rolled her nipples between his fingers.

Then he was looping an arm under her, rolling her on top of him as he fell back onto the bed. "Take what you want, Love," he rasped, hands steadying her as she adjusted to the sudden change in position. She wasted no time doing exactly what he said. Her fingers closed around his cock again as she lined herself up and sank down onto him. Her head tipped back, eyes fluttering closed at feeling him fill her.

"Fuck," he spat, when she ground down on him even more, moving her hips in a tight circle, searching, searching...

Sorin tilted his own hips, and she gasped when the movement hit that spot she'd been seeking. Then she was rocking against him, feeling him drag along that spot over and over with every pass.

"That's it, Love," he coaxed, his voice nothing but gravel. His flames licking along her bare skin had her palms coming to his chest, fingernails leaving crescent-shaped indents as she

steadied herself, moving faster and letting her shadows loose to play with his fire. “Gods, yes,” he groaned.

She was hissing her own curse when she felt his hand gliding up her thigh again. His thumb pressed down on her center, and he worked her with small, firm circles that had her legs trembling as she squeezed her thighs around his hips. His other hand slid up her back until he found her long hair. He wrapped the ends around his fist, pulling her head back and forcing her to arch her back, her breasts pushing out.

“Come for me,” he said in raspy demand, thrusting up into her.

There was just him and her and them and what they were together as he drove into her hard, his thumb continuing to work her center. Embers flickered on the edges of her vision when release crashed through her so hard she fell forward onto his chest. Sorin buried his face in her neck. He bit down as she felt him pulsing inside her, his canines piercing the spot between her neck and shoulder, as a low guttural groan came from him. Her entire body was already oversensitive, still coming down from her high, and she cried out again when the aftershocks of her pleasure flared more intensely from the unexpected bite.

“You will come back to me, Scarlett,” he murmured onto her skin, tongue laving away the hurt. “But know that I will hate every single second you are away from me.”

“I know,” she whispered, peppering kisses along his chest before she settled on top of him. Her ear was directly over his heart, and she could hear it hammering away, slowly returning to its normal, steady beat. She sighed deeply as Sorin lightly brushed his fingertips up and down her spine. “I will come back to you.”

He didn’t ask her to swear it, and even if he had, it was something she wouldn’t do. They both knew that such a promise was too easily broken these days.

CHAPTER 35

SORIN

“Make sure you are all touching when you come back,” Cethin said, pressing a vial into Scarlett’s hand. A vial that contained his blood to make sure they could get back inside the Wards when this was done. He tossed another vial of the same to Razik.

“Will the Wards stop my Travel attempts?” she asked, tucking the vial into an inside pocket of the Witchsuit she was wearing. “Do I need to be prepared for suddenly finding us all suspended above the water?”

“Yes,” Cethin answered. “If possible, let Razik Travel you back. We have locations along the Wards set up for this purpose. We set them up when we learned of you.”

“Maybe you should have mentioned those earlier instead of right before we are ready to leave?” Eliza said, tightening buckles on her leathers.

“Don’t worry, *General*,” Razik drawled from where he stood near Cassius. “I’ll make sure we all get back safe and sound.”

“You have learned enough to be able to defend against Alaric for at least a few seconds. Enough time to get away. Try not to fight him if you can avoid it,” Cethin said, ignoring the bickering now happening between Razik and Eliza.

The others were going in under the cover of night again, which meant it was late afternoon in Avonleya. They were all gathered outside Tybalt’s Estate. Briar and Luan were going, along with his Fire Court, Cassius, and Razik. Briar would be

guarding Hale, Luan with Callan, and Eliza and Cyrus would be with Drake, while Cassius and Razik were with Scarlett. It was part of the negotiating he'd done in agreeing to stay behind, even though every part of his being was screaming at how wrong this was.

Rayner would be moving among them all, his power finally refilled enough to be able to do so. They would be traveling in right outside the Eternal Necropolis. From there, Rayner would scout ahead as much as possible before they went in. Callan would have to lead the way again. Sorin knew this plan inside and out. When they'd made it, he'd assumed he'd be with them. Instead, Razik was in his place, and he was standing here waiting to send them off to fight while he stayed behind.

Scarlett looked up at him, and he could see the question in her eyes. Would he still willingly stay behind, or would he suddenly fight her on this? He'd be lying if he said the thought hadn't crossed his mind, but it was a fight he would lose. After he filled her power, he wouldn't even be a challenge for Cethin.

They'd planned with the others the rest of the day yesterday, but today they'd spent holed up in their suite until two hours ago, when it was time for Scarlett to start getting ready. They were waiting until now to refill her power wells to make sure they were as full as possible, and he drew a dagger from his side. Neither of them spoke as he sliced his forearm and then her palm. He felt the familiar rush of power the moment their blood mixed, fire and shadows, ashes and starfire. He tugged her into him, her brow falling to his chest, his chin resting atop her head.

I will come back, she whispered down the bond.

I will hunt you down if you do not.

She looked up at him, swallowing thickly. His lips met hers in a slow kiss that he dragged out, memorizing the feel of her. He'd kissed her more times than he could count, but it would never be enough if this was the last time he did it.

Her hand slipped from his arm, but she held his gaze as she backed away from him, her palm already beginning to heal over. She held out her hands at her sides, waiting for the others to take them, never looking away from him as fingers slid into her palms.

I love you, Sorin.

All the way through the darkness.

And they were gone, disappearing into the air.

“She will come back,” Cethin said. “They will all come back.”

Sorin couldn't tell if he was trying to reassure him or reassure himself. Probably both.

“Do you want company for the evening?” Cethin asked, his hands clasped behind his back.

“Not particularly,” Sorin answered, still staring at the spot she had disappeared from. He could feel their bond, stretching taut with her so far away. He couldn't feel *her* though. A feeling he should probably start getting used to, but one he couldn't fathom.

“Sorin, she was born for this,” Cethin said. “It is her destiny.”

“She creates her own destiny,” he said simply, finally tearing his gaze away to look at him.

“That she does,” he replied. “I do need to tend to a few things. Would you like me to Travel you anywhere before I go since you do not want company?”

“No,” he answered. “Send someone for me when she returns.”

“If you need anything, send a fire message.” Cethin's eyes swept over him, and Sorin knew he was gauging his power levels. It shouldn't be that hard. Scarlett had just drawn from him. They were nearing empty and were a fraction of what they used to be.

The look that crossed Cethin's face told Sorin he'd gathered as much.

The Avonleyan King nodded once more before disappearing the way the others had, and Sorin found himself alone. He couldn't help but wonder if this was what his future would hold. Being left behind to be kept safe while they all went to fight the battles. He could suddenly appreciate Callan's anger at constantly being forced to stay out of the fighting.

This would be different though. Callan wasn't trained to fight. Sorin was. He'd trained for centuries. He wouldn't be pushed to the sidelines. Not completely.

That's what he kept telling himself as he wandered past the gates of the estate and onto the main road that would lead into Aimonway. Scarlett created her own destiny, but maybe this had always been his. To find her. Bring her to the Fire Court. Help her find herself, her power. Love her through the darkness so she could become the queen she was always meant to be.

But where did that leave him?

The most powerful rules the Fire Court. That wasn't him anymore. That would be...

Eliza.

Eliza would be the rightful ruler of the Fire Court. She would never challenge him for it. No, the only way she would fight for the throne was if someone else challenged him and won. Which wouldn't be a difficult task at this point.

Maybe that would be for the best anyway? He was the Fire Prince, but he was also the King of the Western Courts. Maybe it would be better to not have his focus split between the two. He could be Scarlett's Second, advise her and rule at her side as her consort. That would be a fulfilling life, even if he couldn't properly protect her anymore. She'd have Cassius and Cyrus. Rayner and Eliza. Briar. They would give their lives for her, defend her, keep her safe when he no longer could. They'd proved as much when he'd been halfway across the Veil.

Somehow, they had kept her from coming for him in other ways.

Then again, maybe they hadn't. Cethin said he had come for him, risked the wrath of Arius, bartered with Serafina. Without that...

Well, without that, he'd be across the Veil, and he had no doubt Scarlett would be ripping it apart to find him.

The cry of a gull pulled him from his thoughts, and he found himself standing in front of the statue of Sidora that Cethin had brought them to the night they'd learned of Scarlett's true heritage. He slid his hands into his pocket, reading the inscription below the statue again. There was little doubt it was about Scarlett, whether she wanted to admit it or not. She would eventually. After she'd processed everything in her own time, just like always.

But while it may be clear that she was referenced in the prophecy, that still left room for interpretation of other parts of it.

"Did you know she has a temple here, Prince?"

Sorin turned to the voice to find Beatrix sitting on one of the benches around the small courtyard that housed the statue.

"I did not," he answered.

"Not here exactly," she said. "Outside of the city. A two days' ride from here. Three if you prefer a slower pace as I do."

"Is that where you have been?" he asked, making his way over to her. He bent and pressed a soft kiss to her cheek before taking a seat beside her.

"It is," she answered, patting his hand a few times before settling back against the bench. "I have not been there in centuries."

He twisted, taking in her features. The greying hair, violet eyes, the aging skin. She'd been in service to the Fire Court for ages, serving his father and grandfather before him, but it had never occurred to him that she had been alive for the Great

War. It should have, he supposed. The Alpha and Beta were children when the war was ending, a few decades old. If they had been alive for it, it wasn't hard to see Beatrix being alive for it as well. She'd just never spoken of it.

"You have been to Avonleya before?" he asked, wondering what other secrets she held.

"When I was very young, still a Witchling," she answered, her gaze going back to Sidora. "My mother was a member of Sidora's coven and came with Saylah to this world."

"You know Saylah?" he asked sharply.

Beatrix shook her head. "I was born here, but we were sent across the Edria when I was five. I never saw Saylah. We lived outside of Sidora's Temple while we were here. Saylah left this world at one time. I did not know she had returned. Not until we arrived here."

Sorin turned back to the statue, trying to process what she was saying. "You did not know that Queen Selinya was Saylah? Like the rest of Avonleya?"

Beatrix nodded. "That knowledge was known to a select few. The only three on our continent who knew no longer walk this side of the Veil. Even the High Witch only knew her as Selinya, nothing more."

"But why?" Sorin asked.

"That is something only the goddess herself can answer. Her secrets died with those who held them."

Silence fell between them, Sorin trying to sort through that information and figure out what to ask her next, but she spoke again. "There is a sister temple on our continent. For the Oracle."

"Juliette has a temple?"

Beatrix smiled warmly. "She does. Do you know the reason so few male Witches exist?"

Sorin blinked at her. "Because the Witches despise males, including their own."

“But have you considered *why* that is the case?”

He hadn't. Not really. It had simply always been that way.

“To understand, I must tell you the story of two sisters.”

Sorin nodded at her to go on, the nostalgia of her “lessons” settling over him. He'd welcome any distraction at this point.

“There are more gods than just the ones known to this world,” Beatrix said. “There are two Lesser Goddesses. Sister goddesses, in fact. Taika and Zinta, goddesses of magic and sorcery. Two were created with a purpose. One to serve Beginnings, and one to serve Endings.”

“One is loyal to Achaz, the other to Arius,” Sorin said.

Beatrix nodded. “Taika serves Arius. Zinta serves Achaz. When Achaz learned of Saylah and Temural's existence, he took it as yet another slight against him. The feud between him and Arius was already growing, and Achaz wanted a child with both his gifts and the gifts of magic. Both Zinta and Taika refused him, so Achaz punished them both. Any union between a female and male Witch would produce twins. Always sisters, and they would always find themselves pitted against each other. One would be drawn to the light and beginnings, one to the dark and endings. They dismissed the curse, but history proved it to be a curse indeed. When sister Witches are born, they disrupt history in more ways than one. The Oracle across the sea is only one example.”

“Juliette does not have a sister,” Sorin argued.

“No, but her mother does.”

Sorin sat up straighter. “Hazel. The High Witch and Juliette's mother are sisters. I did not realize they were twins.”

“It is not a well-known fact.”

“But wouldn't that also mean their father was a Witch?”

“It would,” Beatrix agreed. “It is part of the reason they are so powerful. Hazel is older, so she became High Witch when their mother Faded.”

“And their father?”

“Was killed in the Great War.”

Sorin nodded. “But those are not the sisters I need to tell you about. However, know that if Hazel is loyal to Scarlett, a descendant of Arius...”

“Sybil is loyal to Achaz and, thus, Alaric.”

Beatrix nodded.

That would explain a lot. Eliné had worked closely with Sybil in the Healer’s Compound in the Black Syndicate. If she didn’t know this history, even if she had somehow known this history, she likely did not know Hazel and Sybil were twins. How much had Alaric learned simply because Sybil was watching Eliné? Had Sybil served Deimas before that?

“In other worlds, Taika is referred to as the Enchantress, and Zinta is referred to as the Sorceress,” Beatrix said, interrupting his thoughts.

Sorin started. “The Sorceress?”

A humorless laugh came from the Witch, a sound he’d never heard from her before. “The one locked away beneath the Black Halls is not Zinta. Those cells could not hold a goddess, and certainly not a goddess of sorcery and master of blood magic. Her daughter, however...”

“Are you telling me the daughter of a goddess is imprisoned beneath the Black Halls and no one knew?”

“The ones who put her there knew,” Beatrix replied, patting his hand again. “Eliné and Henna knew.”

“How could they have imprisoned the daughter of a goddess? They were powerful, but not that powerful,” Sorin argued.

“You are correct. They are not the ones who imprisoned her. My mother did. The cost to do so was her life,” she replied. “It took a descendant of Zinta to imprison one of the same.”

“Your mother was— *You* are a descendant of Zinta? Are you an Avonleyan?”

“No, Sorin. My mother was already carrying me when she came here. While I am a descendant of Zinta, my mother was her daughter. Taika and Zinta each had one set of twins before they realized the curse from Achaz was real. My mother was the Sorceress’s sister,” Beatrix said calmly.

“Why would you keep all this from us? From me?” Sorin asked quietly. He couldn’t help but feel bitter and slighted.

“A Mark of loyalty to the Fire Court is not the only Mark I bear, young prince,” she answered. “You once told me I answered to your father.”

“And your reply was ‘Do I?’” Sorin said.

Beatrix nodded. “I was sent to serve the Fire Court by Sidora. Well, my mother was. She served Arius. She joined Sidora’s coven, one of the daughters of Taika herself. I traveled with her and took over when she gave her life to imprison the Sorceress. Without that sacrifice, this world would look very different.”

“Did you know the Maraans were already here?”

“No. Despite what you are likely thinking, I do not have all the answers or some vast knowledge to help you, Sorin. I was, however, given a task that I have waited centuries to complete,” she said.

Sorin was at a loss for words, so he just sat back and waited for her to continue.

“You know the rest of the story of two sisters,” she said. “My mother helped trap and imprison the Sorceress. By the time she was imprisoned, the Wards were already up around Avonleya. My mother stripped her of her gifts, creating the Witches and Shifters in this world to aid the Fae. How or when the Sorceress found her way to this world, I do not know. What other havoc she created in other realms, I do not know. She became one of Achaz’s favorites.”

So much time had passed since Sorin had found himself in this small courtyard, the sun was beginning to set, casting the space in soft oranges and pinks.

“Why now?” he asked. “Why are you telling me all of this now?”

“Because knowledge is power, young prince,” Beatrix answered. “I am considered a Sage among the Witches, a keeper of knowledge.” She pulled back the sleeve of her robe, revealing a gold Mark on her arm. This was not a Fae Marking in black nor an Avonleyan Marking in silver. This was something different all together. “Certain knowledge I was bound to keep until the day I crossed the Veil.”

His eyes flew to hers. “What are you talking about?”

Her smile was the one she always gave him. Warm and patient. “Death comes for us all in one way or another, Sorin. I have long known that when I returned to these lands, my days would reach their end.” She gestured at the statue before them. “It was foretold by Sidora herself.”

“You can’t... I cannot do this without you,” he said, fighting the emotion swarming up his throat.

This female had been there for him through everything. He had known her his entire life. She taught him, guided him. She had been there when he’d watched his parents be killed by Esmeray. She had been there when he’d been at his lowest, had told him to trust the Fates when he wanted to give up on everything. She had cried tears of happiness when he and Scarlett had asked her to perform a marriage ceremony. She had Anointed their twin flame bond. She was family. The only constant in his life. And now she was telling him she was going to be leaving him? In the middle of losing his gifts, his twin flame bond, he was going to lose her too?

He swallowed back his emotion. “When?”

“Tonight,” she answered. “When the sun sets, I will Fade.”

“Tonight?” he balked. “I... Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

She reached up and cupped his cheek. “You have enough weight to bear these days, Fire Prince. This was knowledge you did not need to carry.”

“I am not ready for this,” he said, not caring that two tears slipped free. She had seen him cry more than most.

“We have had centuries together, Sorin,” she replied, her hand falling from his face.

“You cannot leave me when I am about to lose everything. My power. My bond. There has to be something—”

“Sorin Aditya,” she said sternly, taking his hands in hers. “I lived a long and good life. And you? You are not left defenseless. She will not leave you simply because you no longer carry fire in your veins or because your bond will look different.”

“Our bond will be nonexistent,” he argued, pushing down the hysteria of facing this on top of everything else.

Her brow arched. “You are beginning to sound like that young child who climbed up to my worktable and grouched about this or that.”

“I am not grouching,” he grumbled.

“Only a young child would complain about having found a love worth dying for.”

“I am not complaining about that.”

“Your bond is what you make it, young prince,” she replied, squeezing his fingers in her small hands.

“I will not be...” He swallowed again, not wanting to say this out loud because it would make it real. But the sun was setting quickly, and the female before him, who had always been there to listen and give sage advice, would no longer be here to do so in a matter of minutes. “I will have nothing to offer her anymore. I will not be able to protect her. I will not be able to give her my power to fuel her own. I cannot fight by her side.”

“You are not defined by your power, Sorin. And I may not be a Seer, but I can see the love you share is not of this world, or any other realm for that matter.”

She let go of his hands and stood, crossing to the statue. She ran a finger along the inscription etched below it. She

must have known how to read the language because she stopped on the second to last line.

“I think you will find that when a Prince falls, a King rises,” she mused. She looked over her shoulder, violet eyes meeting his.

“A powerless king,” Sorin muttered.

She tutted under her breath, folding her hands inside her robes. “If you remember none of my teachings after this day, Sorin Aditya, remember that knowledge is power. You can find the answer to anything if you know where to look and who to ask. You have more power than just fire. Do not forget that.”

Her eyes darted to the darkening sky before landing back on his once more, full of a tender warmth. “It is almost time.”

He stood and crossed to her in a few long strides. She looked tiny and frail in these last minutes of her life in this world, despite being one of the strongest people he knew. He bent down, pulling her into a tight embrace, tears falling freely now.

She pulled back, her hands gripping his shoulders. “When I visited the Oracle on our continent, Sidora met me in the temple there. It was when she told me of this day. She also told me that the day of my Fading, I would need to pass along the name I have been keeping.” She held up a hand. “Before you ask, I do not know the meaning of the name or what value it holds. Only that it will be needed at some point after my passing. I can think of no one else I trust enough to keep this information safe until it is needed.”

“But how will I know?” Sorin asked.

“Knowledge is power, young prince. Always remember that.” She cupped his cheek once more. “I am so very proud of you, Sorin. It has been one of my greatest honors to watch you grow into the Prince you are and to serve in your Court. Thank you for plucking petals for me for so many years.”

Sorin huffed a laugh through his tears as Beatrix pulled him into a tight hug once more. The sun dipped below the

horizon, and she whispered a final word to him as she Faded from his arms.

He was left holding air, a name in his ear, and an ache in his chest.

CHAPTER 36

SCARLETT

Scarlett Traveled them all through the air, across a sea, to the center of the continent. They emerged exactly where she'd wanted to— a good two miles away from the Eternal Necropolis. This entire part of Rydeon was flat plains. There really wasn't any place to hide, which only added to the need to come in under the cover of darkness. They had likely already caused some ward somewhere to go off, alerting Alaric to their presence. They needed to get moving.

But Traveling that far with so many people was a lot, and she was breathing hard when she jerked her chin at Rayner, sending him off to spy in the smoke and ashes. Her hands were braced on her knees as she worked to control her breathing. Cassius gripped her upper arm, and she glanced up at him.

“You good, Seastar?”

She nodded, her gaze cutting to Cyrus. The two had been...different since they had argued about Cassius obtaining a Source again. Cassius hadn't spoken of it to her, acting as if nothing had happened. Cyrus had told her he still refused but that he wasn't entirely opposed to the idea anymore, whatever the hell that meant. It was something she'd worry about when they got back.

Cyrus was watching them from where he stood by Drake, Eliza on the other side of the Rydeon King. His lips pressed to a thin line, and she knew he'd rather it was him at her side than Razik. Sorin's loyal Second, wanting to watch out for his prince's twin flame.

She could feel her bond with Sorin stretched taut but that was about it. She tried to speak to him, to let him know they were here and had made it okay, but the words seemed to fade away down the bond. When she didn't get a response, she could only assume it meant he had not heard her.

Which meant their bond was weakening as he weakened.

She shook her head as she straightened, clearing her thoughts. This first. Then Sorin. One thing at a time. The whole point of asking Sorin to stay back was so that her focus wouldn't be split.

Rayner appeared a moment later, his swirling eyes finding hers in the darkness. "There are five seraphs at the entrance. One had water magic, the others I did not see. I suspect there are more in the sky, but with the cloud cover, I cannot tell."

"Once we're inside the Necropolis, the walls are tall and the passages narrow. It gives us an advantage. They won't just be able to drop in on us," Scarlett said, reaching behind her to pull her hood up over her head. "Rayner will scout ahead, Azrael and Callan at the front once we are inside the Necropolis. I'll be right behind them with Cass and Razik. Briar at the end with Hale and Drake between him and Eliza and Cyrus. If this works, you should have access to your magic immediately. If Alaric shows up, snuff out any power so he cannot draw from it," she ordered. "Do not engage him. If something seems off, ask someone nearby. Remember Lord Tyndell can alter reality. Whether or not he can infiltrate more than one person's mind at a time, I cannot answer. Let's hope not. Any questions?"

"Let's get going," Azrael gritted out. "The sooner we can have access to our magic here the better."

Scarlett nodded. The Fae were all taking not having their magic fairly well. They knew what to expect after coming last time, were prepared for it as much as they could be, but they were all depending on this to work. In short, they were all depending on her.

"Let's start a fire," she purred, shadow wolves forming in front of her and prowling ahead as Rayner disappeared among

smoke again. Cassius and Razik fell into step beside her. Callan and Azrael would take the lead once they were inside the Necropolis, for now, it was her and the dragons.

Everything was quiet for the first mile, the braziers outside the Necropolis entrance burning bright and getting bigger as they got closer. She tensed as she felt her shadows begin to vibrate. Her shadow wolves lunged ahead into the dark, and a second later two grunts of pain filled the air. She was sending starfire into the void in front of them, wings of two seraphs catching alight moments before black flames devoured them both in seconds. Turning to Cassius, she smiled darkly at him, his hand still raised. She turned to Razik, who seemed to have stopped mid-step.

“Problem?” she asked.

“Currently wondering why you needed me to come with you for this,” he replied.

She reached up and patted his shoulder. “Are you sad we didn’t save you one?”

“Don’t touch me.”

Scarlett snorted, her wolves pacing in front of them. She sent them ahead as they all began moving again. Rayner appeared when they were a few hundred feet from the steps of the Necropolis. Cassius moved down, allowing Rayner to walk beside her.

“They are waiting for us. They summoned more. There are ten now,” he reported.

She nodded. “Do they know how many we have with us?”

“No. Their scouts did not return,” he said darkly. “Nice work.”

She nodded, turning to speak over her shoulder. “Keep the kings protected. I will have shields around them, but someone is by their sides at all times. I’ll light up the area when we reach the base of the steps. Briar and Azrael, find the water seraph and take care of him. I’ll set wings on fire to keep them on the ground until someone can deal with them. Cass and Razik will help as much as needed, but we’re all trying to

reserve power. Blades through throats and chests work, but you'll get one chance. They are trained to take down whoever they can when they go down."

They knew all this, but it never hurt to repeat the plan one more time. There was quiet acknowledgement, the mortal kings letting them do their thing. Callan and Drake were used to this, but she idly wondered what Hale was thinking. She was certain he hadn't experienced real-world battle. He might have trained and watched some of the Avonleyans train, but this? Being in the thick of it? When would he have ever experienced that?

A few feet from the base of the steps, she tossed starfire into the sky. The top of the steps lit up, a line of ten seraphs waiting at the top, just like Rayner had said. She didn't stop, didn't pause. She continued up, one step after another, her wolves a step in front of her.

"A welcoming party just for us?" she asked. "How thoughtful."

She watched their eyes skate over all of them behind her, taking them in, calculating. She was halfway up the steps when one near the center said, "How will you do anything when we will take care of this from the air?" At his words, half of the seraphs took to the sky, arrows nocked into bows and aimed at them. "You can save a lot of lives by sitting quietly until your master gets here."

"That's cute," she mused, getting a shield in place around all of them. "Apparently your master neglected to tell you about my dragon friend over here. His fire turned your pals back there to ash in seconds."

"We know about the Witch child," the seraph sneered again. "Why do you think all the arrows are aimed at him?"

"Oh, I meant the other one," she said, nodding in Razik's direction. She brought her hand up to her mouth, mock whispering behind her hand. "Between you and me, he's a little crabby about not getting a kill back there, so I think we'll let him have first shot at your friends. That seems fair, right?"

Razik slowly turned to look at her incredulously, his eyes already glowing bright blue, pupils vertical. She smiled sweetly. “Well?”

He rolled his eyes, wings ripping from his back and scales rippling across his body as he shot into the air. Two seraphs were ashes before they even realized what had happened. Cassius was in the air the next moment, Cyrus moving to his place seamlessly as they reached the top of the steps. Arrows bounced off her shield in front of them, and she felt the same hit her shields around the mortal kings. She looked up, finding Cassius and Razik engaged with the two remaining seraphs in the air.

She drew the spirit sword from her back, starfire winding around the blade. “That one,” she said to Cyrus. “We’ll do him first.”

There was a seraph with earth magic attempting to get past her shield, but a moment later, his wings were flames. She dropped the shield at the exact moment Cyrus struck out, cutting a wing from his back in one clean swipe. The other landed on the ground as Scarlett sliced down from his throat to his navel, blood spraying and insides falling to the ground.

“By Anala,” Cyrus said. “You couldn’t just slit his throat, Darling?”

“He’s the one who insinuated I had a master,” she sneered, the starfire burning away the blood on her blade.

“Fair enough,” he said as Cassius and Razik landed beside them.

She turned to see Rayner behind another, a dagger going across the seraph’s throat. She sent starfire to finish the seraph as he grappled at his throat, blood running between his fingers.

The mortal kings had been herded off to the side. Briar, Azrael, and Eliza were in front of them, engaged with the remaining three seraphs.

“One for each of us,” she mused, stalking forward. “I will still be in the lead that way.”

“The lead for what?” Razik asked.

“The most kills,” she answered with a wide grin, starfire igniting down her sword once more.

Until all three seraphs went up in black flames in front of her.

She turned to Razik, her mouth gaping. “You took my kill.”

“Now I’m in the lead,” he said with a shrug.

“You motherfu—”

“Let’s get going,” Azrael said, cutting her off as he and Callan moved to the archway. “I want my godsdamn magic so I can do something here.”

Scarlett grumbled under her breath, moving to follow.

That entire fight had taken less than five minutes, but that had been her using her gifts alongside Cassius and Razik. There were Fae here to refill from if needed, and she could draw from Cassius, but none of that was ideal. Frankly, Azrael was right. They needed to get going. That had worked for a small number of seraphs, but if there were more waiting for them inside, it was going to get dicey.

They moved through the passageways quietly, Scarlett remembering most of the twists and turns. It still took nearly an hour to get to the center, but as soon as they reached it, it felt like she could breathe again. The passageways were so narrow, and they immediately fanned out around the circular chamber. Her eyes instantly went to the mirror gate where she’d seen the man last time. Now it only reflected the room back to her. She moved closer, fingers running over the various symbols around it.

“Do you know how they work?” she asked Razik beside her.

“How what works?” he asked, sounding annoyed like always.

She jerked her chin at the mirror. “The mirror gates. Is this one only connected to one other mirror? Or can you talk to

people wherever there is one of these mirrors? If I wanted to talk to Cethin, could I do that right now?"

Razik blinked at her. "There are different mirrors in different kingdoms that can only be activated by Avonleyans. You speak into the god's symbol. The person you are trying to contact has to be connected to that god."

Her brow furrowed. When she had spoken to Cethin through the one in the Wind Citadel, she had been studying Temural's symbol. Cethin was bonded to Altaria, Temural's spirit animal, so that made sense, she supposed. But she hadn't been studying any of the symbols last time, which could only mean the man on the other side had called to her. He had seemed as surprised as she had though.

She found Arius's symbol, running her fingers over it. He had to be a descendent of Arius. The blackness that had seeped from his fingertips was like Cethin's— shadows dark as night, inky and thick. She watched carefully, holding her breath, but no emerald eyes appeared in the mirror to stare back at her.

"Are there only mirrors in our world? Or could I summon someone in another world?" she asked.

"Do we not have more important things to be doing?" Razik asked, crossing his arms. "Cethin can give a history lesson on the mirrors later. When I'm not around."

Scarlett rolled her eyes, taking one last look at the mirror gate before moving to the stone table at the center of the room. She pulled a scroll from some shadows, unrolling it across the table. A map of the continent spread out before them, and Azrael found some stones to place on each corner to keep it from rolling closed.

She had been practicing the Mark for days now, making sure it was perfect. The mortal kings had been practicing it too. She would still monitor and instruct them, but at least this wouldn't be their first time drawing it. She would draw it first, one on each of the mortal kingdoms on the map. They would have to trace it with their blood over their respective country.

Azrael held out his palm, a piece of charcoal in it, and she began to sketch the one in Rydeon first. That was the only one that was for sure going to work since they were currently in Rydeon, and it would be the one to give the Fae access to their gifts.

She carefully outlined the Mark, checking it over three times before looking up to summon Drake. She pressed her lips together when she found him standing in front of the tombs of King Dalton and Queen Octavia. Drake's hands were in his pockets as he stared at the words etched into stone. Then he slowly reached out and skated his fingers over a third one. The tomb of the Crown Prince. What was supposed to be his tomb.

“Drake,” she said softly. “It’s time.”

“Scarlett,” Eliza gritted out. “We have company.”

She turned, eyes going to the mirror gate instinctively, but there wasn't anyone in the mirror.

Only leaning beside it.

Dressed in all black, gloves in place, flipping a dagger in her hand.

“For fuck’s sake,” Scarlett sighed. “What are you doing here, Nuri?”

“Here’s the thing,” Nuri said, tossing the dagger into the air. “I was positive we had the foolish Fae Queen tucked away for safekeeping, yet I think you might actually be the stupid one.” She slid the dagger into a sheath on her thigh. “What the fuck are you doing back here, Scarlett?”

“I have some things to take care of, Sister,” she replied tightly. “So if you could kindly fuck off, that’d be great.”

Nuri pulled her hood back, her honey-colored eyes sliding to Azrael. “Plant Prince, you’re looking well. Your queen will be glad to hear that.”

“My queen stands beside me,” Azrael gritted out.

Nuri's brows shot up, while Scarlett clamped down on her own surprise, keeping her gaze trained on Nuri. Sure, he'd

made the Blood Vow, but she had never expected him to claim her as his queen over Talwyn.

“That is an interesting development,” Nuri quipped. She took a few steps forward, and Azrael, Cassius, and Razik tensed around Scarlett. Nuri smirked. Her gaze slid around the room as she said, “Three mortals in your company.” She raised a finger, pointing at Callan beside Azrael. “Prince Callan. Or is it King? Or just Callan? I really don’t know anymore.”

“King,” Callan said tightly.

“Cute,” Nuri replied, her eyes moving and her finger with them. “Drake. Nice to see you, but silly of you to come here.” Her gaze and finger moved again, settling on Hale. “You, however, I do not know.” Her head tilted. “But I would really, really like to.” She smiled wickedly, her fangs snapping out. “Care to introduce me, Sister?”

“If anyone is getting to know the new mortal, Sister, it will be me.”

Scarlett couldn’t keep the surprise off her face this time. Not as Juliette appeared from the passageway they had come from. She was dressed in all black like the rest of them, her red-brown hair braided over her shoulder, snaking out from beneath her hood.

Nuri sighed. “Must we really fight over him? You always got them first.”

Juliette scoffed. “You were the greedy one. I had to fight you to share *twins*.”

“For the love of Silas,” Azrael said. “I cannot deal with all three of you in the same vicinity again.”

Nuri laughed, her insane, maniacal one, lifting her arms out to her side and spinning in a slow circle. “So many family reunions this night.”

“What are you talking about?” Scarlett asked, tone full of trepidation. Nuri may be slightly crazy, but she never spoke in riddles.

“Hello, Drake.”

Scarlett's blood went cold at the sound of Lord Tyndell's voice. She whirled around to see Cyrus and Eliza pulling swords where they stood in front of Drake. Scarlett immediately sent her shadows to him, a panther snarling, eyes glowing, while a shield locked into place around the Rydeon King.

"Scarlett, my dear," Lord Tyndell chided. "Do you really think I would hurt my son?"

"I am *not* your son," Drake said loudly, but he was pale. Scarlett could see it from across the room. The color had drained from his face, his hands curled into fists at his sides. She had been ready for this; Drake had not, despite their best efforts to prepare him for this.

"Is that what they told you?" the Lord's voice had gone cold at Drake's words.

"It is the truth," Drake retorted. "You are a Maraan. I am not. Tava is not." He looked over his shoulder at the tombs behind him, then back at Lord Tyndell. "They are not buried here, are they?"

A muscle ticked in Lord Tyndell's jaw, the only sign of fury Scarlett had ever seen from the man. "That piece-of-shit king is," he finally snarled.

"And her?"

The Lord's face instantly softened. "She was buried in a field of wildflowers in the western part of the kingdom."

"You killed her? Like you killed him?" Drake demanded. "Why not me too?"

"This is not the time nor the place for this, Balam," came yet another voice that Scarlett recognized.

Sybil. The current High Healer in the Black Syndicate and Juliette's mother appeared next.

Nuri clapped her hands once in excitement. "It's like a party."

"Mother," Juliette said curtly.

“My disappointment of a daughter,” the High Healer replied tersely. “I am not surprised to find you here.”

“It must irk you to no end that I became the Oracle while you are stuck serving at the feet of another,” Juliette replied.

“I gave you everything and more,” Sybil snapped.

“I know exactly what you gave me, Mother,” Juliette said calmly. “I know what you gave others too. How you reported all of Eliné’s movements to Alaric.”

Sybil scoffed. “As if you and Nuri did not do the same of Scarlett. That was your entire purpose. It was why I gave you to him in the first place.”

“One of the many *things* you gave me, right?”

“You ungrateful little bitch,” Sybil snarled. “If you would have done what you were told, he would have rewarded us both when he rules this world.”

“*If* he rules this world,” Juliette corrected. She tapped her temple once. “So many outcomes I have seen. They are all different, but one thing remains constant throughout them all.” Sybil stared back at her daughter. “Your only reward is death.”

“Enough of this,” Lord Tyndell ordered. His brow furrowed before his gaze slid to Scarlett. “You cannot hold shields around all of their minds all night, my dear. You will slip eventually.”

“I don’t need to hold them all night,” Scarlett retorted, drawing her sword. “Only long enough to kill you.”

Chaos erupted as Lord Tyndell and Sybil both pulled weapons, advancing in clean and precise movements. Lord Tyndell went to Cyrus and Eliza, while Sybil went to Briar, who was guarding Hale.

Juliette and Scarlett exchanged looks before they began advancing on Nuri.

“Two on one?” Nuri said, drawing her scimitars.

“It will be like training,” Juliette replied, pulling her own blade that was sheathed down her back.

“Just like old times,” Scarlett added.

She let Juliette make the first move so she could turn to Cassius.

“Get Drake to this table, Cass. Call me when you do so I can instruct him on the proper way to trace the Mark,” she ordered, her voice low.

Cassius nodded, and she turned back to see Nuri blocking a swing from Juliette. She stepped in, swinging her sword, and Nuri dropped to a knee, a scimitar meeting her blade with a clang.

“How did you know to be here?” Scarlett gasped as Nuri flipped backwards, getting into a defensive stance once more.

“I had a vision,” Juliette answered, whirling and striking high while Scarlett went low. Nuri managed to duck and jump at the same time, spinning out of the way when she landed. “I saw you’d need help.”

“How did you get here?”

Scarlett parried a swing from Nuri.

“A griffin,” Juliette answered.

“Jealous,” Scarlett grunted, deflecting another blow. She could use magic for this, end it quickly enough, but she needed to keep Nuri busy until Drake was at that table. Not to mention she was focusing on keeping shields around everyone’s minds so Lord Tyndell couldn’t mess with them. Once the magical wards were down though, the Fae would be able to put up their own shields.

Juliette snorted. “Says the woman who rode a dragon out of Baylorin.”

“A real dragon?” Nuri asked, dancing backwards as Juliette and Scarlett advanced again.

“A spirit animal,” Juliette answered, swinging once more.

“You guys always get to do the fun things,” Nuri whined, kicking out as she spun away. “This is why I should get the new mortal.”

“Neither of you is getting the new mortal,” Scarlett snapped, looking over her shoulder to see that Drake was almost there. “Cover me?”

Juliette nodded. “That’s why I’m here.”

That was unsettling and convenient all at once.

Scarlett ran for the center of the chamber, leaping atop the stone table, trying not to move the map. Cassius and Drake made it in the next moment, and as soon as they did, Scarlett pulled her shadow panther apart, creating four more to prowl about while a ring of starfire encased them all. It was a lot of magic, too much power, but if they failed at this, she knew there would not be a second chance.

She could tell Razik was conserving power, catching onto the fact that he was likely going to be the one that would Travel them all out of here. This was going to take all of her magic and then some. She would end up drawing from Cassius at some point.

Cassius had already cut the tip of Drake’s finger, and as Scarlett gritted her teeth against the strain of maintaining her magic in so many different places, she said, “Start at the top of the center line and go down, just like we’ve been practicing. Whatever you do, do *not* lift your finger until the Mark is complete. Do you understand, Drake?”

He nodded, and she could see his hand tremble as he brought his finger to the map.

“You can do this, Drake,” she said, wincing as a panther lunged at something. “You were born to be a king. It’s in your blood, your very being. Do it for Rydeon. Do it for Tava. Do it in vengeance of your mother and father.”

Something shifted in Drake at those words. She saw the deep, steady inhale before his blood met the map, and he started to trace the center line from top to bottom.

“Drake! Stop!” Lord Tyndell’s sharp bellow carried over the mayhem in the room. Eliza and Cyrus were keeping him back, while Briar was battling Sybil all on his own. “You do not understand the cost of this!”

“Keep going, Drake,” Scarlett ordered. “Do not listen to him. Go back up halfway, then follow the curve that loops around the bottom.”

“No!” Lord Tyndell bellowed at the same time Azrael said, “Incoming.”

Scarlett glanced at him, finding his eyes up, and she knew without looking that seraphs were descending.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

They didn't even have one ward down yet. The Fae didn't have their magic. This was going to end before it even began. It would be a bloodbath. She could only hold out for so long, even with Cass and Razik.

She glanced down, finding Drake finishing the loop. “Follow the diagonal line up to the end,” she urged, shuddering against the impact of a few seraphs landing. The stone table shook slightly beneath her. “Do not lift your finger!”

Drake nodded once, entirely focused on his task.

“When you reach the top, trace the short line down then back up, before finishing the long swirling one,” she instructed, looking up to see a seraph with what appeared to be power like Veda had once had. He pulled a weapon from Cyrus's hand with nothing but air. Air magic, then? Maybe?

“Now what?” Drake asked.

“That's it!” she said. “Lift your finger and step back.”

Drake did, and Scarlett held her breath, waiting.

And waiting.

And waiting.

Until something tingled against her skin, washing over her. Her gaze shot to Azrael at the same moment that a long vine appeared in his hands. He whipped it out, stretching it and winding it around a seraph, trapping his wings in the bindings. Thorns appeared, shredding through feathers.

She gasped, pulling back some of her magic from the Fae and letting them get their own defenses up. She tightened the shields around the mortals and Cassius. Cassius had started to master shielding his mind, but she wasn't taking any chances.

“Now we all play,” she said darkly, leaping down from the table. Louder she yelled, “Hale, you next!” as she reached for the charcoal she'd set aside and began drawing the same Mark on the map across Toreall.

CHAPTER 37

CALLAN

Callan brought his sword up, knocking an arrow out of the way. Not before it grazed his shoulder though. He hissed at the sting, but he didn't dare check the wound and take his eyes off everything going on around him.

This was pure chaos. The Fae all had their magic, and things had exploded. Eliza had come to help Azrael next to him, the two of them working together to take down a seraph that had dropped in from the top of the walls. Cyrus, Cassius, and Briar were guarding Drake and Hale where they were gathered around the center table, while Scarlett was back on top of the thing, giving orders to Hale. Juliette and Nuri were locked in a battle of equal skill keeping each other busy, and Razik was back in the air.

“Focus, Callan,” Eliza shouted. “You’ve been training for exactly this!”

Another seraph was coming for them, flames from Eliza engulfing his wings a moment later. The seraph bellowed in pain, but kept moving forward with a sneer on his lips as he raised his sword. Air slammed into Callan, shoving him backwards, but Prince Azrael was there, keeping him on his feet.

“Stay in the shields,” he said tightly, a wood stake appearing in his hand that he sent flying at a seraph coming at Eliza from behind.

“He has air magic,” Callan said pointing at the seraph. His wings were no longer burning, clearly having sucked the air

from the flames.

“Ah,” Azrael replied, twirling his sword in his hand and focusing on the seraph in question. “You ever made a kill?”

“What?”

Azrael glanced over his shoulder at him. “Have you killed someone?”

Callan blinked at him. “No?”

“You’re about to,” Azrael answered. “I will bind his hands and take care of the wings. Your sword goes through his throat. Ready?”

Had he really just asked him if he was ready to take a life?

Before Callan could answer, the Earth Prince was rushing the seraph, vines winding up from the ground and snaking around the seraph, effectively distracting him while one wing was cut from his body.

“Solgard!” Azrael demanded. “Now!”

The Earth Prince took a punch to the face, knocking him back a few steps before Azrael got vines wrapped tightly enough around the seraph’s wrists. Callan rushed forward, tightening his grip on his sword. He didn’t let himself think about it when he brought his blade up and shoved it straight through the seraph’s throat. He twisted the blade at the same moment that Azrael managed to sever his other wing. Blood sprayed, and Callan choked down on the bile that rose in his throat as the warm liquid splashed across his face.

“Eliza! Fire!” Azrael yelled, and the Fire General turned, tossing fire at the body of the seraph on the ground, before spinning back to the seraph she was fighting single-handedly. Fluid and smooth. She fought and pivoted with a skill that left no question as to why she led the forces of a Fae Court.

“Good work,” Azrael said, taking a minute to wipe his blade along his pants. “We go again.” He pointed his sword at a seraph that had just landed. Callan nodded, moving forward with the Earth Prince.

Again and again they worked to take down seraphs. They seemed to be never-ending. Every time they took one down, he could swear three more dropped in from above. Azrael did most of the work, but Callan's sword went through throats and stomachs, more blood and gore splattering as they worked. And Callan realized he was actually doing this. He was part of the fight, not sidelined or forced to hide. Azrael could do this himself, but with Callan helping him, he was able to conserve his magic. They could take them down faster.

“Callan!”

Scarlett's voice carried over the melee, and he turned to see her still atop the stone table.

“Get over here!”

He nodded, indicating that he'd heard her, before turning back to tell Azrael they needed to make their way to the center. But his gaze caught on Juliette's mother sneaking up behind Eliza. She was close. Too close.

“Eliza!” Callan bellowed.

She spun, eyes widening at the sight of a dagger raised overhead. She blocked, but not fast enough. The dagger went into her chest. The Fire General was in black, but Callan could see the blood instantly soaking through her tunic. He was running, faster than he'd ever run before. A seraph stepped into his path, and he prepared to veer left, but before he'd made it a step, vines were yanking the seraph out of the way at the same moment an arrow of white flames went through the seraph's chest.

Eliza had managed to shove Juliette's mother back, but the female was still a Witch. She had been trained like one. Eliza was still fighting though. Sybil had tugged the dagger out, blood continuing to gush from the wound as fire flared down Eliza's sword, arcing through the air at the Witch. Sybil deflected, and Eliza dropped the sword as Sybil threw something onto the ground between them, smoke billowing up. He couldn't see anything, but he could hear Eliza coughing.

He staggered through the haze finding the general on her knees, her hand pressed to her chest atop the wound, trying to staunch the bleeding. Up close, Callan could see the wound was off to the right, below her shoulder. Still severe but away from the heart and lungs. At least he hoped that was the case.

“Eliza,” he rasped, dropping to his knees beside her.

“Saw you...gut some seraphs,” she gasped out, her breaths harsh and full of pain. “Nice work.”

“I have an excellent trainer,” he replied, reaching over and pressing down on her hand to add more pressure to the wound.

“The potion...suppressed my magic,” she hissed. “We did not...anticipate a Witch.”

That had to be why Azrael wasn't beside them yet. He knew what the smoke still billowing around him would do if he inhaled it.

“The mighty Fire General,” Sybil crooned with a sneer, stepping through the wisps. She was tall and thin, red-brown hair braided down her back. She had two long-knives in her hands. Violet eyes slid to him. “And the dethroned Crown Prince. I will be rewarded for taking your lives.”

Eliza's hand came up, claspng around his wrist. He'd dropped his sword somewhere in the smoke, but Eliza's sword was lying behind him. She dug her nails into his flesh, and when he met her grey eyes, he knew exactly what she was telling him to do. He slowly reached behind him feeling the blade beneath his fingers. He curled his fingers around it, blood welling as it sliced into his palm and fingers.

Sybil slowly prowled forward. “He should have taken care of you years ago, when the Wraiths were visiting you daily,” she continued. “Well, I guess only one really. How easy it would have been for Scarlett to slit that pretty throat while sharing your bed. Instead, they started sticking their noses where they didn't belong.”

“By caring about children?” Callan asked, dragging the sword forward. The chaos around them, outside of the smoke

they were hidden within, covered the sound of the metal scrapping over the stone.

“They were trained to do what they were told,” she retorted. “But Eliné could never let that happen. She always encouraged them to ‘think for themselves’ and ‘follow their instincts’ when something didn’t feel right.”

He was caught off guard at the mention of Eliné, his movements stilling for a moment. “You knew the Fae Queen?”

Sybil rolled her eyes. “Yes, I knew her. I was the one who told Alaric of her plans to take the girls and leave Windonelle. In a way, I suppose you could say I am responsible for her death.” She smiled, something sinister and cruel. “It was shortly after that Dracon was hired to kill her. Did you know I worked under her at the Healer’s Compound? Can you believe that? A Witch working under a godsdamn Fae in a healing capacity? The sister goddesses would never stand for it.”

Callan had resumed sliding the sword forward, finally feeling his fingertips brush the hilt. He had no idea what Sybil was talking about. Sister goddesses? There was no such thing, but the longer she spoke, the longer she remained distracted. Perhaps she hadn’t been trained as extensively as the other Witches after all. He couldn’t imagine the ruthless females talked so much before killing. They seemed more like the ‘kill now, ask questions later’ type, but he wasn’t about to question the gods’ favor now.

He could hear Scarlett calling for him, her voice riddled with panic. What they needed was wind magic to blow the smoke from this chamber, but that was the one element they didn’t have at their disposal right now. Even having magic freed in this kingdom, the Fae were as powerless as the mortals when it came to this potion.

Except he wasn’t powerless. He’d been training with the Fae. He’d been training on how to defend against magic, how to fight against those naturally more powerful than he was.

Eliza was leaning heavily against him now, her grip on his wrist loosening, more blood smearing across his skin. The

potion must be affecting her ability to heal too. That or the wound was worse than he'd thought.

He tightened his grip on the hilt. He'd get one chance at this. He knew that much. If he didn't make this count, he and the Fire General were likely both dead. He'd probably laugh about the irony of that if they survived.

Sybil huffed a breath of laughter. "Looks like you're up first, Crown Prince. The general will likely be dead before I've finished with you." She moved closer, sheathing one of the long knives at her sides. Her hand came out, fingers digging into his scalp as she wrenched his head back. "Mortals," she sneered. "So helpless. So powerless. So utterly insignificant." She leaned in a little closer, her voice going soft and vindictive. "So easily manipulated like that sweet young Lady, going to the slums with her bleeding heart. Walking right into traps spoiled by a prince and his guards who had no business being there."

He felt the knife snaking up his chest. He forced himself not to react, not to give in to the rage prowling beneath his skin. The knife paused over his heart before continuing up, the tip gliding against his exposed throat. The metal was cool and hot all at once, and all he could think about as he waited this out, waited for the perfect opportunity, was that if he failed, he would never see his sister again. Eva would grow up to rule a kingdom she knew nothing about. And Tava?

He could still feel the soft flutter of her breaths as she'd slept in his arms. He could still smell the faint jasmine scent of her hair tonic. He could still hear the hurt and agony as she confessed she saw him dying her dreams.

He refused to make those dreams her reality. Even if things were never fixed between them, he wouldn't let that nightmare come true.

He felt the knife pierce his skin at the same moment he let out a yell of defiance, yanking the sword forward and plunging it straight into Sybil's heart. He twisted it sharply, blood already spilling from between the Witch's lips.

Sybil dropped to her knees, and he yanked the sword from her chest, only now realizing the blade he held was the spirit sword Eliza had won in that stupid maze race.

“Maybe,” he panted, “the mortals aren’t so powerless.”

There was a gurgle from the High Healer before she fell sideways, forever still.

He looped his arm under Eliza’s shoulders. “Come on,” he grunted. “We need to get you to your queen.”

He hauled Eliza to her feet, and she groaned. “That...was bad ass, Princeling,” she rasped.

He swiped his arm across his face, warm liquid smearing. His hand was dripping blood as they moved through the smoke, Eliza’s wound still steadily streaming. He didn’t know how she was able to walk.

The moment they stepped from the smoke, two winged males dropped before them. He instantly raised the sword he still held, only to drop it once more in relief when he realized it was Cassius and Razik.

Razik’s glowing blue eyes raked over them both before he stepped forward. “Get him to Scarlett,” he ordered Cassius, scooping Eliza into his arms in one swift movement.

“Put me down,” she protested, still managing to snap at him.

“When you can stand on your own, I’ll do that, Milady,” Razik retorted. “For now, you fly with me.”

He launched for the sky a moment later. Cassius had a ring of black flames around them in the next breath, gripping his arm and dragging him forward. “What the hell happened in there?” he demanded, a knife leaving his hand. Callan hadn’t even seen him draw the damn thing.

“That potion that Sybil threw, it nullified Eliza’s magic,” Callan said, stumbling over what he was fairly certain were charred body parts.

“I know that,” Cassius replied, shoving Callan’s head down. He heard the whiz of an arrow a second later. “We

couldn't go near it. We didn't know if it would work on Avonleyans or not."

That explained why no one had come to help.

"I killed Sybil."

He was jerked to a stop, Cassius staring at him. "You did what?"

"I killed Sybil. The High Healer."

"I know who Sybil is," Cassius said. "You are sure she is dead?"

"I shoved Eliza's spirit sword through her heart," Callan replied.

Cassius started dragging him forward again. "I suppose that would make her fairly dead."

Callan felt tingling on his skin, and the ring of dark flames disappeared. He assumed they'd entered a shield of Scarlett's, which was confirmed when a shadow panther appeared at his side. A second later, the queen herself stood in front of him, eyes wide.

"You are covered in blood," she said, eyes studying him. "Where are your wounds?"

"Nothing life threatening," he answered. "Most of it isn't mine."

"He killed Sybil," Cassius supplied.

"You did?" she asked, excitement filling her silver eyes. Only a Wraith of Death would be thrilled at the fact he'd taken a life.

"Drove Eliza's spirit sword through her heart," Cassius added.

"If we weren't in the middle of a battle, I'd take you to a tavern to celebrate," Scarlett gushed. "We'd get sloppy drunk, and I'd make you regale me over and over again with how it happened. Every minute detail."

“But we are in the middle of a battle, Darling,” Cyrus said, appearing at her side. “Can we get a move on here?”

Scarlett practically skipped back to the stone table. She reached for Callan’s hand, pulling a dagger that was strapped to her thighs and slicing the pad of his forefinger open. She stood beside him, directing his movements over a Mark she’d drawn on the map over his kingdom.

When he finished and stepped back, he realized almost all of their company was gathered around them. The Fae were covering them, keeping seraphs back, while Scarlett’s shadow panthers snarled and snapped at anyone who got too near on the ground.

Juliette and Nuri were still battling near what he now knew to be a mirror gate. Lord Tyndell had disappeared at some point, and Callan hoped they were long gone before he returned.

Razik dropped down, wings disappearing at the same moment his feet hit the stone. Eliza was curled into him, her head resting against his chest. Her eyes were closed. She’d lost consciousness, either from exhaustion or pain. Likely both. Rayner and Cyrus paused at his appearance.

“How is she?” Rayner asked, taking a step forward. It looked like he was going to reach for her, but Razik’s face promised violence if he did.

“My magic is holding the wound together, but she lost a lot of blood. We need to get her to a Healer,” Razik answered.

“We’re almost done here anyway,” Scarlett said. “You need someone to take her so you can Travel us or...?”

“I think I’ll manage,” Razik drawled.

They were all gathering close, Azrael rolling up the map, when another unit of seraphs descended. Juliette cried out as Nuri shoved her, and she stumbled backwards, ending up behind the various shields surrounding them. Callan watched the two lock eyes, Nuri’s lips pressing to a thin line. Juliette nodded her head, acknowledging something, before she turned and made her way over to them.

“Are you coming with us?” Scarlett asked, a tentative hope in her voice.

Juliette shook her head. “I cannot leave the continent.”

“We can’t leave you here,” Scarlett argued. “We’re surrounded. Our magic won’t hold out forever.”

“We can Travel outside, drop her off where we came in,” Razik said. “Then leave from there.”

Juliette was nodding. “Yes. We need to go. Alaric will be here any moment.”

“What?” Scarlett asked.

“It is why Nuri shoved me behind your shield,” Juliette answered. “But it’s too late.”

She pointed towards the mirror gate, and Alaric stepped from the air nearby a second later. That was pure rage and malice on his face as he took them all in.

“Everyone stop using your magic. Now,” Scarlett ordered, stepping in front of all of them. Shadows disappeared. Flames winked out. No one moved. The seraphs stood, waiting for orders. Callan could swear everyone in their company was holding their breath.

“What have you done?” Alaric hissed, eyes narrowed on Scarlett.

“Exactly what I said I was going to do,” Scarlett replied. “I told you to check those cracks. Looks like you missed a few.”

He raised his hand, and Callan braced himself, preparing to feel the crushing around his heart when Alaric used his power, but Scarlett tutted at him.

“Not yet, Alaric,” she purred, backing up. Azrael grabbed one of Callan’s hands. Someone else grabbed the other. “Your nightmare isn’t over yet.”

Cassius’s hand landed on her shoulder, and Callan felt the pull at his navel before they were standing on the grass a few miles from the Necropolis. Juliette was already running, the cry of an eagle ringing through the night.

“I will be fine,” she called back over her shoulder, a half-lion, half-eagle beast descending from the sky. “Hazel is waiting for me.”

“Go,” Scarlett ordered, clearly not willing to waste any more time here and risk being ambushed.

Callan didn't have time to catch his breath before he was tugged through the air again. It would never be right to him that they could cover so much distance in the blink of an eye. They crossed an entire sea in less time than it took for him to inhale a breath, but a second later they stood on sand. Winds were whipping around them. The sound of waves crashing filled the air.

“Where are we?” Scarlett cried.

“An island outside the Wards,” Razik shouted back, his words nearly getting lost among the howling winds. “Get out your vial. Dump it in the waters.” As she fished it out from an inner pocket, he added, “Everyone stay touching. We move again as soon as the Wards let us in.”

This time when they Traveled, they emerged inside a warm entrance foyer. They were not at the Greybane estate though. They were at the castle.

Kailia was there, her head tilting at their sudden appearance. “That was faster than I anticipated.”

“Where is Cethin?” Razik barked, the rest of them all fanning out. Hale sank right to the floor, his head between his knees.

“Here,” the Avonleyan King said, coming from a hallway. His eyes scanned over everyone, alarm filling his face.

“We need Niara,” Razik said. “Now.”

Kailia was gone among smoke before Razik had finished speaking.

“Who is that? Who is Niara?” Scarlett asked. “And where is Sorin?”

“I felt Razik at the Wards,” Cethin said. “I sent Riggs to get Sorin.”

The front doors of the castle flung open suddenly, the Fire Prince rushing through them. His eyes were locked on Scarlett as he stalked across the foyer.

“Are you hurt?” he asked, taking Scarlett’s face in his hands, searching her eyes.

She shook her head. “No, but Eliza... We need Beatrix, Sorin.”

Something haunted crossed Sorin’s features, but it was gone just as quickly. Scarlett saw it too, her features tensing with concern, but he said, “She is unavailable.”

“Still?” Scarlett asked.

Sorin only nodded.

“Kailia is getting Niara. She is our most skilled Healer,” Cethin said.

“You have Witches here?” Callan asked.

“She is a descendant of a powerful Witch,” Cethin answered. “Let’s take her to a guest room, Raz. Niara will meet us there.” Razik was already moving toward the stairs. “Does anyone else need healing?” Cethin asked, turning to the rest of them.

“Minor injuries that can wait,” Cyrus replied.

“Niara will want her to stay here to monitor her.”

“Then we will stay as well,” Scarlett replied, looking up at Sorin who nodded in agreement, his fingers threaded with hers. They headed for the stairs Razik had gone up, Cyrus, Rayner, and Cassius following.

“Of course,” Cethin said. “Your rooms are always ready, as are several guest rooms near your wing. Is everyone staying?”

“I need to see Tava,” Drake said, his voice monotone and raspy.

“I would also prefer to go back to my estate,” Hale added from the floor.

In the end, the mortals were Traveled back to the estates, Briar and Azrael choosing to stay with the other Fae.

Drake and Callan trudged up the stairs of the manor house. It wasn't until Orson had Traveled them that he realized he still had Eliza's spirit sword.

They were halfway down the long hall when Tava's door flew open and she rushed out into the hallway. She stumbled to a stop, her turquoise eyes wide as she stared back at them. She wore a dark purple silk robe that went to her feet and was cinched tightly at the waist. Her gaze bounced back and forth between him and her brother, and her hand fluttered up to her throat, fingers grasping for a phantom amulet.

"You are covered in blood," she finally said.

Callan glanced down, having completely forgotten about all of that between the actual killing of Sybil and the Mark and Eliza.

"It is not mine," Callan said. Then he amended, "Most of it is not mine."

"Fath— Tyndell was there," Drake said in the same monotone as before.

Tava's hand dropped to her side. "He tried to kill you?"

"No. Maybe? I do not know," Drake said. "I saw their tombs, Tava. I saw *my* tomb."

"Drake," she whispered, something pained in her voice. She took a few steps forward before faltering again.

"I am going to bathe," Callan said, nodding at Tava. She looked like she was about to protest. "I assure you, Tava, I am fine."

Her lips pressed into a thin line, but she nodded all the same, taking Drake's hand. "Come on," she said, pulling him towards her room.

Callan shut the door behind him when he entered his room, setting Eliza's sword carefully atop the dresser. He would clean it for her after he'd cleaned the events of the night from his skin. Peeling the soiled clothing from his body, he dropped

it into a pile on the bathing room floor. He assumed they'd be burned. There was no amount of laundering that would get them clean.

He had to drain the tub and refill it as he rinsed all the blood and gore from his flesh, the water turning pink around him. With fresh hot water, Callan tipped his head back against the back of the tub, steam drifting up from the surface.

He had killed people today.

He had been part of the battle.

He had taken life.

He had fought alongside Fae.

He had ended beings' entire existence.

He had saved Eliza.

He had violently killed Sybil.

He couldn't balance all of it in his mind. He couldn't separate the virtue from the atrocity of it all. He could appreciate how different the battle had been from that throne room—that he had fought instead of cowered—but he could also feel the stain on his soul for ending life. The darkness creeping in that came with that sin, whether it was necessary or not.

How did Scarlett make peace with herself? How did any of them justify it for that matter? How did they decide it was worth it? How did they carry the weight of it with them?

Callan sighed, gripping the edge of the tub and hauling himself up, stepping over the edge and onto a bath mat. He quickly dried off, wrapping the towel around his waist before moving out to his room to find clothing.

He didn't expect to find Tava there too.

"Oh my gods," she gasped, turning away, hand flying up to block her eyes. "My apologies, Callan. I was bringing fresh towels. I did not... I will go."

Callan fought the smile playing on his mouth at her cheeks going bright red. "Just let me get pants. How is Drake?"

She turned away completely, facing the wall. “He is also bathing. I am sorry, Callan. I thought you would already be done. When I realized you were still in the bathing room, I was going to leave them here and...”

He had already slipped into pants, his towel draped over a chair, and he reached out, gently touching her elbow. She jumped, and he bit down on the laugh trying to escape. “It is fine, Tava. I am dressed.”

She turned, her hands flying back to her face, cheeks heating all over again. “You are *not* dressed,” she stammered.

“Would you be more comfortable if I put on a shirt?”

“Yes. No.” She bit her bottom lip. “I am just going to go. This entire situation is wildly inappropriate.” He reached for her again, but stopped when she said, “You are bleeding.”

“What?”

She reached out this time, seeming to forget he was shirtless, taking his hand in hers. The deep slice across his palm and cuts on his fingers from gripping Eliza’s blade had reopened somehow, blood dripping to the floor.

Tava glanced up at him. “You said it was not your blood.”

“I said *most* of it was not my blood.”

Her eyes darted to his shoulder where the arrow had grazed him. “These need to be cleaned and bandaged.”

“I just bathed.”

“In water that was no longer clean after washing everything from yourself,” she argued, still holding his palm in her hands.

He didn’t bother telling her he’d changed out the water. She was already striding from the room, saying something about getting supplies from Magdalena. He was exhausted, but she was also right. The wound on his hand needed to at least be wrapped.

He moved out to the sitting room, stooping to put logs into the hearth and start a fire. The fire Fae had been taking care of

this since they'd been here, but with all of them at the castle, it looked like he'd be doing it tonight.

Callan was searching for matches when Tava came back through the door. There were various things bundled in her arms.

"Sit," she said, pushing the door shut behind her with her foot.

"The fire—"

"I will get it," she interrupted, setting the supplies down on the small end table. She pulled matches from the pocket of her robe, lighting one and crouching down to get the fire going before she disappeared into the bedchamber. She emerged a moment later with a wet cloth, sitting down beside him and pulling his injured hand into her lap.

She was gently dabbing at the wound when Callan said, "You do not need to do this, Tava."

"It keeps me busy," she murmured, not looking up. "I was quite anxious with all of you gone this evening."

"How is Drake?" he asked again. "And do not tell me fine. He was clearly not fine."

"You are correct," Tava replied, not missing a beat. "He is not fine." She set the soiled cloth aside, reaching for a small glass jar and twisting off the top. "I remember overhearing Drake, and... Well, who I know to be my father, arguing more than once. Drake wanted to be trained to take over his position as the Commander of the King's armies. He could not understand why our father would refuse, and he would become upset. Father would tell him he was not cut out for battle, that he was better suited to advise and move behind doors." A cool salve touched his skin, and she carefully spread it over his palm and fingers. "He tried to keep us both in the background as much as possible. I was more content there than Drake. He thought he had something to prove to him, and it made their relationship strained."

Tava set the jar aside, reaching for the bandages. She began wrapping each of his fingers. "His entire life he has

thought he did not measure up to our father's expectations. When in reality, it appears our father was trying to keep us hidden. That does not negate the fact that for his entire life, all he has heard is that he is not good enough. Seeing everything tonight—our father, the tombs of our real parents, the fighting and bloodshed he was always kept too sheltered from..." She sighed, reaching for another bandage to begin wrapping his palm. "No, he is not fine."

She smoothed her fingers over the wrappings, and Callan flexed his fingers slightly around the bandages. Busying herself with another cloth, she shifted a little closer so she could clean up his shoulder. She cleared her throat. "And you? How are you holding up?"

"I killed people tonight."

Her hand paused its dabbing at the superficial wound. When she slowly resumed the motion, she said tentatively, "You were fighting for your people. This is the beginning of a war. It is to be expected."

"I do not think anyone ever expected me to fight in a war," Callan answered.

"A real king would do so," she answered softly. "A real king does not sit on a throne commanding armies from afar. Besides, is that not exactly what you have been training for?"

"Yes, but..." He pushed out a harsh breath. "Even with all the training, I thought I was prepared for that moment, but I was not."

"You hesitated?" she asked, reaching for the jar of slave.

"That is just it. I didn't hesitate," he said. "Prince Azrael sort of talked me through it, but I did not hesitate. Not even a little bit. What does that say about me?"

"That you were adequately trained," she answered without hesitation.

"You make it sound simple."

"Taking a life is anything but simple." She wiped her fingers on a towel, reaching for a bandage.

“It is not simple, yet so many do it daily. Seemingly without thought. I do not understand how,” Callan said. “I feel...tainted. Like when I took those lives, I lost a piece of myself too.”

Tava was finishing taping the bandage in place, fingers smoothing over his skin. She was quiet for a long moment as she finished up before sitting back, fiddling with the supplies and gathering them up. “I think that anyone responsible for other people has to make hard choices sometimes. I think they taint their souls so those they care for do not have to.”

She moved to stand, but Callan caught her hand. She hadn't looked at him directly since the hallway, and he reached out, tipping her chin up. “Thank you, Tava.”

“It was nothing,” she said, cheeks turning pink once more. After all this time, she still blushed at the full weight of his attention.

“For the bandages, yes, but that is not what I meant,” he said. “Thank you for being a light when the darkness starts to close in.”

She cleared her throat, pulling away from him and pushing back to her feet. “I need to go check on Drake,” she said, gathering up the various supplies she had brought in with her. “Do you need anything else?”

What he needed was for her to stay here tonight. He would not sleep, even though he was utterly exhausted. The adrenaline rush of the battle had long-since worn off. And if he did sleep, he was certain the nightmares of that throne room would find him and mingle with the events of this night. What he needed was her light to keep the night away and the darkness at bay.

Instead he shook his head, walking her to the door and pulling it open for her. She seemed to hesitate for a moment before she left. He watched her until she had slipped inside her room. He quietly closed the door, moving to the small alcohol cart and pouring a measure of liquor. Then he sat back on the sofa before the fire, watching the flames flicker and listening

to the logs hiss and crackle. The darkness already creeping back in.

CHAPTER 38

TALWYN

The sound of the door opening roused Talwyn from sleep, and she sat up. It took her a moment to remember where she was. In a soft bed, navy blue and gold curtains tied back on the bed. She pushed her hair back from her face, her hand shaking when her fingers snagged in tangles.

This was her childhood room at the Black Halls. The room Eliné had tucked her into at night. The room where she and Ashtine had played in, pretending they were queens and princesses. The room where she'd dreamed of being queen. When she'd believed she would do something good.

A figure moved into the moonlight seeping in from the window. She didn't need to look to know it was Tarek. He was the only one who visited her here. They'd removed the shirastone shackles, but a ring had been shoved onto her finger. She couldn't get it off, no matter how hard she tried. They'd taken her Semiria ring though. She was sure she'd never see it again.

"You need to eat, Talwyn," Tarek said into the dark of the room.

He'd stopped being formal and greeting her days ago. She was hauled from this room daily. She had been forced to watch Alaric slaughter another group of Fae that night, at sunset, just like he'd said. She'd started giving him more at that point. Anything to keep her people safe and Ashtine's secret hidden. But Alaric knew that she knew how to get into the prison. She knew his patience wouldn't last much longer, and when it

came down to it, she was going to have to choose: let their innocent people be slaughtered to keep a secret or tell him how to get into the prison.

“I am not hungry,” she retorted, throwing back the blankets.

“You have not been hungry for three days.”

That wasn't true. She was starving. But her power refilled on sleep and food, just like mortal energy. She could only avoid sleep for so long, but food? She could hold off on that for days.

Her feet hit the floor, and she stumbled to the bathing room. The shirastone ring locked down her gifts anyway. She couldn't feel them. She had no idea how much her power had refilled.

She took a glass, filling it from the tap and swishing water in her mouth before spitting it into the basin. Then she lifted her gaze to the mirror.

Lifeless jade eyes stared back at her, hard and fractured. Her mahogany hair hung limp around her shoulders, and the hollowness of her face said she hadn't eaten in days, just like Tarek had said. That explained the tremors in her hands and weak knees, she supposed.

She turned to the tub, twisting the knobs to start the water running. Unceremoniously, she removed her nightgown, letting it fall to the floor before she stepped into the tub. She knew Tarek was watching her every move from the doorway. If he was here, then she would be going to see Alaric soon. She wasn't going to be doing that in a godsdamn nightgown.

She quickly washed, slipping under the water to rinse her hair. When she emerged, Tarek was standing there with a towel held out. She glared at him. “I do not need your help.”

“I am aware, Talwyn,” he replied, but she let him settle the towel around her shoulders anyway as she climbed back out of the bath.

“Where am I being taken today?” she asked, wringing water from her hair over the draining tub.

“Lord Tyndell will be here shortly to take us to Baylorin.”

It had been a while since she'd been there. The last few times she'd seen Alaric it had been in the throne room of these Halls. He had sat upon her aunt's throne, now Scarlett's throne, she supposed, and she could do nothing. The way he had looked at her told her he knew what it did to her to see him up there. It was another way to not-so-subtly show her he was in control.

She quickly dressed in her usual brown pants and white tunic, sliding on her boots and braiding back her hair. Tarek escorted her down to the entrance of the Halls, Lord Tyndell waiting for them.

The Lord looked tense, his features tight. He didn't greet Talwyn like he usually did. He just gripped her elbow and took them all through the air straight into a council room at the Baylorin castle.

Nuri was seated at the table. There was a cut above her eye, already scabbing over, and a spot on her jaw was turning black and blue. Talwyn raised a brow in question, and Nuri smiled. “Sibling spat,” she said with a shrug.

Whatever the fuck that meant.

“He is not happy,” Mikale said soberly from where he sat across from Nuri.

“That makes two of us,” Lord Tyndell replied tightly, moving to his usual seat at Alaric's right.

Tarek's hand at the small of her back made her flinch, and she quickly moved to her chair at the other end.

“Is it true?” Mikale asked. “Did she take down the magical wards?”

Talwyn sat up straighter at that.

“She did,” Lord Tyndell said, his hand resting on the table before him.

“But...how?” Mikale asked. “Those wards were linked to mortal kings.”

“The Avonleyans apparently had a Toreall heir hidden in their godsdamn kingdom.” Alaric’s cold voice filled the room as he stalked through the door, Mordecai behind him. His furious gaze landed on Lord Tyndell. “And *someone* insisted on keeping the Rydeon heir alive and fucked us over.”

“The requirement was three mortal kings. If Toreall had been dealt with properly, it would not have mattered that Drake lives,” Lord Tyndell retorted sharply.

In a flash of rage, Alaric picked up a chair and flung it across the room. Talwyn had never seen him so unhinged. The others around the table didn’t even flinch though. They had apparently seen this temper before.

Alaric moved to the head of the table, slowly lowering into his chair. “What was Juliette doing there?”

Nuri shrugged. “I was as surprised as you were.”

“Bullshit,” Alaric snarled.

“How would I have possibly known she was going to show up?” Nuri asked, head propped on her hand. She held up her other palm. “It is not as if I could lie to you.” Alaric’s gaze slid to the window, where the sun was beginning to rise. “You know who else showed up there though?” Nuri asked, that manic delight creeping into her tone. “Besides the queen who has once again fucked you over, of course.”

“Careful, Nuri,” Alaric gritted out.

“A dragon,” she said with glee, ignoring Alaric’s warning.

“Cassius is not a dragon,” he replied. “He is half-Avonleyan, if that.”

“Oh no, not him.”

“She speaks truth, Alaric,” Lord Tyndell sighed. “This one appeared to be able to fully shift if he wished, although he only summoned wings and scales tonight.”

“Let me get this straight,” Alaric said in barely suppressed rage. “In the last year, she has managed to figure out her lineage, find her twin flame, master her magic, take a throne, tear down the wards containing the other beings, remove the

magical wards around the mortal kingdoms, find her way into Avonleya, and find Sargon's line? She is systematically undoing everything Deimas and I worked to put into place over centuries, and she is doing so in months."

"She killed Veda too," Nuri said. "Don't forget that. Oh! And Sybil. Although that was Callan, so maybe that doesn't count?"

"You need to leave. Now," Alaric snarled.

"Of course, *father*," she said, already on her feet and disappearing from the room.

For someone who wanted to play the game, getting kicked out of this meeting didn't seem very conducive. How would she know what was said and planned?

"Did you learn anything before you had to come to the Necropolis?" Lord Tyndell asked.

"No," Alaric replied, body coiled tight with tension. His black eyes settled on Talwyn. "Which is why you are here, your Majesty."

She said nothing, staring back at him, her expression blank and impassive.

"I have some questions for Princess Ashtine."

"I can hardly go ask them of her when I am not allowed to leave the Black Halls without an escort," Talwyn replied.

"And if I let an escort go with you, would you ask them then?" Alaric asked. He seemed to have relaxed slightly, his elbow propped on the arm of his chair, temple leaning on his fist.

"She has been unwell."

"All the more reason to check on her, no?" When Talwyn did not reply, he said, "The thing is, when I went to the Wind Citadel today to do just that, I was informed she has not been seen nor heard from in weeks. Her Court did not appear too concerned. They told me she sometimes disappears for extended periods of time when the winds call her."

“This is true,” Talwyn replied.

“Yet you seem to know she is unwell, and Tarek reports the winds no longer speak to her. Now, I will not pretend to know Princess Ashtine well, if it all, but she does not strike me as the type of ruler who would simply up and leave her Court. Unless she has fled and followed the other Fae Royals. In which case, if you are still in communication with her, we have other issues to discuss.”

“She has not abandoned her Courts,” Talwyn said sharply. “She entrusted them to me while she has been trying to recover, but I have been unable to properly run them. Again, because I am being kept in the Black Halls.”

“You look unwell yourself,” Mikale muttered.

“Likely because my power is being used to feed another,” she sneered.

“Or because you refuse to eat,” Tarek cut in.

Alaric’s brows rose. “Clever move. Trying to keep your power from refueling. That’s the beauty of the Fae though. Their power replenishes within days. You may have delayed it a bit, but they are already half-full, my dear.”

“Why don’t you ask me the questions you have for her? Perhaps I can answer them,” Talwyn said, forcing herself not to react.

“I have already asked them of you. You either do not know or refuse to share your knowledge,” Alaric replied. “But since you seem to know Princess Ashtine is simply—how did you put it?—trying to recover? You clearly know where she is. If you did not, I would think you would be more concerned about her whereabouts.”

Alaric was standing then, slowly striding around the table towards her. “We have ways of finding those who are missing. The most accurate involves the person closest to her.”

“That is not me,” Talwyn said.

“I know,” Alaric drawled. “He is across the sea with the other Fae Royalty you allowed to leave. But that leaves me in

a conundrum then, does it not?"

"I suppose it does."

"But one you can help with."

Alaric had stopped beside her chair, standing between her and Tarek. He reached out, his finger gliding over the shirastone ring on her finger. "I bet you have tried to take this off, haven't you?"

She didn't bother answering. Obviously she had tried. Spent hours trying.

"It is spelled," he said, hands bracing on the edge of the table as he leaned in closer to her. "By the being in the prison I want freed, which brings us back to Princess Ashtine."

"What does Ashtine have to do with the Sorceress being freed?" Talwyn asked from between gritted teeth.

"There is a vast library beneath that Citadel of hers. One only she can enter. I am certain there is something in there that would help me enter that prison." He straightened then, pushing off the table and stepping back. "The thing about that ring, though, is that it nullifies all of one's magic, including your ability to shield."

"I am aware," Talwyn replied stiffly, her fingers curling around the arms of her chair.

Alaric turned and began striding back to his chair. "Do you recall how I told you there are a vast array of powers in my home world?"

"I am well-acquainted with one of them," she retorted.

A small, amused smile tugged at his lips as he lowered back into his seat. "Some can read minds, sift through memories. It is called telepathis. Would you like to guess what power Mordecai acquired?"

Talwyn felt herself pale.

Victory danced in Alaric's dark eyes. "It is what makes him an excellent leader. As an opponent's power begins to weaken, so do their mental shields. All he needs is some of

their blood, which is easy enough to obtain in a battle. When he can read their mind and know their next move? Well, the battle is over quite quickly after that.”

Talwyn twisted, realizing Mordecai never took a seat at the table, but she was too late. The seraph was already behind her, a knife slicing across her forearm. She yanked her arm away, but her blood glistened on the blade. He swiped his finger across it, drawing a symbol of some sort on his forearm.

She felt him. Some sort of extra noise in her mind, clawing through various bits and pieces of her thoughts. She could do nothing. She had thought Alaric was referencing a physical shield, but he'd meant mental ones because she could not keep him out. And having him in there was an excruciating torture because he could see everything she was and wasn't. All her fears and failures. All her secrets.

All Ashtine's secrets.

Mordecai's head tilted, his brown eyes watching her carefully, and Talwyn knew he had found what he was looking for.

“Well?” Alaric asked impatiently from the other end of the table.

“She is in the Southern Islands, hidden in the cliffs.”

“We figured as much,” Mikale said in annoyance.

“She is with child,” Mordecai said, and the Maraans all fell still around the table. “Twins.”

Alaric sat back in his seat, and Talwyn had never seen him look shocked, but that was what was on his face. His jaw was slightly slack as he stared at her. “Looks like we do not need that work-around after all, do we, your Majesty?”

“She will not help you,” Talwyn said, unable to keep the panic from creeping into her voice. “Even if you manage to find her and get past Abrax, she will not aid you.”

“Oh, you will find minds can be easily changed when children are involved,” Alaric said, a cruel smile twisting on his lips. “As for you, your Majesty, we are clearly no longer

allies, which makes you a traitor. It also means I no longer need to pretend you are here for any other reason than to feed my power.” He stood, the others standing with him this time. “Tarek, escort her to the cells. We will deal with her when we return.”

Tarek gripped her elbow, leading her from the room, down stairs and halls. He led her into a cell, and when the door clanged shut behind her, he said, “This is not what I wanted in the end, Talwyn.”

“You made your choices; I made mine,” she replied, not turning to look at him.

There was silence for a long moment until she heard the echo of his boots when he finally left.

She thought of begging the gods for death, but they’d stopped listening to her long ago.



Clink. Clink. Clink.

“Stop that,” Talwyn snapped from where she sat on a cold stone floor. Her knees were bent, arms resting atop them, head tipped back against the wall behind her. It was rocky and uneven and dug into her back.

Clink. Clink. Clink.

“For the love of the gods!”

Nuri laughed, and Talwyn opened her eyes to watch Death’s Shadow on the other side of the bars of her cell. She held a dagger in her hand that she had been dragging back and forth across the bars causing the incessant clinking sound. She’d been doing it for at least two hours, and Talwyn was going mad.

“I was told to watch you,” Nuri said, twirling the dagger in her hand.

“Clearly. Were you told to annoy the ever-loving shit out of me too?”

Nuri made a show of considering this before answering. “No, just watch you. But that is rather vague, wouldn’t you say?”

Talwyn blinked back at her because she was certifiably insane.

“This is why I got myself kicked out of that meeting you know,” she continued. “Alaric’s order came second-hand. Alaric would have been much more specific, but all he told Tarek was ‘*Tell Nuri to watch her.*’ Careless really. He only gets that way when it comes to Scarlett.” She tapped the dagger against her chin. “His beloved protégé ruining everything”

Clink. Clink. Clink.

Clink. Clink. Clink.

“It’s so open-ended when you think about it. What am I supposed to watch you do exactly? Eat? Drink? Piss?”

She could do all three. It wasn’t as if Talwyn had privacy in a godsdamn cell.

Nuri suddenly grabbed the bars, pressing her face to them. “Or...I could watch you walk out of this cell.”

“You cannot let me out,” Talwyn said dryly. “I am not that stupid.”

“The stupidity part is debatable at this point, but you are correct. I cannot let you out.” She moved back again.

Clink. Clink. Clink.

“But I could watch that ring slide off your finger. I bet your magic could free you from these bars.”

Clink. Clink. Clink.

“You cannot take this ring off.”

Nuri grinned at her. “You really need to reevaluate that whole not-stupid thing. We have already established you know nothing. The question is, are you finally ready to play the godsdamn game?” She was gripping the bars again, and Talwyn could swear she was going to start climbing them. “I won’t take that ring off unless you are going to play.”

“I will never make it to Ashtine before they do,” Talwyn said. “My magic reserves are not full enough to Travel to the South Islands.”

Nuri rolled her eyes. “You wouldn’t be able to do anything anyway. But a Water Prince might.”

“You want me to contact Briar?” Talwyn asked, getting to her feet.

“He would definitely play the game.”

Clink. Clink. Clink.

“How can you take the ring off?”

“Anyone can take the ring off,” Nuri said with a flippant flick of her wrist. “Only the wearer cannot remove it.”

“That is...oddly simple.”

“Some of the best magic is just that. Simple.”

Clink. Clink. Clink.

“There is one problem though.”

Of course there was.

“What is that?”

“Once Alaric learns of your escape, I will be ordered to hunt you down and probably kill you.”

Talwyn snorted. “I would welcome death at this point.”

Nuri threw the dagger at the bars. It clanged loudly before falling to the stone floor. The ringing sound echoed in the dungeon halls. Talwyn lurched back. The Night Child was back to gripping the bars, face pressing to them once more.

“That is not playing the game, foolish queen,” she snarled, her fangs snapping out. “If you are dead, you are more

worthless than you already are.” She shoved off the bars in disgust. “I’m not letting you out if you don’t even want to play. You are more useful in there if you wish for death.”

“You said yourself Scarlett is going to kill me.”

“And she is,” Nuri said in exasperation. Talwyn did not understand how *she* was the one not making sense here. “But by the gods, don’t you want to at least *try* to fix your shit before she does? I know you are a selfish bitch, but leaving your mess for everyone else to clean up takes it up a few notches, don’t you think?”

She bent down, retrieving the dagger she’d thrown.

Clink. Clink. Clink.

Talwyn curled her fingers at her sides. Ashtine had said the same thing, albeit in a much nicer way. Ashtine had spoken about the legacy she would leave, about what future she would leave for the generations to come. So did Nuri. Ashtine didn’t filter herself, but was unintentionally infuriating with the way she spoke. Nuri was a blunt bitch and clearly didn’t give two shits.

Talwyn had actually come to appreciate that about her. She always knew where she stood with the Contessa, even if she made it obvious she stood beneath her boots.

“Do you have a solution to this *problem* then?” Talwyn asked, inching closer to the bars once more.

“I do. Two of them, in fact.”

“Are you going to share them or make me guess? We have all the time in the world after all,” she drawled.

Nuri’s lips tipped up, and Talwyn could swear a flicker of approval flitted through her eyes. “That temper thing you do has much less of a bite when you’re on your leash.”

“I am looking forward to being rid of it.”

“You will need to hide somewhere,” Nuri said, resuming dragging that fucking dagger along the bars.

Clink. Clink. Clink.

“Obviously don’t tell me where.”

“Obviously,” Talwyn deadpanned.

Nuri smirked. “I’ve questioned your intelligence more than once, foolish queen.”

Talwyn bristled, but kept her snide remark to herself. Death’s Shadow may be utterly insane, but she was the one on the other side of the bars. She undeniably knew how to work within the confines of her position, and Talwyn...did not.

Because she’d never had to navigate such a low position. Nuri had been right about that too. She’d been handed power and position and fear. It’d been given to her freely. She’d never once questioned that others would bow to her. She was born a Fae Princess and became a Fae Queen.

“I saw your plant prince again,” she said suddenly, dancing backwards and tapping the tip of the dagger on her chin again. “He somehow fits in with her Court quite well. Which really makes me question... Can I still call you a queen?”

Talwyn had gone still again at the mention of Azrael. She didn’t let herself think about him very often. Certainly not when she’d been letting Tarek have her body, but he hadn’t attempted that since she had made it clear she knew what she was to him. A means to an end. A way back to a throne he thought was his.

She couldn’t exactly blame Azrael for working with Scarlett and her Courts. He had fled with them after all. He had to cooperate, aid them, but he said he would do as much. He had walked away from her as a queen, but had made it clear he was not walking away from *her*.

And that was what she didn’t let herself think about. How if she would have asked, he would have helped her find a way out of all this shit. How if she would have let him, he would have not saved her— no, he would never rescue her— but he would have stood by her. But she couldn’t see past the heritage he’d kept hidden. She couldn’t see past her need for revenge to see it for what it was: a need to prove herself and show she

was good enough, that she didn't need those who had abandoned her.

Azrael had never needed her to prove anything to him.

That was what she avoided thinking about the most.

She was her own worst enemy.

If only she'd realized that before, so many things could be different.

But they could be different now. If Nuri was truly going to let her out of here, she could do exactly what the Night Child suggested. Change what she could in the time she had left. She couldn't bring Sorin back. Scarlett would still kill her for that. But she could get word to Briar. She could start there. It wasn't only about Ashtine anymore. If Alaric got to her and released the Sorceress, the tides would shift in this war, undoing all the progress Scarlett had made.

"What do I need to do?" Talwyn asked, stepping right up to the bars, her fingers wrapping around the cool steel.

Nuri's smile grew wider, almost in approval at whatever she saw on Talwyn's face. "You let me drink."

Before Talwyn could process those words, Nuri's gloved fingers were wrapped around her wrist, wrenching her arm through the bars. Her fangs sank deep into Talwyn's arm, and Talwyn cursed under her breath.

But insane or not, Nuri was godsdamn brilliant. With Talwyn's blood in her system, she wouldn't be able to harm her, even if Alaric ordered Death's Shadow to kill her.

Nuri drank far more than was necessary, and Talwyn's other hand tightened around the bar as she held perfectly still for her. When she finally stepped back, dragging her arm across her mouth, she sighed. "Gods, I haven't drunk straight from a Fae since the Fire Prick."

Talwyn recoiled at the mention of Sorin.

Nuri just smirked at her and held out her hand. When Talwyn lifted her own to her, it trembled slightly, but Nuri

gripped the shirastone ring between thumb and forefinger and slid it off her hand.

Talwyn audibly sighed in relief at feeling her magic flare to life in her veins. A part of her had worried that it hadn't been true, that Scarlett hadn't managed to remove the magical wards, but here she was, wind and earth at her fingertips and no Semiria ring on her hand.

"Move," she said darkly to Nuri, and Death's Shadow slowly backed away.

Winds coiled and swirled in her palm, and when the force behind them was stronger than a tempest, she blasted the steel door to her cell clear across the dungeon.

Nuri tsked. "So dramatic."

Talwyn stepped from the cell, jade eyes meeting honey-colored ones. She didn't know what they were now. They weren't friends, but they weren't enemies. They were something in between.

"Until we meet again, foolish queen," Nuri said, taking a step backward.

Talwyn nodded, preparing to Travel, but she paused for the briefest of moments. "Thank you."

Nuri disappeared at the same moment Talwyn stepped into the air.

She emerged in the Water Court at Anahita's Springs. If the Wind Court's sacred place was the top of the Shira Cliffs, then this was the Water Court's. The water was said to be blessed by Anahita herself, and it was where the Water Fae imbued weapons with magic. Not only water magic. Any weapon could be imbued here. The element of the Fae dipping the weapon into the waters determined what magic would imbue the weapon.

It was also connected to Briar and Sawyer, two Water Gazers. She just needed to catch them near some water. But first she needed to eat. Because now that she was free, she needed her magic back at full strength.

The sound of rustling foliage had her spinning, a wooden stake forming in her hand, but what stepped from the trees surrounding the springs made her drop it to the ground.

It was a spirit animal.

Not hers.

But his.

Rinji stopped several feet away from her, observing her.

We are not done, you and I, and I will come for you as soon as you let me do so.

Some of his last words clanged through her thoughts, and she felt two tears slip free. The first she had cried in... She didn't know the last time she'd cried. But when Rinji closed the distance between them, she tentatively reached towards him. The red stag huffed softly. Warm breath caressed her palm. She slid her hand down his broad neck, fingers sinking into his coarse fur.

They stood there like that for several minutes until Talwyn whispered, "We have work to do, Prince."

CHAPTER 39

SCARLETT

“Tell me again why we have to do this?” Scarlett called from the dressing room in the princess’s suite.

They had been here since they’d returned from Rydeon. Eliza was still recovering in a guest room on this floor. The other Fae all had guest rooms as well, none of them willing to leave while Eliza was here. She was healing though. Cethin’s Healer was as skilled as Beatrix, even with Eliza being one of the worst patients Scarlett had ever witnessed. The female argued about having to rest and stay in bed, scowling whenever Cyrus or Sorin would bring her food. She was slightly more civil with Rayner, but that wasn’t saying much.

Scarlett had spent the better part of the last few days propped up beside her in her bed, which is why she knew that when Razik brought her food, she didn’t complain about it. She just ignored him, as if he were invisible. Not that Razik said much either when he visited. Scarlett hadn’t been brave enough to ask her about it yet. Eliza might be healing, but she was still terrifying. Scarlett did not want to provoke her in any shape or form.

Sorin had told her about Beatrix the day after Rydeon, speaking quietly across the pillow while they’d lain in bed that morning. She’d seen the grief of losing her, but it was more than that. He was struggling. She knew it had to do with losing his power, figuring out what that meant for him as a prince, as a king, as a twin flame. She’d felt it down the bond. Felt his uncertainty and trepidation. Felt his hopelessness. She wanted

to soothe it away, but didn't know how. All her spare time was spent trying to find an answer to this, but spare time was something she had very little of these days. She knew Cyrus was looking into it too, but his research was as fruitless as her own. At least his research had turned up hidden Rydeon heirs that had aided in bringing down the magical wards. It only rankled her a little bit that he had discovered that instead of her. And that he had been right about Queen Octavia being their mother and not their aunt.

What Beatrix had told Sorin had explained quite a few things, particularly learning that Sybil had been working with Alaric. Callan hadn't said much about killing the Witch, but he had told her what she had said. That Sybil had told Alaric of Eliné's plans to flee with her and Nuri and Juliette. That Sybil had aided Veda in luring Tava to the slums and hired people to abduct her. That Sybil's spying and reporting back to Alaric had resulted in so much pain and heartache for so many. Juliette had loved her mother, had asked Scarlett to tell her as much when she had been dying in her lap. She wondered when she had stopped. When she became the Oracle? Did she see her true colors then? Whenever it had happened, there was nothing but contempt when Juliette had spoken to Sybil in the Necropolis.

"You know why this is happening, my Love," Sorin called back from the bedchamber. "But if you do not hurry, we are going to be late."

She was nervous. So godsdamn nervous.

She ran her hands down the sides of her dress, smoothing out nonexistent wrinkles. She hadn't told Sorin about it. She knew he was wearing the same black pants and jacket he'd worn when Beatrix had Anointed their twin flame bond. When Cethin had told her this was happening, she had snuck away into Aimonway with Kailia, who had taken her to the best seamstress in the city.

The back of the dress was open, dipping low like the red one he favored so much. Sheer, full-length sleeves were intricately embroidered with silver thread to create the illusion of flames that matched the threading on his jacket. The bodice

was fitted with a wide neckline, and the gown went to the floor, draping around her hips and legs. Thousands of silver beads were sewn to the flowing skirts that shimmered like starlight when she moved. A small train dragged behind her that was going to be a pain in her ass when they danced, but the beading made it worth it. The dress was stunning and well worth the money she'd paid the woman to make it in three short days.

Her silver hair was curled and pinned up off her neck, her crown nestled among the curls on her head. She wore silver slippers on her feet with extra grip on the bottom, because if they were doing this, she was damn well going to enjoy herself, which included dancing as much as possible.

She swallowed, not sure why her heart was fluttering so fast. Probably because the last time she'd seen Sorin in the ensemble he was wearing, she'd literally been speechless.

"Love, we need to go," he called again. "You are kind of the reason for this ball, you know."

"I know, I know," she muttered, taking one last look in the mirror. She sucked in a deep breath, exhaling slowly, and stepped out of the dressing room. Sorin was fiddling with something by the bed, but when he heard her approach, he turned. Golden eyes swept over her.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

"Are you going to say anything?"

He shook his head, twirling his finger in a motion telling her to turn around. She slowly spun, looking over her shoulder when her back was to him.

Watched his eyes trace the dip.

"Seriously, Sorin. You need to say something. Is it too much?"

"I am not saying anything, Scarlett, because there are no words to adequately describe how stunning you are. To try to

find them would be an impossible task.”

His voice was low and rough, and she turned back to him, her lips lifting in a small, soft smile. “But is it truly all right? Because Kailia said it wouldn’t be too much and—”

She was cut off. He’d crossed the room to her while she’d been speaking, and his lips landed on hers, silencing her rambling. His tongue slipped in at her surprised gasp, his hand coming up to grip the back of her neck and hold her to him. The fingers of his other hand slid down her spine, slow and sensual, then traced the back of the dress on his way back up. Her stomach dipped, heat pooling in her belly, and she gripped his jacket in her fists.

He pulled back first, speaking onto her lips in a low rumble. “The dress is perfect, my Love. The dress is perfect. You are perfect.”

“We already knew that,” she murmured back, fingers sliding along his jaw.

He chuckled low in his throat. “That tongue of yours will be perfect for other things this evening too.” His thumb brushed across her bottom lip, and her tongue darted out to lick the pad of it. He groaned. “Now you are teasing me, Love.”

“Never. Just a preview of what’s to come.”

He brushed his lips over hers once more before he said, “We are also perfectly late.”

She sighed. “Let’s go.”

His hand came to her lower back, ushering her out of the bedchamber to the main doors of their suite, but she held up her hand before he opened the door. A crown of flames appeared atop his brow. She’d be able to keep it burning all night without a problem. She hadn’t asked him about his reserves since they’d returned and he’d refilled her own. She hadn’t asked Cethin either.

Tomorrow.

She’d worry about that tomorrow.

Tonight, she just wanted to shut out the rest of the world and breathe in what they were.

He interlaced his fingers with hers as they made their way down the halls and stairs. There was a small lounge off the great hall that was reserved for the king and queen. A door on the opposite side would lead out to a balcony that overlooked the hall with a set of stairs leading down into the room. Even with the heavy wood doors closed, Scarlett could hear the commotion of the hall when they stepped into the lounge.

“I was starting to get worried, Seastar,” Cassius said, appearing at her side.

“In that dress? Fuck, we’re lucky they’re here at all,” Cyrus quipped. He bent down, pressing a kiss to her cheek. “You look gorgeous, Darling.”

“Thank you,” she said, feeling her face heat.

She looked around the room, seeing all of them gathered here in such finery. The Fae Princes. The Mortal Kings. The Avonleyans. The Fire Court, other than the recovering Eliza.

“Where are Cethin and Kailia?” she asked, trying not to fidget.

“Already out there,” Cassius answered, passing her a glass of water. “We have been waiting for you. He will start introducing everyone soon.”

“I do not understand why there needed to be this grand affair,” she said, sipping at the water. Cassius gave her a droll look. “Okay, fine. I understand, but I do not like it.”

Tybalt slipped through the door on the opposite side of the room. Scarlett just caught Cethin’s voice speaking about alliances across the sea when the door clicked shut again. Tybalt’s eyes landed on her, and he smiled warmly. “You look beautiful, Scarlett,” he said with a bow of his head. “He is addressing his people. The kings and Princess Tava first,” he said, nodding at the mortals. It was still jarring to think of Tava as the Rydeon Princess. “Fire Court next, then the Princes. Then Cassius before you two. If you will.”

He motioned to the mortals to follow him out, and little by little, the room cleared until it was only Scarlett and Sorin. Their own little bubble in their own little world, and she wanted to stay here in this space forever.

“You are fidgeting,” Sorin teased gently, reaching over and pushing a curl back that had fallen forward.

“I do not like this.”

“Do not like what, exactly?”

“All of this. The attention.” He arched a brow at her. “You know what I mean. Royal attention is different from chaos attention.”

“Chaos attention?”

She shoved his shoulder at the smile he was fighting to keep from forming. “Stop teasing me. I do not know how to do this, Sorin. I do not know what I am doing. They are going to expect things from me, place all their hope in me.”

“Calm down, Love.” He spun her, pulling her into him, hands settling on her hips.

“I can’t do this,” she rasped, her breaths starting to come faster and faster.

He took her hand, placing it over his heart. “Breathe in and out. Feel me and match my breaths. In and out, Scarlett.”

She nodded, focusing on her breathing. He brought his brow to hers, holding her hand in place against his chest. “You have faced loss and pain. You have battled the shadows and won. You have created stars when there were none. You are Death’s Maiden, Princess of Avonleya, Queen of the Western Courts, and a Lady of Darkness. You can face a hall full of people who will rejoice at your return surrounded by your family, both old and new. We do this together. Always together.”

The door opened behind them, Tybalt sticking his head through. “It’s time.”

Sorin nodded at him over her shoulder, and he brushed a quick kiss to her lips as he whispered, “All the way through

the darkness.”

She nodded, looping her arm through his, and let him lead her through the door. The black marble floor was gleaming beneath her feet. Banners of black with silver moons and stars hung from the ceiling. Cethin and Kailia were off to the right of the balcony overlooking the hall, and her brother looked over as they approached, smiling broadly. He extended an arm in their direction as they reached the top of the stairs.

“Welcome home your princess,” he said, his voice filling the entire hall. “Scarlett Sutara Aditya, Queen of the Western Courts, and her twin flame, Prince of the Fire Court, Sorin Aditya.”

As one, the entirety of the room dropped to a knee. There had to be at least a thousand people in the vast space, if not more. Her family was at the bottom, off to the side, on a knee with the rest of the room. Sorin reached over, squeezing her fingers with his other hand, and she swallowed back her nerves as he nudged her forward.

The moment they stepped onto the first stair, the entire room rose, excited murmurs breaking out as every eye in the room watched them.

“I swear to Arius,” she muttered under her breath, “if you let me fall down these stairs...”

There had to be thirty of them.

“I will catch you, Scarlett. Tonight and tomorrow and the day after that. Even if I do not have my fire, I will still catch you.”

When they reached the bottom, the crowd began parting, letting them make their way to the middle of the hall. They turned to face the stairs when they reached it, Cethin and Kalia descending the stairs. If Cethin was a Lord of Night, then she was his Lady. Her black hair flowed around her, ashes seeming to flit among the black strands. Her dress was black and strapless with black pearls sewn across the bodice and dripping down the skirt. A pearl and diamond circlet sat atop her head, a matching onyx crown inlaid with diamonds upon

Cethin's. Her hand sat in his where he held it aloft as he escorted her down the stairs, everyone staying down on a knee while they descended. Cethin had talked her through this earlier that day. She and Sorin would not be asked to bow to them; but she certainly felt awkward staying on her feet.

"How many times have you done this?" she murmured out of the corner of her mouth.

Sorin glanced down at her quickly before his gaze went back to the king and queen. "I have been the Fire Prince for a very long time, Scarlett, and I have been royal from the day I was born."

"How long until it felt natural?"

But Cethin and Kailia stopped beside them before Sorin could answer her. Her brother and his wife faced each other, seamlessly preparing for the next part of this extravagant display.

A dance.

That she and Sorin would be doing with them.

She turned to Sorin, her hand going to his shoulder, the other sliding into his palm. He tugged her close, hand on her hip. The music started. Her eyes locked on his, and the world faded away as she fell into golden eyes that held her entire world.

"So, should we do something similar when we return home?" Sorin asked after a minute. She didn't know what her face did, but he chuckled. "I am joking, Love."

"I hate you," she grumbled, letting him lead her around the dance floor. It was clearly a dance he'd done a number of times, and she trusted him to lead her through it all.

"Still telling yourself such sweet lies after all this time," he teased. He twirled her under his arm before pulling her back to him. "Relax, Scarlett. This night is for you. You deserve it. Enjoy it and show them why you are their princess."

Cethin had told her this part too. That at some point in the night she needed to showcase her starfire, to show the people

that she was indeed their princess and his sister. That some would doubt the return of an unknown princess without proof.

So when Sorin twirled her once more, she tossed starfire into the air above them. It flared brightly, filling the space above the entire hall. There were gasps and small screams quickly hushed as it burned above them. She sent more starfire flitting among her crown and then into Sorin's crown of fire. She wound the silver flames around her arms, letting embers trail her footsteps. Then she let her shadows out. The dark mist swirled about their feet, her starfire slowly raining down as embers around them, merging with her shadows.

Her very own stars in the darkness.

The murmuring and shock was turning to awe and wonder. A chuckle of laughter, that was surely Cyrus's at her over-the-top display, floated to her. Then Cethin's dark magic was mingling with hers, Kailia's ashes flitted among their shadows, and Sorin's bright fire lit up all of it.

Sorin spun her again, and she was laughing, her heart light for the first time in ages. He caught her when she came back to him, his brow coming to hers.

The first song ended and another began, but they didn't let go of each other. If anything, he tugged her closer. Her hand slid from his shoulder to his neck, fingers toying with the hair at his nape. What he said to her as they were coming down the stairs came back to her.

I will catch you, Scarlett. Tonight and tomorrow and the day after that. Even if I do not have my fire, I will still catch you.

"I love you, Sorin Aditya," she whispered into the space between them.

"All the way through the darkness, my Love," he answered, their hands clasped between their bodies as he moved her around the floor. Other couples had joined in now, the noise of them barely registering.

"Even if we do not figure this out, even if there is not an ember left in your veins, I will love you, Sorin. You make my

world brighter, and it has nothing to do with your magic. It's *you*."

She saw his throat bob as he swallowed. "Scarlett—"

But she was shaking her head against his brow, tears pooling in her eyes. "I just want you, Sorin. I do not need your fire. I do not need your power. I just need you. That's it. I don't care about the rest. You know that, right?"

"But I am your Source, Love," he said hoarsely. "Your power needs that. *You* need that."

Scarlett was vaguely aware of the music changing again, something fast-paced, but they were in their own world.

A world of fire and shadows that had nothing to do with magic and power.

"I just need you, Sorin," she repeated. "You set my world on fire just by being in it. You don't need magic to do so."

His lips brushed across her brow, her temple, her cheek. Finally they found hers.

The kiss was short and sweet and simple, sealing more promises between them.

Always together.

Tonight.

Tomorrow.

And the day after that.

CHAPTER 40

CALLAN

“How are you feeling?”
“Well enough to hold a sword,” the Fire General groused.

A wounded Eliza was crankier than the usual Eliza.

“I am told you still have my sword,” she added, sipping on her glass of wine.

Callan had been sitting on a bench along the wall, watching everyone dancing. It had been like slipping into a worn pair of boots—the formal introduction, the traditional first dance, the greeting and polite nodding. Things he had done his entire life. The Fae Princes had looked just as comfortable. Even Drake and Tava had handled it well, used to life at Court he supposed. Honestly, Scarlett and Cassius had appeared the most uncomfortable, and if that hadn’t been paradoxical, he didn’t know what was.

The ball had been underway for a few hours when Eliza had practically thrown herself down into the seat beside him, arms crossing as she glared up at Razik, who had apparently escorted her down from her room. Callan hadn’t been stupid enough to ask questions about that.

“I do,” Callan answered. “I have cleaned it, but I did not think you would want it left in your room unattended.”

“You are right about that,” she said. “Cyrus would probably try to steal it. Think it was a game.”

“How are you doing, Eliza? For real?” Callan asked, watching her from the corner of his eye. He rubbed at the back of his neck. “I thought she stabbed your heart. From where I was standing that is what it looked like and—”

A hand wrapped around his, calluses on her palm rough against his skin. “I live, Callan,” she said gently. “Thank you for calling to me, for coming to me, for killing that bitch when she suppressed my magic. I would not be sitting here if it had not been for you.”

“Thank you for training me, even though I am certain you thought it was pointless on more than one occasion.”

She huffed a small laugh, then grimaced, letting go of his hand to rub at the wound. “That is the thing about training. You never know who will need it or when, but you pray to Sargon that you’ve taught them enough to make it count. You made it count, Callan.”

“But you will continue to train me when you are well?” he asked, eyes landing on Tava speaking with Hale, smiling in amusement at whatever he was saying.

“You may have saved me and gutted a few seraphs, Princeling, but your swings could have been better. Not so sloppy.”

A bark of laughter came from him. “Fair enough, General.”

Razik appeared a moment later, holding out a plate to Eliza of what appeared to be chocolate cake. She glanced at it once before arching a brow at him.

“You said you would eat,” Razik said by way of explanation.

“Only because it was the only way you would let me come down here for a bit,” she retorted sharply.

“Niara said you need to rest or healing will take longer.” He moved the plate a few inches closer to her. “Now eat, or I will feed it to you.”

Eliza scoffed. “You will not.”

He bent down close, getting into her face. “Try me, Milady.”

Eliza scowled at him, her cheeks going red with anger, as she snatched the plate from his hand, cutting off a piece with the fork and shoving it into her mouth. Razik smirked back at her in satisfaction. Callan sat awkwardly while she ate the entire piece of dessert. Then she all but threw the plate back at Razik.

“Give it to me,” she demanded.

Razik handed the empty plate off to a passing server before there was a burst of black flames and he produced a book, holding it out to her. She tore it from his hand, flipping through the pages until she apparently found the page she was on.

“If you take my book again, I will gut you in your bed,” she said nonchalantly, as if she wasn’t threatening a powerful warrior who could literally turn into a dragon.

“Noted.” Razik lazily dropped down onto the bench on the other side of her. “Of course, then that means you will have to come to my bed.”

Eliza went eerily still, and that was when Callan decided it was time for him to find somewhere else to be. He muttered something to them about going to get a drink, but neither of them acknowledged him. He was halfway across the hall when a silver head of hair intercepted him.

“Dance with me?” the queen asked, grabbing his hand and tugging him to the dance floor.

He hadn’t seen her away from Sorin all night. They’d each danced the necessary dances with other people. Scarlett had danced with Cethin and Tybalt at some point. Sorin had danced with Kailia. He’d seen a few other Avonleyans brave enough to interrupt them and ask for dances, but for the most part, the two had been in their own world. Eyes always on each other, tender touches, and whispered words that brought about soft smiles. It was everything she deserved and more. To

have someone look at her like that and understand who she was beneath it all.

“You think too hard, your Majesty.”

He hadn't realized he'd just been going through the motions, falling back into old habits. She smiled up at him, a knowing thing, bright silver eyes seeming to look into his very soul.

“It is disconcerting to dance without masks sometimes,” she remarked.

“Everyone can see everything,” he agreed, twirling her under his arm, her dress flaring out around her ankles. Her hair had already begun coming loose from the curls she'd had pinned back. It was better this way. Down and free. It was her.

“They can,” she conceded when she came back to him, hand back at his shoulder. “Even things we cannot see ourselves. I think that is what makes it most unsettling, that someone might see something about us we haven't figured out yet.”

“And what do you see when you look at me these days, my Wraith?”

She smiled at his old pet name for her. “I see a king uncertain of his place.”

“It is hard to know your place when you do not know who you are anymore,” he said quietly.

“It is hard to find yourself when the world is demanding everything from you, and you do not recognize the person staring back at you in a mirror,” Scarlett replied.

“How did you do it?” he asked, his eyes snagging on Tava dancing with Hale. Her forest green dress with gold details—the traditional colors of Rydeon—looked regal against the red and gold of Hale's jacket. “How did you...survive?”

Scarlett's gaze followed his. “I found people who could look past the masks, Callan,” she said. “Not people who tried to fix me or tell me how I should feel or what I should do. People who understood that sometimes...” She exhaled

deeply. “Sometimes we just need people to sit with us in the middle of the mess. But those people? They tend to find you. You don’t find them. You’re too busy trying not to drown to even be looking.”

The song ended, and they clapped for the musicians, stepping back from one another. But she grabbed his hand once more, squeezing his fingers in hers. “Those people, Callan? They are the ones that can reach us even on the darkest of nights.”

He watched her saunter off, moving straight to Sorin who was speaking with Cyrus and Rayner on the edge of the crowd, all of them huddled around Eliza. He pulled her under his arm, and Cyrus said something that made her shove his shoulder while Rayner smiled lightly at whatever was being said. Cassius appeared a moment later, and he melded in with them as if he’d always been a part of what they were.

Effortless. It all seemed so effortless. The nonchalance. The camaraderie. The familial love. He knew it wasn’t. They faced the coming war and unknown as much as he did. But they did it together. Had somehow found each other.

A laugh he knew in the depths of his being carried to him, and he instantly found Tava, laughing with Drake as her brother twirled her around the floor. Drake still seemed slightly haunted, but he looked better than he had in days. She laughed again when he dipped her low, fingers digging into his tunic sleeve as she warned her brother not to drop her. He chuckled, hauling her back up before spinning her once more.

Scarlett had found stars in the darkness, but he didn’t need to do any of that Callan realized as he watched them.

He only needed to follow the light.



It was late, the middle of the night, but when Cethin said the Avonleyans preferred the night, he hadn't been lying. The ball was still in full swing, people still dancing and eating and laughing when Callan had left, exhaustion settling deep in his bones.

But now it was late. The middle of the night. And he couldn't sleep.

He'd slipped on a pair of pants and a long-sleeve tunic before sliding on boots and heading downstairs. He'd walked these halls plenty over the weeks they'd been here. Walked the garden paths even more. He could find his way in the dark easy enough at this point.

On one of his walks, he had found a small pond nestled among the low stone walls that wound through the gardens. There were fish in it that glowed faintly in the dark waters. In fact, he'd learned you could only see them at night. He'd come here during the day to try to see them in the light, but the waters were black, even in the pond, and the fish were lost to the void of inky darkness. Even the wildlife preferred the night it seemed.

It took fifteen minutes to find the pond, taking two wrong turns at some point, but when he stepped through the opening in the wall, his heart stuttered. The walls were taller around the pond, creating its own space, keeping out everything else. Thick vines climbed up them, dark purple flowers blooming along their length. The glow of the fish in the pond cast them in a soft light. A fountain was along the back wall, feeding into the pond, and a long bench set along the side of the water, close enough for one to dip their toes in if they wished.

Which is exactly what Tava was doing.

She'd changed out of her forest green finery and put on a simple dark teal dress with long sleeves and a scooping neckline. It looked better. The finery was beautiful, but this casual grace was...better. Grey slippers rested on the bench beside her, and she sat leaning forward with her hands braced on the edge of the bench. Her hair was pulled over one

shoulder, golden strands cascading around her as she dragged her toes through the water.

She hadn't heard him approach, which was surprising in and of itself. She was always so observant, but she was obviously lost in her thoughts. Her features were soft and contemplative, a small frown on her lips.

For a moment, he thought he should leave, that he shouldn't intrude on what was clearly some time she needed to herself, but he couldn't make himself do it. He couldn't walk away from her.

Not again.

He didn't know how to make himself known without startling her, so he lightly cleared his throat, hands shoved deep into his pockets. Predictably, she jumped, tugging her feet quickly from the water, eyes flying to his face.

"Callan?"

"I am sorry to intrude," he lied.

"No. I mean, you aren't." She reached for her slippers. "I can go."

"Please don't."

She stilled, fingers hooked into her slippers. He gestured to the space beside her. "May I?"

"Of course." She tucked her hair behind her ear, not looking at him as he made his way over, settling down beside her and moving the slippers aside. He toed off his boots, pulling his socks off too, and dipped his toes into the water, fish darting away.

She glanced up at him briefly before slowly lowering her feet back down, painting ripples alongside his. "How long have you been here?" she asked softly.

"Not long."

"I needed some air after the events of the night. I have only seen this place during the day," she said. "I asked Magdalena to show me the way to it in the dark."

“And she left you here?”

Tava shrugged. “I figured it was close enough to dawn. I could find my way back in the light.” Her foot paused as a curious fish swam closer before darting away once more. “What about you?”

“Me?”

“What are you doing out here in the night?”

“I returned an hour ago,” he said. “I needed to unwind after all the festivities.” She hummed in acknowledgment. “You seemed to enjoy yourself,” he ventured.

“It was lovely,” she conceded. “Proper and formal and yet somehow not.”

He couldn’t have described it better himself.

He hadn’t been alone with her since the night she had bandaged his wounds. Before that, it had been when she’d slept in his arms. They had never discussed that night. She had woken shortly after he did, fingers skating across his chest briefly. She’d looked up at him, holding his gaze for a long moment, and then she’d slid silently from his lap. When she had disappeared into the bathing room, he’d slipped out of the room, Drake still sleeping in her bed. They’d gone back to what they’d been since that throne room.

That fucking throne room.

Would he forever measure time by the events of that night now? Before the throne room and after?

“Did you enjoy yourself?” she asked after a moment of stilted silence.

“Well enough,” he replied. “I sat with Eliza for a while.”

“I saw. She is healing?”

Gods, he hated this small talk between them. They had spoken so freely while she’d tended to his injuries that night. That’s what he wanted, but he didn’t know how to get back to it.

I cannot handle only having you when you allow me to.

“Callan?”

He shook his head, clearing his thoughts. “Sorry,” he said in a rush. “Eliza is healing well, yes. It appears they have an exceptional healer.”

“Niara,” she said, toes tracing a circle in the water. “Hale told me of her.”

“You and King Hale seem...friendly,” he said cautiously.

“He is very gracious in letting the children run around his estate these past weeks. I find myself in his company quite often when I am there.”

Callan was sure she did.

“He is excited to return to our continent one day,” she added.

“With you?”

Well, he hadn't meant to say that out loud, but it was out there now. Tava, to her credit, didn't react. She switched from swiping her toes through the water to lazily swinging her legs back and forth.

“I am not naïve, Callan,” she said. “I know he has an interest in more than my company.”

“I did not mean to imply you were naïve.”

“I know.”

For a long moment the only sound was the small splashes from her feet.

“How do you feel about that?” he finally asked, so godsdamn sick of the small talk. This is not what they did. They did not tiptoe around topics. They spoke candidly, honestly, with each other.

She shrugged. “I suppose an alliance of some sort will be expected of me at some point.”

Callan openly balked. “You would do that?”

“If Drake asked it of me, yes,” she said, head tilting as she watched the ripples. “I was likely always going to be married

off for status. Me now being a royal princess? I would be naïve if I thought otherwise.”

“Has Drake hinted at this?” he asked.

“No, Callan. I was simply raised in the same society you were. I know what is expected of me.”

“And you just...accept that?”

She pulled her feet from the water, drawing her knees up to her chest, arms wrapping around them tightly. “When Drake has had time to process everything, he will step up. He will rise to the challenge and be a remarkable king. He will need to prove himself to his people. What better way to do so than by securing an alliance with the lost heir of Toreall? It is politics.”

Smart. She was always so damn smart, thinking ahead, planning for all possible futures. She was also right. He and Drake were already friends. He’d been planning to ask Drake to be his Hand-to-the-King when they returned, but that was before they’d learned he was royalty himself. The alliance between Windonelle and Rydeon was secure and expected. Toreall was the wildcard here.

He swallowed thickly. “You have a choice here, Tava.”

“I have as much choice as you would have had if you had not suddenly found yourself a king, Callan,” she replied.

“As far as Windonelle is concerned, we are still betrothed,” he argued. “What kind of message will it send if we return and you are betrothed to another?”

“Why do you care, Callan? I gave you an opportunity to end the courting, and you took it.”

“Because blue is more your color than red,” he said, sharper than he’d intended.

“What?” Tava asked, her eyes widening at his sudden outburst.

“Windonelle’s colors are blue and grey. Toreall’s are red and gold,” he muttered, not looking at her.

There was another long stretch of silence before she whispered, “I do not know what you want from me, Callan.”

He looked over to find her studying the water, arms still curled tightly around her knees.

“I know what I do not want,” he said, reaching over and gently taking her chin between his thumb and forefinger. “I do not want you two kingdoms away from me, Litte Fox. I do not want you one kingdom away from me.”

“What do you want?” she whispered, tears pooling in her eyes.

“I want to travel with you. I want you to wear blue and grey. I want your dances at events like tonight. I still don’t know who I will be at the end of this, but I want to figure it out with you.”

He leaned in then, closing the distance between their mouths. He slid his tongue along the seam of her lips, coaxing them open. She was hesitant, had every right to be, but then her lips began moving against his. Slow and tentative. Nothing like the other two kisses they’d shared. One had been a scheme. One had been a surprise.

But this one was neither of those things. This one was apologies and promises. This one was saying there would be no in-between, not anymore.

He pulled back and whispered onto her lips, “I want all of those too, Tava. Every single one.”

She laughed softly. “Truth be told, when I kissed you in that conservatory knowing Veda would catch us, that was only the second time I had kissed someone.”

“Who else?” Callan demanded.

“It does not matter,” she said breathlessly.

It didn’t *not* matter.

Then again, as long as she hadn’t kissed *Hale*, he could live with it.

“But the rest of them?” he pressed, brushing his mouth along hers again.

She laughed. “They are yours, Callan, but...”

He leaned back, tucking her hair behind her ear. “But what, Litte Fox?”

“I need you to be sure. I cannot...” Her eyes darted to the pond before coming back to his.

“Tava, this is the only thing I am sure of in my life right now.”

“Okay,” she whispered, a tear slipping free.

He brushed it away with his thumb. “Okay.”

She leaned against him, and he ran his fingers through her hair before settling an arm around her and tucking her in close to his side. She eventually lowered her feet again, toes once more dipping into the water beside his.

“I do not like it here,” she whispered.

He smiled into her hair. “Care to specify?”

“Avonleya in general,” she answered, leg brushing against his as she glided her foot through the water. “The kingdom itself is beautiful, but I do not like their schedule. I miss the morning sunrises. It is too dark here.”

“I could not agree more.”

CHAPTER 4I

CYRUS

Cyrus was leaning back against the wall seated on a bench, watching Scarlett and Rayner move around the dance floor. Sorin had convinced Eliza to go back up to her guest room a little bit ago. She had gone pale and was undoubtedly overdoing it by staying down here far longer than she should have. She'd finally relented as long as Sorin was the one to escort her back and not Razik.

The male in question was seated beside him. Cassius sat on Cyrus's other side. With Eliza being stuck here to stay close to the Healer, they'd been hanging around the castle the last few days. They'd found themselves spending more and more time with Cassius's cousin, and while the male was certainly a prick, Cyrus found he didn't mind him. He was helping Cassius learn to harness his magic and continued to train him. He was an excellent warrior, which was to be expected with Sargon's blood running in his veins, and he was knowledgeable. Cyrus had asked him questions for nearly two hours the other day, and he'd answered every single one. Granted, he had seemed utterly annoyed the entire time, but he'd still answered them.

"I cannot believe you brought that here tonight," Cassius said, eye fixed on the object in Cyrus's hand.

He'd been absentmindedly fiddling with the sea glass item that he'd pulled from his pocket. It was Sawyer's mirror that he'd stolen. He'd hinted at it that night they'd raced through the hedge maze. From the glare Sawyer had given him the

next morning, he knew it was gone. Which meant he'd be trying to get it back.

Since Cyrus was staying at the castle right now, and there was a big event planned, it was the perfect time to attempt to steal it back. It's what he would have done, and Sawyer had gone conspicuously missing a few hours ago. Which is precisely why he'd slipped the mirror into his pocket before heading down to the festivities tonight.

"Strategy," Cyrus said with a wink at Cass, flipping the mirror between his fingers again.

Cassius gave him a droll look as he finished off the mug of ale he'd been drinking.

"Do you have an attachment to this trinket?" Razik asked. "Or the female that you glimpse in it at times?"

"No, I am not attached— Wait, what female?"

Cyrus flipped the mirror over, staring at the reflective surface. There was nothing in it. The mirror itself was imbued with Water Gazer magic, but Cyrus had still assumed only Water Gazers could see anything in it. If Cethin or Scarlett had seen something, that could have maybe been explained away since their father was a Legacy of Anahita, but Razik? He was Sargon and Shifter.

Unless Cyrus had misunderstood how the mirror worked.

Cassius leaned in, peering at the mirror over his shoulder, and Cyrus clamped down at the heat of his body being so close.

They hadn't spoken of Cassius getting a Source or going to Aelyndee since the night Cassius had kissed him again. The godsdamn prick. They'd gone to Rydeon, split up on their tasks. Cass had guarded Scarlett as her Guardian, and he'd guarded Drake with Eliza. He'd never admit it, but he was glad he'd been partnered with someone because his focus had definitely not been entirely on Drake.

Then they'd been staying at the castle with Eliza. They'd been given suites in the wing on Scarlett's floor. The rooms

were big— a large sitting room with seating and dining space, small study, bed chamber, bathing room.

They were too big. Too much quiet in such an empty space. Too many places for memories to lurk.

He'd lasted two hours before he'd found himself outside of Cassius's door. He was in the suite next to his, and Cyrus stood in that hall for fifteen minutes, cursing himself up and down, before he finally knocked on the door. It opened within seconds, as if Cassius had been waiting for him. He'd been shirtless. Again. No patch. Barefoot. But he noticeably hadn't been sleeping either.

"No talk of Sources," he'd said.

"No talk of Aelyndee," Cyrus had replied.

Cass had nodded, stepping aside and moving to the alcohol cart in his rooms. He'd passed Cyrus a glass of liquor before he'd moved back to the sofa, picking up the book and notes he'd been pouring over. It had taken him a while to realize it was the same book he'd been studying that night they'd argued, but he had been too busy breathing deeply for the first time all night to ask him about it.

He didn't know how to navigate this thing with Cassius. It had been different with Merrik. They'd both been little idiots, learning the ways of the world, the ways of their bodies, and everything in between. They'd fumbled through all of it, their relationship included, learning as they went until they were dealt one of life's hardest lessons: loss and grief. Or at least he was. Cyrus had always thought Merrik got the better end of that deal, not having to learn how to keep going when it hurt to breathe.

Thia had been different too. Everything had been instant with her. They'd both felt the pull of the twin flame bond. Things had become heated and passionate right from the start. That described their entire relationship. She'd challenged him, yes. Was perfect in every godsdamn way. But Cyrus had always been waiting for her to get taken away from him. Cassius had been right that night. When she'd died, it had only confirmed what he'd always suspected.

But this thing with Cassius had been slowly building, and Cyrus didn't know what to do with it. Things hadn't been easy, per se, with Thia, but they'd certainly been easier than this. No, that wasn't true either. They had just been different. The challenges they'd faced together had been different.

"You haven't seen her?" Razik asked. "Every once in a while there is a flash of her in there."

Cassius's fingers closed around his hand, tilting the mirror in his direction, and fuck him and his causal fucking contact.

"The mirror is usually hidden. Out of sight. Out of mind," Cyrus said, watching the reflective surface carefully.

"How many times have you seen her since we have been sitting here?" Cassius asked, face so close to Cyrus, his hair was brushing his cheek. He'd pulled the shaggy brown strands up and tied them back for the ball tonight, but a lot of it had slipped free again.

"A few," Razik said with a shrug.

"Helpful," Cyrus deadpanned.

"I assumed she was of some significance to you," Razik said. "It was not my business, but I was curious how that worked with you two being together."

Neither Cyrus nor Cassius said anything to that.

"It has been a while since I have seen her, but I was not monitoring it all evening. Just saw glimpses," Razik said.

Cyrus and Cassius both muttered something of acknowledgment as they watched the mirror, Cass's fingers still wrapped around his hand. Which wasn't helping his focus. Granted, they were just watching a small mirror. It didn't exactly require a lot of concentration, but gods. His touch made him think of the way he'd felt underneath him in that training arena. Cassius straddling him, the feel of his—

"Is that who I think it is?" Cassius said, leaning in even closer, pulling Cyrus from things he really should not be thinking about right now.

“It can’t be,” Cyrus said, bringing the mirror closer. “Why would Sawyer have a mirror that showed him Talwyn?”

“The Fae Queen?” Razik asked, leaning in to look too.

“The dead Fae Queen when Scarlett gets a hold of her,” Cyrus muttered.

“You still think she will kill her?” Cassius asked, watching Talwyn in the mirror.

Cyrus snorted a laugh. “I can’t believe you are asking that. If Scarlett had seen Talwyn on any of our missions to the continent, she would have either killed her there or brought her here to do so slowly. Likely the latter now that I say it out loud.”

“Fair point,” Cassius said. “Where is she?”

“I don’t know,” Cyrus said. He couldn’t see much behind the Fae Queen. All he could tell was that she was by water. A moment later, she was gone from the reflection again. He glanced up, spotting Sawyer with Briar, Neve, and Azrael across the hall. “But I’m guessing he might.”

“Of course he will also want it back,” Cassius said, getting to his feet to follow Cyrus, who was already making his way between bodies, heading towards Sawyer.

“Yes, but Talwyn is up to something. If we can use this mirror to watch her? It’s a fair tradeoff. I can nick it again another time,” Cyrus said, Cassius reaching his side in a few long strides.

They made it to the other Fae within a few minutes, and Cyrus sidled in between Sawyer and Azrael. He slung an arm around Sawyer’s shoulders. “Question for you.”

Sawyer’s eyes narrowed in suspicion while Briar huffed a laugh, sipping from his drink.

Cyrus took the mirror from his pocket, toying with it between his fingers. “Tell me about this mirror.”

“It is mine,” Sawyer snapped, a hand darting out to snatch it from him.

Cyrus yanked it back out of his reach. “Finders keepers, right?”

“Godsdamnit, Cyrus. You are a bastard,” Sawyer muttered.

“Well established fact,” he agreed. “But I’ll make you a deal, Baby Drayce. You tell me about your fancy mirror, and I’ll give it back to you.”

“Just like that?” Sawyer asked suspiciously.

“Just like that.”

“Even I do not believe you,” Briar said with another laugh, watching the exchange.

“We saw...” Cyrus paused, glancing at Azrael. The male might have sworn loyalty to Scarlett, but he didn’t know where the prince stood with Talwyn at this point. “We saw someone in the mirror.”

“Who?” Briar asked, slowly lowering his cup that had been halfway to his lips.

“Better question,” Cyrus countered. “Where?”

“The mirror was passed down from our father,” Briar said, reaching for it. Cyrus let him take it without fuss. “We were told the first Water Court Prince made it. I was not quite sure I believed him, but knowing now he was Avonleyan and had Anahita’s bloodline running in his veins, it makes it more believable.”

“Do you have one too?” Cassius asked.

“No,” Briar said, handing it over to his brother. “There was only one. I do not know who our father intended on passing it down too, but I do remember Sawyer was obsessed with it as a child. Would spend hours playing with it, listening to father’s stories about it.” Sawyer had gone quiet, the mirror clutched so tightly in his fist, his knuckles were turning white. “When our parents were killed, I insisted Sawyer take it. It had always meant more to him than me.”

Well, Cyrus definitely felt like the bastard he’d been called now. He’d known the mirror was special to Sawyer but had never known why.

Cyrus shoved his guilt aside, asking, “So he would be the most knowledgeable about the mirror?”

Briar nodded, Azrael and Neve listening intently to every word being said beside him.

“How does it work?” Cassius asked.

“It is really not that complicated,” Sawyer said tightly, opening his palm to look at the mirror. “It was imbued in Anahita’s Springs.”

“The hidden springs of the Water Court?” Cyrus asked.

“Those are the ones. It shows the reflection of the springs. If someone is looking into the waters, you would see them in the mirror,” Sawyer explained.

“And you do not have to be a Water Gazer to utilize it?” Cassius clarified.

Sawyer shook his head. “The magic is in the mirror itself, not the holder or the person on the other side.” He paused for a moment before he asked again, “Who did you see?”

“Not important,” Cyrus said, gripping Cassius’s forearm and tugging him backwards. “Thanks for the history lesson.”

“Cyrus...” Briar said, his eyes narrowing in warning. “Where is Sorin?”

“With Eliza,” Cyrus answered over his shoulder, dragging Cassius with him.

“What the hell, Cyrus?” Cassius demanded, when they were out of earshot. “Did you know you were stealing something that had sentimental value all this time?”

“No,” Cyrus replied. “And yes, I feel like a jackass.”

“At least you acknowledge it,” Cassius muttered. “I cannot believe you made me help you steal a mirror that belonged to his father.”

“Well get over it. We’re about to go steal a queen,” Cyrus said, eyes sweeping the room for Scarlett.

“What are you talking about?”

“I know where the Springs are. If Talwyn is there, we can go get her.”

“You think Scarlett is going to help us leave the Wards? To go get Talwyn?” Cassius asked doubtfully.

“I know she will,” Cyrus answered. He spotted Scarlett a moment later, speaking with Cethin and Kailia. He whistled at Razik, who was still sitting on the bench they’d been sitting on earlier. The dragon shifter looked over at him before flipping him off. Admittedly, Cyrus should have known better than to try to get his attention that way.

He wandered over to him and said, “Want to come with us to get my queen a present?”

“Why would I want to do that?” Razik asked. His lip curled as if the mere idea of that disgusted him.

“Because it involves hunting down a powerful Fae Queen on my continent. You can stretch those wings a little bit,” Cyrus answered.

Razik shrugged, getting to his feet. “I don’t have anything better to do.”

Cyrus sent a fire message to Scarlett and watched as she reached up, plucking it from the flames. Somehow, she immediately found him in the sea of bodies, her head titling with interest.

“Come on,” Cyrus muttered. “She’s going to meet us in the king’s lounge.”

They hurried up the stairs they’d come down at the beginning of the night, slipping into the lounge, and a few minutes later, Scarlett did the same.

“You brought me a present?” she asked, the same suspicion that had filled Sawyer’s eyes filling hers. “To thank me for taking down the magical wards?”

“Not exactly,” Cyrus said. “It’s not here yet.”

“Then where is it?”

“In the Water Court.”

Scarlett went still. “What, exactly, is going on?” Her eyes shifted to her Guardian. “Cassius?”

Cass rubbed at the back of his neck. “We may have learned where Talwyn is, and Cyrus wants to go get her.”

“Talwyn?” She hissed the name more than she said it.

Cyrus nodded, adrenaline already flooding his system. “The three of us can go get her, Darling. It takes her out of play for the Maraans. Gets her out of our Courts. And—”

“Her death is mine,” Scarlett snarled, and shit. She was terrifying when she got this way. This was Death’s Maiden staring back at them. A Wraith of Death, not the Avonleyan Princess.

“Of course it is,” Cyrus said quickly. “Let us go get her.”

“How?” she gritted out.

“Cass can Travel us to the Water Court Palace. From there, I can get us to the Springs,” he said. “Razik will come with us.”

“I still have the vial of Cethin’s blood from the last trip to Rydeon,” Razik said, completely apathetic. “We’d just need some of yours to leave the Wards.”

“You will get her and bring her back to me?” Scarlett clarified, and that was definitely bloodlust and hatred shining in her eyes.

“Yes, Darling,” Cyrus purred. “Just tell me where to drop her.”

“At my feet,” Scarlett snarled.

“As you wish, my queen.”

Scarlett paced a few steps before whirling back on him. “You and Razik go. Cassius can stay back with me.”

“He’s the only one who can Travel us there,” Cyrus argued. “Razik has only been to the Necropolis.”

“You’re not taking Cassius with you.”

“Then how else do you propose we get there?” Scarlett pursed her lips, but before she could say anything, Cyrus warned, “And don’t even think of suggesting you going with, or I’m telling Sorin everything. That we’re going to get Talwyn so you can exact revenge.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” she hissed.

Cyrus stepped closer, bringing his face right up to hers. “I would dare.”

“This is an interesting dynamic,” Razik quipped, watching everything with bored amusement.

Scarlett sent him a droll look before turning back to Cyrus. “I swear to Arius, Cyrus, if you take him with you and something happens to him—”

“Nothing is going to happen to him, Darling. I’ll be there, and Razik will be there with his fancy dragon tricks.”

Scarlett bit her lip, still not entirely on board with this plan.

“Don’t either of you find it a little ridiculous that you are debating my safety when I am, in fact, a Guardian and an actual descendent of Sargon? With the same dragon magic as Razik?” Cassius cut in.

Scarlett and Cyrus both glanced at him briefly before she turned back to Cyrus. “If *anything* happens to him, the things I will do to you will make what I did to the man who choked on his balls—”

“Gods! Stop!” Cyrus snapped with a grimace. “I got it. Don’t let anything happen to the Witch child.”

“Fuck both of you,” Cassius said, flipping them off.

“So we’re doing this then?” Razik asked, pushing off the wall he’d been leaning against.

“My queen?” Cyrus asked, a wicked grin curving up on the corner of his lips.

Shadows flitted across her eyes and more curled around her arms. “Bring me Talwyn.”



“Directly on the High Witch’s front step?” Cyrus asked, looking around when they stepped from the air. “Bold move.”

“Stupid move,” another voice sneered. “Three males showing up unattended by a female? You must wish for death.”

“Not death. Just a word with Hazel,” Cassius replied, his chin lifting.

“How dare you call her by her name,” the Witch snarled, the sword she’d drawn rising and leveling at Cassius’s throat.

“Believe me, there are plenty of other things I could call her,” Cassius retorted, and damn. He might have forgiven his father for not being there while he’d grown up, but that evidently did not extend to his mother.

Before the Witch could reply, the front door opened and the High Witch herself stood there. Cyrus immediately bowed low. Razik crossed his arms, looking her up and down once, while Cassius just stared back at her. She seemed to peer around them before she asked, “You travel alone?”

“If you are asking if Scarlett is here, the answer is no,” Cassius replied. Then his head tilted to the side. “Unless you are inquiring after Tybalt?”

The High Witch’s lips pursed, her sharp features hardening even more. “Come with me.” She looked at the other Witch. “I do not require assistance, Arantaxa.”

The other looked like she wanted to argue, but wisely nodded in agreement, turning her back on them.

They stepped into the High Witch’s home. It was the first time Cyrus had ever done so. Cassius had come here one other time with Scarlett. It had not gone well. They’d had to be discreet and secretive because Hazel had not wanted the other

Witches to know of his existence yet, and Cyrus was sure that was what upset Cassius most of all. Tybalt was ecstatic to have a son, introduced him as such every chance he got. The High Witch kept his identity a secret under the guise of protecting him. She gave the same explanation for having abandoned him in the mortal kingdoms.

“Who is this?” the High Witch asked, trying and failing to keep the sneer off her face as she looked over her shoulder at Razik.

“My brother,” Cassius replied tightly.

The High Witch nearly tripped over air. She was quiet for a long moment, seeming to gather herself, before she turned to face them fully. “Do you bring news?”

“We do not have time for that,” Cassius replied, stepping forward. “We came because we need your help.”

“My help?” the High Witch asked, brows shooting up.

“A few days ago we were in a fight in Rydeon. Sybil had a potion that nullified powers. We need one that would do that to a Fae but not affect an Avonleyan.”

“For what purpose?” the High Witch asked.

“None of yours,” Cassius returned coldly.

Her fingers twitched at her sides, but other than that, the High Witch had no reaction. “It is rumored my sister has met her end.”

“She has,” Cassius confirmed. “At the hands of a mortal male.”

Again her fingers twitched, a brief glimpse of shock skating across her features, before they were hard once more. “Good. Come with me.”

She turned, leading them through her home, and Cyrus couldn't help but notice there was no one else present. Did she live in this giant castle by herself? That protective of her privacy and secrets?

They followed her down several halls before they entered some kind of storeroom. There was no other way to describe the room they were in. Shelves lined the walls and freestanding shelves were throughout the room. It was like being in a library only with vials instead of books.

“What are all these?” Cyrus asked, forgetting he was in the presence of the High Witch. Surprisingly, she answered him.

“Do you think we have not been preparing for war as you have been?” the High Witch demanded.

“These are all for battle?” Razik asked. “Impressive.”

“I do not require the approval of a male,” she snapped. She came to a stop beside some shelves lined with vials that held grey liquid. Pulling one from the shelf, she held it out to Cassius. “Add your blood and his to it. When you use it, throw it to the ground to enact the spell.”

“It will work on Talwyn?” Cassius asked.

“This one will, with your blood added to it,” the High Witch replied. “You are as much Witch as you are Sargon.”

Cassius glared back at her. “One wanted me and one didn’t. Forgive me for embracing the half of me that did.”

“You are both, whether you embrace it or not. It would be stupid not to master all parts of you with war on the horizon.”

“She is not wrong,” Razik said, perusing the other vials on the shelves.

“No one asked you,” Cassius bit out, slipping the vial into his pocket.

“What else do you need?” the High Witch asked.

“Some place to stay until nightfall,” Cassius answered.

“You may stay here. No one will bother you.”

Cassius nodded. “Can we take two? Just in case?”

“You can take whatever you need,” the High Witch answered.

“This is all I need.”

Hazel nodded curtly, gesturing for them to follow her back out of the storeroom. They went down two more passages before she pushed open the doors to a large dining area. “I will have some food prepared. So you can eat before you do whatever it is you are here to do this evening.”

She was gone a moment later, the doors thudding shut behind her.

“So that was your mother,” Razik commented a heartbeat later.

“In that she birthed me, yes,” Cassius replied.

“She seems to care.”

“Enough to abandon me in the mortal lands and let me fend for myself.”

Cyrus was silent, taking a seat at the table. Cassius stood rigidly near a window, looking out at the Witch lands.

“She did it to keep you safe,” Razik said, something Cyrus couldn’t quite read entering his tone. “She clearly wishes that had not been the case.”

“What do you know of it?” Cassius snapped, rounding on him.

Razik gave him a razor-sharp smile from the chair he’d taken. “I know what it is to be truly and willfully abandoned, Cassius. That was not this.”

Silence descended on the room and stayed, even when Hazel returned with food. She did not linger, giving Cassius one last look, before she left them to themselves until night.



They emerged just after sunset, the sky so cloudy they couldn’t see the stars or the moon.

Perfect for sneaking up on an unsuspecting Fae Queen.

They'd spent the afternoon planning, getting Razik up to speed on Talwyn and her powers, and sharpening weapons.

Cyrus wasn't sure what to expect from her. Would they be able to surprise her? How much would she fight them? Were there others with her that they would have to fight as well? Would she be able to summon one of the Maraans?

Admittedly, this wasn't the best planned mission, and he tried not to remember the last mission that hadn't been properly planned. This was different. There were two who could Travel them out of there if needed, and both of them had dragon fire. Razik could literally shift into a dragon. This would be fine. That's what he kept telling himself anyway.

Cassius and Cyrus both had fighting leathers on, while Razik apparently felt his scales were enough, along with his usual twin short-swords. Save for a few knives down his boots, those were the only weapons he had on him. Cyrus and Cassius had at least a dozen more weapons on them each, but Razik said if he needed to shift fully, the weapons just got in his way. Neither of them were about to argue with him.

Anahita's Springs were located northwest of the House of Water, and Cassius had Traveled as close to the spot as he'd been able to. It was still a good hour of moving across the dry plains of the Water Court. Three warriors stalking unknowing prey. If she only knew what was coming for her.

Cyrus had wanted this for years, ever since Talwyn had turned her back on them. Sure, one could argue Sorin had failed her in some fundamental way when he lost himself after Eliné left, but Talwyn's sins had been just as grave. She'd needlessly isolated the Fire and Water Courts, and then wondered why there was such animosity. She acted as if she was the only one who had faced hardship and loss.

She didn't know what hardship was, but she was about to find out. His queen would make sure of that.

He could still remember what it felt like to rip apart those Night Children who had taken Thia from him. The bloodlust

he had descended into, relishing every kill. More than fire had burned that night, and the embers of that bloodletting still burned hot in the depths of his soul. It had been a long time since he'd let his darkness out to play, and he was more than glad to fan those flames a little bit.

And playing was exactly what he intended to do before turning her over to Scarlett.

When the vegetation started getting denser, he knew they were getting close. They had maybe a mile to go before they'd be at the edge of the Springs. They slowed to make their approach soundless, each pulling a vial from their pocket and knocking back the contents. The High Witch had offered the tonics to them before they'd left, saying it would mask their scents.

They heard the waters cascading down the small rock formations before they saw it. They were all crouched down, peering between foliage. A black wolf sat at the edge of the pond. Azrael and Scarlett had told them she had learned to Shift. Queen Henna had been able to Shift too, into a beautiful white wolf.

"Will she run?" Razik asked quietly, studying the wolf before them.

"I hope so. And when she does, you stop her," Cyrus answered.

Cassius and Razik nodded, each moving in a separate direction so they could surround her. Cyrus waited a full fifteen minutes to give them time to get into position before he straightened. The wolf's ears cocked, and she stood, turning to face him as he stepped from the surrounding trees. His hand was in his pocket, fingering the potion from Hazel. It would nullify his magic too, but he wasn't worried about that. He could overpower her in hand-to-hand combat if neither of them could access their magic.

There was a flash of faint green light, and the Fae Queen of the Eastern Courts stood before him. She looked like she always did. Brown pants. White tunic. Brown boots. Hair braided down her back. There were no swords peeking over

her shoulders, but hard jade green eyes stared at him, the same emotionless mask on her face as always.

“Cyrus?”

“Talwyn,” he returned, casually prowling forward.

She looked around, as though she had been expecting someone else, and he immediately tensed, wondering who else would be out here with her.

“What are you doing here?” she asked sharply when she didn’t appear to find who she was looking for.

“My queen wants a word,” he replied darkly, flames winding up his legs.

She noted the movement, winds beginning to disrupt the surrounding vegetation. “So she sends you to retrieve me like a good dog?”

“Says the wolf,” Cyrus returned. “I assure you, those who came with me say more than ‘woof.’”

Her eyes darted around the space again. “Who else is here?”

“No one who will save you.”

“I did not ask to be saved,” she retorted sharply. “I will even go with you, but only if I can see Briar before you deliver me to Scarlett.”

“You are really not in any place to be making demands,” he said, pulling the vial from his pocket.

He sent a burst of flames in her direction, forcing her to react and flinch away so she did not see the vial coming. It landed at her feet, smoke billowing up around them. His flames instantly died, his veins going cold. It sucked, but at least he was prepared for it. Talwyn was not.

She blinked, staggering as she backed away from him. “What did you do?” she asked in horror.

“Made sure you didn’t get any crazy ideas about escaping this fate.”

“I cannot fight without my magic,” she gasped, holding her palms in front of her. She stared down at them as if she couldn’t comprehend what had happened when no magic appeared at her fingertips.

“No,” Cyrus agreed. He was only about a foot away from her now. He leaned in as he whispered the next words. “But you can run.”

Her eyes went wide. He could see the dilemma in those jade irises. Face him and fight, or try to flee. He saw the moment her resolve took over. She didn’t run, but she did take a step back from him.

“Who is out here with you?” Cyrus asked, following her as she retreated backwards.

“No one. I was being held in the Baylorin cells. Nuri helped me escape.”

“You expect me to believe that? After you fought against us? Nuri wouldn’t help you.”

“But she did,” Talwyn insisted, panic filling her gaze now. “I swear I will come with you, Cyrus. Just take me to Briar first. It is important.”

“I promised my queen I would drop you at her feet, and that is exactly what I intend to do.”

“Please, Cyrus.”

“It is not me you need to beg for mercy.”

“I am not begging for mercy,” she spat, frustration overtaking her panic. “If you will not permit me to see Briar first, then I will fight you on this. I will run.”

Cyrus smirked at her, a wicked thing that filled his entire face. “I wonder, can wolves run faster than dragons can fly?”

“What?”

“Make your choice, Talwyn.”

She turned without another moment of hesitation, sprinting away from him into the trees. He stalked after her, not in too much of a hurry, knowing Razik and Cassius had eyes on her.

The rustling of the trees told him they'd already launched into the sky.

It was a few minutes later when he heard her muffled scream. A few moments after that when he found her, Cassius holding her wrists as she struggled to free herself. His wings were out, eyes glowing.

“What are you doing out here without weapons anyway?” Cyrus drawled, lazily moving towards her.

“I was not able to take any with me. I told you, Nuri helped me escape. I have been hiding here, trying to reach Briar. Instead I got you,” she spat. She looked over her shoulder and sneered, “And some sort of hybrid, I guess.”

“If you want the full thing, just ask,” said a voice as dark as the night he dropped out of. Dragon fire flared, casting everything in eerie shadows that danced around them. His scaled flesh glistened, and the ground shook slightly when he landed before them. Talwyn shrank back into Cassius.

“Rumor is you want revenge against my kingdom,” Razik purred, a sharp smile on his lips, sapphire eyes glowing brightly in the night.

“Who are you?” Talwyn demanded. Cyrus had to give her some credit. She almost sounded like the feared queen she'd once been, but the quiver in her voice gave her away.

“I am many different things. Son of the Commander of the Avonleyan forces. Grandson of Sargon, god of war and courage. Hand to the King of Avonleya.”

Talwyn slumped to her knees, and Cassius let her go. The three of them closed in around her, looking down at the Fae Queen who had nearly broken Scarlett. Who had tried to take everything from her, from them. She was visibly trembling below them, and Cyrus had never felt so satisfied at seeing tears glimmer in someone's eyes.

“But to you,” Razik continued. “I am a messenger of my princess.”

“Your princess?” she repeated, her chin still defiantly raised, despite the meekness of her voice.

“I believe you know her better as Queen Scarlett Aditya, but I know her as the sister of my king,” Razik replied. “And she is waiting for you.”

CHAPTER 42

SCARLETT

She'd spent the entire day waiting to hear from Cyrus. They'd left immediately after she'd told them to go get Talwyn. Then she'd had to spend every moment since pretending like she hadn't let them go on a mission to collect the Fae Queen. Granted, they'd slept for much of that time after the ball since it had lasted until nearly sunrise. Sleep hadn't come easily though, her thoughts filled with the vengeance she was finally going to claim.

She was certain Razik had told Cethin where they were going, but her brother hadn't said anything about it to her. Cethin had trained her as usual, Kailia and Sorin watching on. He'd gone easier on her in training and had told her to be sure and refill her reserves fully when they were done.

She hadn't told Sorin. He had assumed Cyrus, Cass, and Razik had all slept in and then went to train in the Nightmist Mountain arena. She hadn't bothered to tell him otherwise. She was done talking about this. If roles were reversed, Sorin would have already hunted down the person who had attempted to take her life. For as much grief as she gave him about being an overprotective pain in her ass, she was the same. It didn't matter if it was the bond, being Avonleyan, or simply her demeanor. Talwyn had come after what was hers, had killed her twin flame. The only acceptable penance for that was death.

Scarlett dreamed of it being slow and drawn out over days, but she knew that would not be how this played out. Talwyn would not see another day because the moment Sorin learned

she was here, he would try to interfere. But Talwyn was the reason they were in this mess. She had handed the Courts over to Alaric. She had sent Sorin beyond the Veil, was the reason he was soon to be without his fire magic. She may not be the source of all their problems, but a good number of them could be traced back to her.

Cyrus had finally sent her a fire message a few minutes ago when they'd crossed the Wards back into Avonleya. Razik had taken them to some barren place south of Aimonway until she was ready for her. And now she was standing in the center of the training arena waiting for them. It seemed right, that Talwyn would die on Avonleyan soil. The kingdom she sought revenge against would be the last place she ever saw.

The last thing she would ever see, however, would be Scarlett's face as she watched the life leave her eyes.

Scarlett's lips turned up in a wicked smile at the thought. Her shadows jumped under her skin, and she let them out. She had been trying to save every drop of magic for Talwyn, but her power was as anxious for this as she was. Its counterpart was being taken from it. Not just its source of power, but the answer to its songs. Sorin's flames fed her starfire and shadows as much as he fed her soul.

The shadows twisted into two panthers that prowled impatiently around her, soft growls and snarls echoing to her in the arena. Rayner appeared a moment later. Cyrus must have sent him a message too. His swirling eyes met hers, and he nodded once before moving to the stone wall and leaning against it.

Razik arrived next, Eliza with him. He must have gone to collect the Fire General. The Fire Court assembling to watch justice be delivered on the one who had come for their Prince. Scarlett had briefly considered offering to let them in on this revenge, but had dismissed the notion just as quickly. Talwyn's death had been hers from the moment her power had slammed into Sorin's chest. From the moment she had watched his eyes slowly go to her.

Had watched him try to fight his way to her.

Had watched him stagger before dropping to his knees.

I would still choose to stay in the darkness.

She closed her eyes, breathing deep to shove down the memories, but then stopped. There would be no more shoving them down. She let them wash over her, play on repeat in her mind. Feed her wrath.

Sorin trying to fight his way to her.

A bolt of energy hitting his chest.

Him staggering before dropping to his knees.

His golden eyes finding hers, slowly dimming.

Him lying on the beach while she curled over him.

Sobbing into his ripped and bloodstained tunic.

His unmoving chest.

No heartbeat sounding beneath her ear.

Her twin flame Mark slowly fading from her hand.

I would still choose to stay in the darkness.

When she opened her eyes, she saw red.

Cyrus and Cassius were before her, and between them was Talwyn. It took every shred of self-control Scarlett possessed not to launch herself at the female.

Cyrus shoved Talwyn forward, and she fell to her knees at Scarlett's feet, exactly as he'd promised.

Scarlett stared down at her. Her braid was barely holding together, large sections of hair having come free. They hung limp and tangled around her face. She wore her usual brown pants, and her white tunic was stained with dirt and grime. She smelled terrible, as if she hadn't bathed in days, and the dark circles under her dull jade green eyes made Scarlett wonder when she'd slept last.

Scarlett hoped that when she did sleep, it was her that haunted her nightmares.

The two stared at each other, the silence thickening in the air with every passing second. Scarlett was trying to get her breathing under control, her chest tight and each breath labored as she soaked in this moment.

“Give her a sword,” Scarlett said, her voice eerily calm.

Talwyn said nothing, her mouth set in a thin line as she held Scarlett’s gaze from her knees.

Cassius brought a blade forward, handing it to Talwyn. The Fae Queen took it, holding it at her side, waiting for Scarlett.

“You took him from me,” Scarlett said, each word carefully controlled. “You sent him to find me in the mortal lands, set this all into motion, and then you took him from me. When I kill you this night, I want you to know it is because I am better than you. In every godsdamn way. While you are toiling away in the Pits of Torment, I do not want you to think you could have won if only you’d had a weapon.”

Talwyn stared up at her, face as unreadable as always.

“You have nothing to say to me?” Scarlett demanded, her control beginning to slip. “After you attempted to take everything from me?”

“Nothing I have to say will change this outcome. You do not wish to hear excuses, and there is no justification for what happened that night. I only wish to speak to Prince Briar before we do this,” Talwyn said, her chin lifting slightly.

“You do not get to ask *anything* of me,” Scarlett hissed. “You do not deserve a last request.”

“You are correct,” Talwyn conceded. “I do not deserve that, but it is not for me.”

Scarlett glanced at Cassius and Cyrus, who still stood a few feet behind Talwyn. They were not going to move until Scarlett was ready to end her.

“When we found her, she said she would come with us if she could speak to Briar before we delivered her to you. When

we refused, that is when she fought. Or rather, ran. The High Witch gave us a potion to nullify her magic,” Cyrus explained.

“And do you have your magic back now?” Scarlett sneered, attention going back to Talwyn. “I do not want that to be your next excuse.”

“I do,” Talwyn answered, and Scarlett saw her fingers flex around the hilt of the sword she’d been given. “But if you let me speak to Briar first, I will not fight you on this, Scar—Your Majesty.”

“Oh, Talwyn,” Scarlett crooned mockingly, letting her shadow panthers stalk closer, tendrils of darkness reaching out and sliding along Talwyn’s arms. She flinched back when Scarlett let them bite. “I want you to fight. I want to revel in each drop of blood I draw from you. I want to feel it on my skin, bathe in it as I slowly draw your life from you. I want you to beg me to end it, and then I want you to thank me right before I send you to the Pits of Torment because it will be a reprieve from my wrath and a kindness you will never deserve.” She jerked her chin at the sword Talwyn held as she stepped back a few paces. “Get up.”

Her eyes flicked to Cassius and Cyrus, who understood the silent command to give them space, but Talwyn remained on her knees. “I need to speak to Briar,” she said again.

“I am denying your request,” Scarlett snarled. “Get up.”

“Please, Sc—”

Her panthers snapped and snarled again, and Talwyn lurched up on instinct.

“Better,” Scarlett said, beginning to circle her.

“I will fight you. We can have this duel you desire and deserve,” she said, moving with Scarlett. “Just let me talk to Briar first.”

“Briar will not save you,” Scarlett retorted sharply. “One would think you would want to speak to Azrael as your dying wish. Or did you simply use him like you used the rest of us?”

“Shut up,” Talwyn snapped, eyes flashing with the first hint of emotion Scarlett had seen.

And she smiled savagely.

“Tell you what, *your Majesty*, if you manage to draw a single drop of blood from me, I will summon Briar here. You can speak with him before I end your miserable existence,” Scarlett said, twirling her sword once in her hand before taking an offensive stance.

A slight sneer curled on Talwyn’s lip. “You think I will not be able to land a single strike? You will win this, *Scarlett*, but if I fight, it will not simply be handed to you.”

“Good,” Scarlett purred.

Then she lunged, starfire flaring down her sword. She felt the wind Talwyn threw at her, but Scarlett had been training with an Avonleyan King and a godsdamn dragon. Her shields hardly shuttered at the impact. Talwyn staggered back one step when their blades met, and Scarlett heard the breath she sucked in at the impact. Determination flared, and a wooden spear appeared in her other hand.

“That’s more like it,” Scarlett said, circling her once more.

“I need to speak with Briar,” Talwyn repeated, her tone hardening.

“Was your education lacking? Do you not understand the meaning of the word no?” Scarlett asked sweetly, her shadow panthers reforming into snakes at her feet.

“It is not for me,” Talwyn spat, her eyes going to the writhing shadows on the ground. “It is for Ashtine.”

“Then tell me,” Scarlett replied. “I will relay the message.”

Talwyn shook her head, blocking Scarlett’s next strike. Scarlett’s sword sliced clean through her wooden spear.

“Only Briar,” Talwyn gritted out, her air magic managing to shove Scarlett back several feet. “I trust no one else to get this information to him. If I can right only one thing before my death, then it shall be this.”

“Then you will fail. Unless you can manage to draw blood,” Scarlett sneered again, her shadows looping around Talwyn’s ankle and yanking hard.

The Fae Queen went sprawling to the ground. Her sword skittered a few feet away.

An arrow of ice left Scarlett’s palm, grazing a shallow cut along Talwyn’s thigh. She hissed between her teeth, and Scarlett smiled tauntingly at her. “Must not be that important, hmm? Or do you simply fuck over and fail everyone in your life these days?”

Talwyn opened her mouth, clearly about to spout something back, but she snapped it closed just as quickly. She reached for her sword, getting back to her feet.

Talwyn lunged first this time, and then it was all swords clanging and magic blocking. Scarlett slowly and steadily shredded through her shields. Talwyn’s wind and earth magic never even dented hers. But Scarlett was waiting for it. She was waiting for that crackling energy to make an appearance. Was mentally preparing herself to see it, face it.

Knew that would be her tipping point.

The moment that magic appeared, everything Scarlett was holding back would be unleashed.

Scarlett whirled, blocking Talwyn’s sword with one hand, the long knife in her other slicing deeply into Talwyn’s forearm.

Talwyn cried out sharply at the pain, but managed to keep her grip on her sword as Scarlett yanked her knife free. She felt a few drops of blood land on her cheeks, and her smile only grew at the feeling of them, warm and sticky.

Something was sliding along her legs, and she looked down to find vines snaking up, as if Talwyn thought she could bind her. Scarlett met her eyes, her head tilting slightly as her shadow armor appeared, shadows clinging to her being as thorns appeared on Talwyn’s vines.

Scarlett tsked under her breath. “One would think you’d have been trained better, Talwyn. This is how you draw blood

with vines.”

Talwyn’s cries of pain were indeed music to Scarlett’s ears.

Her shadow snakes slithered up Talwyn’s legs, fangs of razor-sharp ice biting into her skin as they went. They wound around her calves, her knees, her thighs, moved up her torso, blood welling and smearing along their path as they went.

They dissipated somewhere around her ribs, and Talwyn was left panting, her sword lowered at her side.

“Any time you want to start begging, I’m listening,” Scarlett said.

“Please let me speak to Briar,” Talwyn said from between her teeth, straightening as she spoke.

“No.”

Scarlett lunged again, and Talwyn barely got her sword raised in time to block her swing, another burst of wind slamming into Scarlett’s shield. It didn’t even phase her. She spun, landing a kick square in the center of Talwyn’s chest, and the female choked on a cough.

“Scarlett, please.”

Ah, there it was. The beginning of her song.

She bared her teeth, tossing her sword aside. Starfire flared in her palms, and she sent it at Talwyn, who was forced to dive out of the way. Her wind wouldn’t suck the air from those flames.

She was still on the ground as Scarlett advanced, prowling forward like the panthers that took form beside her once again. Talwyn dragged her sword up to block her. A panther snatched it in its large maw, wrenching it from her grip.

Talwyn scrambled to her feet just in time for Scarlett to land another kick to her stomach, knocking the air from her lungs.

“Please,” she gasped out, and Scarlett smiled wider at hearing her gasp for breath.

At hearing that word come from her lips again.

“You haven’t drawn blood yet, Talwyn,” she sneered. She was circling again. She knew she was playing with her. Talwyn knew it. The others standing silently around the arena knew it too.

Talwyn seemed to gather herself, swiping an arm along her brow. It left a trail of blood from where the knife had been embedded. “I do not want to do this,” she gritted out. “I only wish to speak with Briar.”

Scarlett couldn’t hold in her bark of laughter. “Do you think I give a fuck what you *want*, Talwyn?”

And that storm that had been brewing, that had almost been unleashed upon this world when she had thought Sorin had died, came to the surface and broke free.

Starfire slowly began winding up her legs, around her torso, her arms, knitting itself among her shadow armor. Her crown took shape atop her head, settling among her sweat-slick strands. The panthers at her sides fell back, merging behind her until her shadow dragon stood at her back. It let loose a roar, fire spewing from its mouth and casting a circle of flames around them.

“If this world loses its freedom, it is because of *you*,” Scarlett snarled, taking slow, deliberate steps towards Talwyn. “It is a mercy I offer this world to take you out of it. You have handed your people over to Alaric without a second thought in order to get into Avonleya. Well, here you stand, Talwyn. Everything you worked your entire life for. All for this.”

“I did not know—” she started.

“You did not *want* to know,” Scarlett sneered.

“You’re right,” Talwyn agreed quickly, backing up.

“You tried to take him from me,” Scarlett all but screamed. A shadow snapped from her palm, wrapping around Talwyn’s throat. Talwyn grappled at it, nails scratching along her neck, drawing her own blood.

“Tried?” Talwyn gasped, dropping to her knees.

That dark smile tilted on Scarlett's lips again. She was a foot in front of her now, her hand coming out to grip her throat, relieving her shadows of the task of cutting off her air supply. Her fingers flexed, digging into Talwyn's windpipe, and the queen's hand came back up, wrapping around Scarlett's wrist.

Until she yanked it back when Scarlett let fire flare beneath Talwyn's hand, burning her palm and fingers.

Scarlett tightened her grip, and Talwyn tried to suck in any amount of air. She found none.

Winds tore at her. Vines snapped out. Wooden stakes struck her shadow armor, burning away amid the starfire. The ground shook beneath her, opening up to swallow her down. Her shadows converged beneath her feet so she stood on a cloud of darkness, and at her feet was a dethroned queen on her knees.

Scarlett bent down so she could speak into her ear. "You failed at even that, Talwyn. Be glad I called him back from the Veil, or this entire world would be ash. Your Courts. My Courts. The stars themselves. They were spared my wrath so that I could bestow it all upon you."

Starfire crept down her hand, inching closer to Talwyn's throat, and the female's eyes went even wider, tears glimmering.

Scarlett! Stop!

She jolted at the sound of his voice in her head, slamming her shields up to keep him out. But then there was a hand on her arm, a curse sounding as starfire burned skin. She jerked her arm back, releasing Talwyn's throat, to find Sorin beside her.

"Love," he said softly, placatingly. Scarlett tried to look away from him, but he moved to stay in her line of vision. "Here, Scarlett. Keep your eyes right here."

The tempest under her skin howled for release, for the death that was her's to claim, for the kill that was being denied her.

A sad smile formed on his lips. "I know, Scarlett. I feel it all." He reached out, cupping her jaw. "You are better than this, my Love."

"No, Sorin," she replied, hurt coiling through her. "I'm really not."

"Scarlett," he tried as she stepped away from his touch. She was trying to hold back her emotions, conceal them from the bond, but she was feeling too much right now.

She looked down at Talwyn where she was sucking in lungfuls of air on her hands and knees. The former Fae Queen looked up at her, tears cutting trails down her face. "Understand that the mercy you are receiving right now is not mine but his. You do not deserve it, and your death is still mine. You will not return to the continent. You do not have a throne. You are not a queen. You are nothing, and when I kill you, it will be a stain on my soul that I will celebrate with every breath I take."

Talwyn swallowed, wincing as she did so. Scarlett held her stare a moment longer before her jade irises darted to the side, relief filling them. Scarlett turned to see what she thought she'd found salvation in to find Prince Azrael and Prince Briar, along with Cethin and Kailia, standing behind them. Briar had doused the circle of flames that her shadow dragon had built around them, the fire hissing as it went out.

Azrael was staring at Talwyn, more emotion on his face than Scarlett had ever witnessed, but he did not go to her. He stood here. On this side with her.

Briar's icy blue eyes went from distaste to pity when they moved from Talwyn to Scarlett. "I stand behind whatever you decide to do, Scarlett," he said gently.

"Briar, wait," Talwyn rasped.

Scarlett could see her trying to stand out of the corner of her eye, but she collapsed down again, crawling forward a few feet instead.

Scarlett turned away. She couldn't stand to look at the female. Couldn't stand to see her alive, breathing, moving.

Sorin's stare was boring into her, and she let him feel all of it. Let him feel what he was doing to her to deny her this.

"It's Ashtine," Talwyn gasped, and Briar went preternaturally still.

Scarlett watched the Water Prince, waiting for Talwyn to say whatever it was she so desperately needed to tell him.

"Alaric is going to take her. He wishes to enter the Water Prison. To free the Sorceress."

"Ashtine cannot grant entry into the Water Prison," Briar said coldly, still not moving.

"She is with child," Talwyn said amid her labored breathing. "Twins. One has water magic. I have seen her use it. Abrax has been protecting her. I have been keeping her location a secret, but they know. They know where she is, Briar."

Briar's dark skin had paled, and Scarlett knew what was coming before the words left his mouth.

"Get me out of the Wards," Briar said, turning to face her.

"She could be lying," Scarlett said listlessly. "That is what she does."

"Not about Ashtine," Azrael said, his muddy brown eyes studying Talwyn carefully.

"I do not give a fuck if she is," Briar said. "I need to see her. Need to know for sure."

"We do not know where she is," Scarlett replied in the same monotone as before.

"The Southern Islands," Talwyn supplied, her breathing getting steadier. "She is hiding in some enchanted cliffs in the Southern Islands. She said when the time came for Briar to come to her to ask the Ash Riders how to find her."

Scarlett's gaze lifted to Kailia, whose amber eyes were wide with horror, terror seeping from her so thick, Scarlett could feel it. She turned to find Rayner with a look of dread on his face.

“Anything else?” Cethin asked sharply, an arm coming around Kailia and drawing her into his side. She moved as if she were a doll, her movements not her own.

“I...”

Scarlett closed her eyes, the mere sound of her voice grating on her very bones.

“I am glad you still breathe, Sorin,” Talwyn finished.

And the sound of his name on *her* lips? That was all she could take.

Scarlett stepped through the air, away from it all.



She felt him before she saw him. It was a bittersweet thing. She didn't want to speak to him right now, but her days of feeling him this way, of being able to find each other with their bond, were quickly coming to an end.

She was lying on her back on grass that was too soft. The sun had set, the stars looking back at her. This was the only place she could think of to come. The only place she had been that was open enough to breathe. She had momentarily contemplated trying to enter the country estate just to see what it would have been like, but she hadn't wanted to deal with the guards. She needed some place to think and breathe and feel all of it away from the rest of the world, even if only for a few minutes before she went back to deal with everything Talwyn had dropped on them.

He sat down beside her, resting his elbows on his knees, not saying anything for a long time. He was waiting for her. She knew that. He always waited for her, let her gather herself, which is why she was surprised when he spoke first.

“I know we need to talk about...all of that, but you either need to come talk to Briar or give me some blood so Razik can

take him to the Water Court.”

She sighed deeply. She knew that. Briar was likely freezing and drowning anyone who looked at him the wrong way right now. She had never seen him lose his temper. Had never really seen him angry actually. But if what Talwyn had said was true, then the princess he loved was carrying his children, and they were all in danger.

“Do you believe her?” she asked.

“It does not matter. Briar will not rest until he lays eyes on Ashtine. You cannot stop him, and you need to do this, Scarlett. He has always stood beside you. You cannot deny him this,” Sorin replied.

“He cannot go back without a plan.”

“Apparently that is what we do now,” he said tightly. “Send our family and allies across the sea without proper planning.”

“If you came to reprimand me for letting Cyrus and Cass go get *her*, you can leave now,” she retorted. “How did you get here anyway?”

“Cethin Traveled me.”

She tsked. “Of course he did.”

“Scarlett, we will have this conversation, but it is time to be a queen. We can have it out later. You need to be there for your Court right now. You need to be there for Briar. Both as his queen and as his friend.”

He was right. She knew that. She’d just needed a minute to breathe, but she’d left Briar to suffocate. Sorin was right to call her out on this.

“Where is everyone?”

“At the castle.”

She didn’t reply. Just grabbed his hand and Traveled them back to her suite in the castle. She was already reaching for the door when an arm reached over top of her, holding it shut. She turned to snap something at him, but he had her back against

the door in the next moment, fingers gripping her chin and tilting her face up to his.

“All the way through the darkness, Scarlett. Even when you do not want to look at me.”

“Stop it. I hate it when you’re sweet when I’m cranky and angry,” she hissed, irritated by the soft look he was giving her.

He huffed a laugh, bending down to press a kiss to her cheek before he released her. She stepped away, and he opened the door for her. His hand settled on her lower back, and she ground her molars at the bond soothing her anger. She wanted to be mad at him right now, damn it.

He led her down to the same lounge she’d met Tybalt in, her Court along with Cethin, Kailia, and Razik scattered throughout. As soon as she came through the door, Briar was before her.

“Take me to the Water Court now, Scarlett,” he demanded, something crazed in his eyes that had Scarlett stepping into Sorin.

“We will take you, my friend,” Sorin said, clamping a hand onto his shoulder. “We need a plan first. Not having one will only put her in more danger.”

Briar jerked back, stalking a few steps away before turning back to face them. “We know where she is. The Southern Islands.”

“That as far as we know have been uninhabited for centuries,” Sorin countered. “No one goes there, Briar. You know why.”

“Sorin!” Briar snapped, and that was frost left in his wake as he began to pace in front of them. That was ice creeping across the floor, the temperature of the room dropping so quickly, Scarlett’s breath was a puff in front of her. She used her own ice magic to counter his, the memory of him doing this when she first arrived at the Fire Court flitting through her mind.

“I get it, Briar. When we went to Baylorin to get Scarlett months ago, I knew where she was. I knew who had her. I had

to sit on my ass and wait, not knowing what was being done to her. Fearing the worst. Nothing about it was easy, but if I had gone in without a plan, I can almost guarantee we would not be standing here today,” Sorin replied. He somehow sounded both like a king taking control and a friend concerned for a fellow prince, but he got through to Briar, the Water Prince nodding once before moving to a spot before the window.

Scarlett cleared her throat, still fighting to balance out Briar’s magic. “Where is she?”

She couldn’t bring herself to say her name.

“I had her escorted to our cells,” Cethin answered. “I have four guards watching her, and she is in nightstone manacles.”

“Nightstone? Not shirastone?” Scarlett asked.

Cethin shook his head. He was on one of the sofas, Kailia tucked in beside him. Her features were still as ashen as her power. Cethin was tense beside her, a protective arm around her, his fingers making soothing strokes up and down her arm. “We only have nightstone. It is stronger than shirastone. Dragon fire and starfire can melt through shirastone.”

“Did she say anything else?”

“No,” Sorin answered, nudging her towards an armchair.

“I can go talk to her,” Azrael said. He was standing off to the side, arms crossed.

Scarlett arched a brow as she lowered into the chair.

“She will talk to me. Out of everyone here, she will talk to me. I can take another Blood Vow if you need me—”

Scarlett waved her hand, cutting him off. “I trust you, Azrael. It is her I do not trust.”

“I will get information for you and report back every word she says,” he promised, arms falling to his sides.

“And you will tell her nothing of our plans and knowledge.”

He nodded in understanding, and Scarlett jerked her chin, dismissing him to do just that. Orson was summoned to take

him to the cells.

Then her gaze fell on Rayner. He was leaning against the far wall, arms folded across his chest, swirling eyes already on her. She held his gaze because this was something she'd been avoiding, but now it needed to be addressed.

“I need to know, Rayner.”

His eyes fell closed, head tipping back against the wall. Scarlett glanced at Kailia, who had stiffened next to Cethin. He was murmuring low into her ear. When Scarlett looked back at Rayner, he was looking at her again.

“The islands were set up by Deimas centuries ago. He used them to essentially breed more powerful beings,” he said.

“That is where you are from?” Scarlett asked softly.

“That is where I was born.”

“What happened to them?”

A smile as wicked as any Wraith of Death filled his face, dark and terrifying. “I did.”

CHAPTER 43

SORIN

He flexed his fingers where his hand rested on his thigh. Sorin was seated on the arm of Scarlett's chair, his other arm resting along the back of it. He itched to touch her, but she was angry with him. She was just angry in general, and he could feel all the effort she was putting into holding back the storm under her skin. Any extra sensations would set her off right now, and they needed to not be in an enclosed room when that happened.

"You did?"

The question came from Kailia, who had lifted her head from Cethin's shoulder. She was studying Rayner intently, as if seeing him for the first time. Cethin was watching his wife just as closely, and Sorin knew that look. It was how he looked when he was anticipating Scarlett about to get incredibly violent.

Rayner nodded.

"So the islands are deserted now?" Scarlett asked tentatively.

Rayner nodded again. "We were housed within the cliffs Talwyn spoke of. They contain an inner city of sorts. Various levels with thousands of rooms."

Scarlett's nose scrunched. "Like its own kingdom then?"

"No," Rayner said. "Those who ran it answered to Deimas. He wanted powerful beings to aid him from what I understood."

“So people were matched based on power? Like arranged marriages for status in the mortal kingdoms?”

Rayner’s eyes swirled faster, all of his muscles tensing. “No, Scarlett. They were not arranged marriages. The males were forced to rape the females to produce powerful offspring. If those offspring did not emerge with the power desired, they were considered to have weak blood and were killed.”

Scarlett lurched back in her chair, audibly gasping as a hand flew up to cover her mouth. Sorin ran a hand down her hair, resting his arm around her shoulders. He knew this story. Knew why Rayner never spoke of his past. Knew he wouldn’t tell Scarlett everything today either because some of it, quite frankly, never needed to be spoken of again. He was fairly certain Rayner had never shared all the details with anyone.

Scarlett opened and closed her mouth several times, trying to find something, perhaps the right thing, to say, but there was no right thing to say to this. Finally she managed, “What did you do to them?”

Rayner held her gaze. “I killed them. All of them. It took some time, but I eventually found them all.”

“How long did it take?”

Rayner tipped his head back against the wall again, arms still crossed. “There was a powerful female who oversaw everything. We knew her as the Baroness. She warded the cliffs, enchanted them, and made them what they are today. We were born there, raised there. I did not know there was anything beyond the rocky walls until I moved among the ashes for the first time without meaning to. That was the first time I saw the sky. I was twelve. After they realized what I could do, I was given private trainers and special privileges. I did not understand why until much later. I was late into my third decade of life and serving as a guard to the Baroness herself when I stumbled upon documents I was not supposed to see. When I learned that I had blooded sisters. One half. One full. My mother had apparently died giving birth to the younger one, and my father had managed to take his own life at some point. I did not even know my parents were there. Had

never really thought about it. The children were all raised together with various caretakers and tutors. It was all we knew.”

Scarlett had pulled her knees to her chest, hugging them to her body. Her chin rested on top of them as she listened to Rayner speak.

“My sisters were five and seven when I learned of them,” Rayner continued, his voice getting tighter as he spoke. “I learned they were trying to force their gifts to emerge early, wanting to know if they were Ash Riders too. It took me two weeks to figure out where they were being kept. I found them in a tiny room dressed in rags. The older one told me they hadn’t eaten in three days. They were trying to force their magic to surface and keep them alive, trick it into survival mode. I started looking after them, moving among ashes and smoke to keep my movements hidden and discreet.”

That wasn’t the half of it though. Sorin knew Rayner had made plans to get his sisters out. He began secretly making contacts outside the cliffs, off the islands, for the next couple years. He had been ready to take them and go until...

“But the Baroness eventually found out. She always knew everything going on. When I went to them one night, I found her in their room instead. She always wore this bright red color. Always. And she was sitting there on one of their small beds, legs crossed, waiting for me. When I walked in, she smiled and told me their magic had emerged that day. That it was basic fire magic.”

“Oh my gods,” Scarlett whispered in horror.

Rayner had stopped speaking, and Sorin wondered if he would tell her the rest. If he would tell Scarlett the choice the Baroness had given him.

“They were killed. One that night, one...later,” Rayner said, his eyes still closed as he spoke. “I killed fifty people and nearly did not make it out, but I managed to escape the cliffs that night. Not without a cost though. The Baroness had taken precautions and had an enchantment around the cliffs. The spell took my memories of the place to keep me from

returning. But I swore to her I would be back, that I would be back to kill them all, and I kept that promise.”

“How did you find it? Remember it?” Scarlett asked.

“I spent an obscene amount of money on elixirs and Witches who swore they could help. Little bits came back to me but not enough. Not until I found my way to the Oracle.”

Scarlett started, her legs dropping to the floor. “You told me you’d never seen the Oracle.”

“I lied.”

“You lied?” she repeated.

Rayner arched a brow. “You were not my queen then. You were adamantly refusing the throne. I was under no obligation to speak of my past to you. I still am not.”

“You saw one of your sisters when you saw the Oracle, didn’t you?” Scarlett asked in a hushed breath.

Rayner nodded once, eyes hard as he held her gaze.

“What happened to all the people there?”

Rayner’s head tilted to the side, a predatory glint filling his eyes, and Sorin leaned closer to Scarlett on instinct. He knew Rayner would never harm her, but he also knew what Rayner had done, what he was capable of.

“Many of the people being used did not make it out alive. Some of the overseers were shuffled around wherever Deimas saw fit.” A sharp smile tipped up on the corners of lips. “Some found their hearts ripped from their chests or other vital organs suddenly misplaced.”

“You are The Reaper.”

They all turned to Kailia, who was sitting up straight now, gaze fixed on Rayner. His attention went to her, eyes narrowing. “How do you know that name?”

Kailia was visibly trembling, and Cethin ran a hand down her back as he leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to the back of her shoulder.

“I...” Her throat worked as she swallowed, and she cleared it. “I got out because of you.”

“When?” Rayner asked.

“One of the nights you came. You entered one of the...” She paused, her amber eyes darting to the window before she lifted her chin. “You came to one of the rooms. There were many of us in there. You killed all the overseers. I was young. Only nineteen. But because of you and another, I got out.”

“This was truly you?” Cethin asked, protectively drawing Kailia back into his side. “You are The Reaper?”

“That is what they began to call me,” he answered. “When I was finally able to return and begin freeing some of the people, it took me decades to get them all out. I do not know how many I was able to save. I know that more died than lived, but I did what I could. Deimas was gone by this time, but from what I have gathered over the years and from what I have learned since meeting Scarlett, I am starting to believe many of the children ended up on the streets of the Black Syndicate. That if the Assassin Lord is Deimas’s son and he knew he would need powerful blood to create these rifts or feed his own power, he already had a source of that blood. When it became clear I was coming for them, Alaric moved them.”

“But the children of the Syndicate were born well after this happened,” Cassius argued from where he was seated at a small table, Cyrus next to him.

“Keep people in poverty and they never learn how powerful they truly are. It becomes a cycle. Alaric is smart enough to control that cycle and keep it going,” Rayner said. “Add the magical wards that prevented their magic from surfacing and kept them from entering the Staying, they would have never known. And with Alaric’s ability to sense power, he would have known who the most powerful were.”

“But why would Ashtine say to ask the Ash Riders how to find her?” Scarlett asked.

“Because we bear the brands to enter the cliffs,” Rayner answered.

“What brands?” Scarlett asked, eyes raking over his visible flesh.

“Magical brands. Beneath the skin. They only appear when we are near the cliffs.”

“Then how did Ashtine get in?” Cassius asked.

“Abrax is with her,” Briar said, the first words he’d spoken since moving to the window. “He must have found a way to get her in.”

“Why take her there though?” Scarlett asked.

“Because the islands are believed to be cursed. That if you visit them, The Reaper will come for you,” Razik said. He was standing near the hearth, and for once, he didn’t look bored out of his mind. He was looking at Rayner with a sort of respect Sorin had never seen from the male.

“I tricked the Baroness before I killed her,” Rayner supplied. “They are believed to be cursed because I made her connect me to the wards. I know if anyone enters those islands, and I kill them without question. Those islands are graveyards and will remain so. Only the dead will inhabit them. I can only assume the Wards around Avonleya are interfering with my ability to feel the wards there since I did not feel anyone cross them. I have not had to go there for nearly seven decades.”

“Then you can get me into the cliffs to find her,” Briar said, stepping forward. “You or Queen Kailia?”

A snarl came from Cethin. “Kailia will never step foot on those islands again.”

Sorin could only imagine what the Avonleyan Queen had experienced there as an obviously powerful Ash Rider.

Rayner had tipped his head back against the wall again. “I have not been inside the cliffs in a very long time. Not since I killed the Baroness.”

“Rayner, please,” Briar pleaded.

“I am not saying no,” Rayner replied. “We will go get her.”

“When?” Briar demanded. “When can we go?”

Rayner scrubbed a hand down his face. “Two days. We take two days to plan and make sure our reserves are full. It would be foolish to go and not be properly prepared.” His gaze slid to Cyrus. “Very idiotic to go on a mission without proper planning.”

Cyrus gave him a sardonic smile while simultaneously flipping him off. “We didn’t know how long she would be there, jackass. We made a call.”

“Without discussing it with anyone first,” Sorin interjected.

“They discussed it with me,” Scarlett cut in, leaning away from his touch.

“He is my Second,” Sorin retorted.

“And Cassius is my Hand,” Scarlett countered. “And Razik does not answer to either one of us.”

“Why are we even arguing about this? It is done and over with,” Cyrus said. “We went. We accomplished what we set out to do. We weren’t caught, seen, or injured. It was successful.”

“You were lucky,” Sorin bit back.

“Still successful,” Cyrus said with a shrug.

“The only part of the plan that failed was the fact that she still breathes,” Scarlett said, glaring at Sorin.

“This needs to be discussed later,” Sorin replied.

“It will be.”

From the look on her face and the emotions flooding down the bond, Sorin knew there would be no preparing for what was to come. That was fine. He had just as much to say to her. They could burn together.



The door clicked shut behind him, Scarlett walking straight through the sitting room to the bedchamber. They'd spent another hour planning before everyone agreed to get some sleep and resume preparations in the morning when they were refreshed. Luan had not yet returned when they'd dispersed. He could fill them in when they met tomorrow.

Sawyer had promised Sorin he would try to make sure Briar slept, but they both knew it would be no use. Sorin knew better than anyone what it was to have the female you love in the hands of Alaric. To bring children into the mix? He could not fathom how he would be feeling. Rayner had said two days. He had a feeling this would be happening tomorrow, and he would support Briar in that if at all possible.

But first he needed to deal with the female in the other room. He had felt everything she was feeling down the bond. He had given her a small pass for walking out on Briar. Knew she would be able to think clearer and more rationally if she had a few minutes to breathe away from everything that had happened in that arena. So he'd given her that, but this? This would be an entirely different battle.

He sighed as he removed his boots, setting them near the door before moving to follow his wife. He was exhausted. His power levels were a quarter of what they had once been, and it had been taking a toll on him physically as much as mentally.

Which made this little secret expedition to the continent all the more irritating. It felt like one more thing she was pushing him to the side on.

He braced himself, preparing for anger and fury and the whirlwind that she was—

And he fell still when he found her curled up in an armchair before the fire, tears tracking down her face. Either

she was blocking the bond or it was part of the bond fading, but he couldn't feel her.

He crossed the room, lowering to his knees before her and reaching up to thumb away her tears. She wouldn't look at him, staring past him into the flickering flames.

"Love," he prompted.

"You told me you would not stand in my way, and yet you did, Sorin."

Her eyes slid to his, icy blue irises staring back at him. She'd used so much magic fighting Talwyn. Too much. It had been a foolish move to do so, but he would even give her grace on that. She'd needed to release that rage and wrath, and she had done so. But now? Now they needed to discuss how she had let that rage cloud her judgment, what that could have cost them. But he didn't speak yet, wanting her to say everything she needed to before he took his turn.

"This was the one thing I begged you not to ask of me, and you did anyway. It is unfair of you. You hurt me, Sorin," she whispered. "You asking this of me *hurts*."

"I know it does. I am sorry, Scarlett."

"If roles were reversed, you would not be questioning this."

"I understand why you feel that me asking this of you is unfair."

"It feels..." She huffed out a breath, stray hair fluttering.

"Tell me, Scarlett. I can handle what you have to say to me."

Her gaze went back to the fire. "It feels as if you are choosing her over me."

"Never," he said vehemently.

"But you are," she insisted, her voice cracking. "I need this, Sorin. Not just because I want revenge. I felt your emotions when I went to Rydeon without you. Something felt fundamentally *wrong* about letting me go, about not being

there to protect me. That is how I feel about this, Sorin. It feels wrong, in so many ways, not to make her pay for this. Not to take retribution for my husband and twin flame.”

“I understand what you are saying, Love. I hear you. But even as wrong as that felt, to stay behind while you went to fight, I still did it. Because that was what was best for all of us. That was not about just me, and this is not about just you,” he replied. “Can I ask you something?” She nodded once, gaze still on the hearth. “Will killing her stop the memories from surging up? Will making her pay keep the nightmares at bay? Will this vengeance change anything?”

Her eyes slowly slid back to his, and she blinked at him. “If you are asking me to be the bigger person here, Sorin, I am not that. I do not want to be that. I cannot let this go. I will not let this go.”

“I am not asking you to, but perhaps we find another way to make her atone for this. She is already suffering, Scarlett.”

“She deserves nothing less than death.”

“I failed her, Scarlett. I failed her in so many ways—”

“You are not responsible for her choices, Sorin.” Her voice was rising, and here was the anger he had been expecting. “She is decades old. She was a queen. She made her choices. She can suffer the consequences of them.”

“I helped Eliné raise her,” he said, trying to get her to understand.

“And she turned her back on you, your Court, and Briar’s Court by association,” she said, uncoiling from the chair and stepping past him. “Again, *she* made choices, Sorin. Choices you are not responsible for.”

He got to his feet, facing off with her.

“She does not deserve mercy, Sorin,” she said, hands raking through her hair. “Not mine. Not yours. For fuck’s sake, she *killed* you!”

“I will not kill her.”

“You do not have to,” she spat. “I will. I would have, if you had not shown up.”

Kailia, of all people, was the one who had told him what was going on, that Scarlett had Talwyn in the arena. He’d been on a veranda with Luan and Briar discussing possible battle strategies for when they were back on the continent when Kailia had shown up. They’d immediately gone to find Cethin, who had Traveled them all to the training arena just in time to see starfire winding down Scarlett’s arm to end Talwyn. He had tried to reach her down the bond, but she had either been too lost to the call of vengeance or the bond was too weak to reach her at that point.

And Talwyn’s eyes, when they had landed on him, were wide with shock and disbelief, but also relief and regret. She had clearly been left in the dark about his survival. Had been living with the guilt, thinking she had killed him.

Even after everything she had done, Talwyn hadn’t always been this way. Scarlett was right. Talwyn had made her own choices, needed to face the repercussions of her actions, but he would always feel somewhat responsible for her. His own actions pushed her away. He had turned his back on her as much as she had turned her back on their Courts. He had forced her to take steps in the wrong direction that led to paths he never imagined she’d follow. His action and choices had consequences just as dire.

He could still see her swinging her feet while she ate frozen cream on the counter. He could still see the way she lit up the first time she’d controlled her wind magic. He could still see her taking the throne for the first time, and he’d been so damn proud of her, even if he’d been reeling over losing Eliné and never actually told her as much.

And would he even be here with Scarlett right now if it weren’t for Talwyn? If she hadn’t sent him to the mortal kingdoms to find a weapon he did not believe existed, would he have found his twin flame? Or would they still be lost in their own darkness, trying to find the way alone in an unending starless void?

Talwyn hadn't always been like this. Scarlett had only known her as a vengeful Fae Queen. Sorin had known her as so much more.

"If I had not shown up, you are right. You would have killed her, Scarlett," he replied, his tone getting sharper. "And then we would not know about Ashtine. Briar would not know she carries his children. We would not know she is in danger, and we would not know that Alaric is going to attempt to free the Sorceress. Whether you want to admit it or not, she is an asset at the moment. Even if I did agree to it, it would be foolish to kill her now."

Scarlett was staring at him, shaking her head in disbelief.

Sorin took a deep breath, exhaling sharply. "I do not want to fight with you, Scarlett. We have so many other things to be worrying about."

"Then for the love of the gods, stop fighting me on this!" she cried, more tears spilling over. "Please just give me this, Sorin!"

"You were not the only one wronged here, Scarlett!" he said, his own temper flaring despite her tears, and her eyes widened at his tone. "You are not the one who nearly died. If anyone has a say in her fate, it is me. Not you."

She stared at him, shock filling her features. "If this was Mikale, you would have killed him a thousand times over already."

"But it is not." She started to argue more, but he cut her off. "No. You got to say your peace. Now I get to say mine."

Her mouth snapped shut, lips pursing. She crossed her arms, nodding once at him to continue, her eyes going to the window.

"This situation with Talwyn is very different from Mikale, Scarlett. You want Mikale dead as badly as I do. This is not him. This is not Tarek. This is not Alaric. None of them are comparable. You know who is? Nuri." Her gaze whipped back to his. "Nuri betrayed you as much as Talwyn betrayed me, and you cannot bring yourself to end her, can you? I know the

reason you will not give Auberon an answer as to her fate. I saw you protect her in the Eternal Necropolis. I was told how you and Juliette spared her in the last fight too.”

“She did not *kill* you, Sorin!”

“But she would have,” he argued. “If Alaric orders it, she will try. And now? With my power nearly nonexistent? She will succeed. You know who she did kill? The Contessa of the Night Children. For all intents and purposes, *a queen*. Auberon’s queen. He has asked you for retribution. You have denied it. Because it is Nuri. Someone you have cared about for much of your life, despite her many, *many* faults and flaws.”

She was shaking her head in fierce denial.

He took a single step towards her. “If you insist on this, Scarlett, you do not have my support. If we are equals as you claim we are, you will consider my feelings in this. If you kill her, you are no different than she is— a queen who puts her own vendetta ahead of her Courts and what is best for her family and people.”

Scarlett recoiled as though he had struck her, and perhaps he had. Not with a physical blow but a verbal one, and it was one she needed to feel.

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do,” he replied calmly. “And to clarify, I am not choosing her over you. I am choosing our Courts, that we are responsible for, over her. I am choosing the kingdoms and territories that you swore to put above all else when you took the throne. I am choosing the Shifters and the Witches, the Avonleyans, Ashtine, Briar, the rest of our family, over her.” He closed the small distance between them, taking her chin between his thumb and forefinger. “We are not the only ones who have faced darkness, Scarlett. Just because we have found the love and loyalty and laughter within does not mean there are not others still lost in it. She hasn’t allowed anyone to pull her from the river yet.”

“She does not deserve stars, Sorin,” she said, her voice full of agony.

“My love, neither did we,” he said, taking her face in his hands. “Just because her suffering looks different from ours does not mean she is not suffering. And you?” He pushed hair back off her brow before resting his against it. “You *are* the bigger person, Scarlett. Maybe not before, when you were prowling the streets and flitting across rooftops with your sisters, but now? You are the bigger person. You just have to choose it, my Queen.”

Then she was clutching at his tunic, burying her face in his chest as she cried, and he wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly to him. Eventually, he scooped her up and carried her back to the armchair, settling her in his lap as he smoothed his hand over her hair.

“I do not know how to let this go, Sorin,” she whispered into the quiet room some time later. The fire had died down to embers, casting a soft, shadowy glow over them.

“I did not say we needed to let this go, Scarlett. She will still be held accountable for her actions. She will still answer for them.”

“She will no longer be a queen.”

“I am amenable to that,” he replied. “But I think this is a discussion that can be tabled for now. She is in a cell. She is not going anywhere. We need to focus on Ashtine first, and once we have her back safely, then we deal with Talwyn. Together.”

“Always together,” she murmured, fingers tracing the Marks along his chest through his tunic. Another minute of silence ticked by before she said, “Will it take me centuries to become a wise old sage like you?”

“By the gods,” he muttered, pinching her hip.

She sat up, her small smile slowly fading as she met his gaze in the dark. “I’m sorry, Sorin. For... Well, for all of it.”

“I understand the need for retribution, Scarlett. I really do,” he said, twining a lock of her hair around his finger. “But

from what I witnessed earlier, it would appear you got your pound of flesh, both for you and our family. Now we decide her fate together.”

Her eyes fell to her lap. “I was never taught to forgive. Not that it is an excuse,” she continued in a rush. “I was... It was never an option. I would have been punished for even considering the idea, and I sometimes forget that...” Sorin waited, continuing to toy with her hair while she collected her thoughts. “I sometimes forget that being free of that cage means I can choose to be something different from what he required me to be.” She paused again, worrying her bottom lip. “We’re...okay, right?”

He often forgot how young she truly was. This girl who had been forced to grow up far too quickly with daggers and swords in her hands. This female who had repeatedly had her world upended over the last year. If this had happened a year ago, he would have found Talwyn already dead when he’d arrived in that arena. He would have never gotten through to Scarlett like he had tonight. She certainly would not have apologized to him. She had come so far, yet was still growing into her crown.

“I will always choose you, Scarlett,” he said, pulling his finger from the hair wound around it.

“Even when choosing me means calling me out on my bullshit?”

He flicked her nose. “Especially then, but I still love hearing those three little words.”

She sighed dramatically, her cheek settling back onto his shoulder just as they settled back into what they were and always would be. “You were right.”

CHAPTER 44

TALWYN

Another set of bars.
That's what she was staring at.

For the second time in a week, Talwyn was in a cell. Her entire body ached. Scarlett had definitely taken her time in that arena, drawing out her pain. And by the gods, she was powerful. So godsdamn powerful.

She winced as she flexed her wrist. Scarlett had hit tendons with that knife to her forearm, and the manacles on her wrists were keeping her from healing any time soon. She tried to avoid moving the shackles. The metal burned against her skin every time she shifted too much. She didn't know what they were, but it sure as fuck wasn't shirastone.

But Sorin was alive. She hadn't dared to believe it when Scarlett had snarled at her about 'trying to kill him.' Trying. As if she hadn't succeeded. As if she hadn't committed one of the sins she regretted most in her life. She didn't know how it had happened. She had seen the wound she had caused, knew there was no surviving it. Knew she had damned herself with that one impulsive act.

But he had survived, and there he was. Saving her, protecting her as he had when she had been a child. His eyes had met hers for a brief moment while he had spoken softly to Scarlett, persuading her to stop, and giving Talwyn the chance to tell Briar of Ashtine. That was all she'd wanted. All she'd needed.

She didn't need saving anymore.

The distant sound of a door had the four guards outside her cell straightening. Two sets of boots sounded, males judging by the heaviness of the footfalls. The male who had been in her dreams a few times and who had found them on a spiritual plane had escorted her down here earlier, not saying a word other than to bark orders at the guards, but she had already figured out who he was.

The King of Avonleya.

The dragon shifter had told her Scarlett was the sister of the king, which made the male who'd escorted her Scarlett's brother. That was who she was expecting to see once again, but that was not who appeared on the other side of the bars.

Azrael stepped into view. There was another sentry with him, but Talwyn didn't pay any attention to the male. Her entire focus was on the Earth Prince. For the first time in months, the scent of forest and fir and soil filled her nose, and she inhaled sharply, letting it wash over her. She didn't deserve this last bit of comfort, but she was too selfish not to take it.

Azrael's dark hair was longer than it had been before, and he had it knotted on top of his head. His bronze skin seemed darker in the low light of the sconces across from her cell, and his muddy brown eyes were staring right back at her. No emotion on his face, jaw hard, mouth set in a firm line.

He glanced at the sentry who had come with him. "Can we have a moment?"

"His Majesty will not like that."

"She will not speak as freely if you are all here," Azrael said, focus shifting back to her.

So that's what this was. He had been sent to extract information from her. She almost laughed out loud. They could have sent the cook from the kitchens, and she would have told them everything she knew.

The sentry, however, seemed to consider his words for a moment before he nodded. "We'll be at the top of the stairs. Send a message when you are done. She is not to be left unattended."

Azrael nodded in agreement, continuing to stare at her while the sentry and guards filed out of the hall that contained her cell. She heard the door creak and shut again, and then it was only them. Talwyn was certain there were no other prisoners in this section of the dungeons.

“You have not been sleeping well.”

Talwyn pursed her lips. Out of all the things he could have said to her, *that* was the first thing he chose to say?

She hated it. Did not deserve for him to continue to care about her well-being.

When she did not reply, his tone was a touch softer when he asked, “Do you sleep, Talwyn?”

“It is not the night and the dark that haunts me, Azrael,” she replied. “It is when I am awake, when the sky lightens, and I am forced to live another day with my choices. Sleep is a reprieve from hell. A reprieve I am not worthy of but one my body takes when it can no longer survive without it.”

“Talwyn.”

“What do you want to know?” she asked sharply. “I will tell you anything I can.”

There was silence for a long moment, the two staring at each other, before he said, “Is there anything else we need to know about Ashtine?”

“I told Briar everything I know. I am assuming he has already gone for her?”

“They are discussing matters now. Making a plan.”

Talwyn lurched forward, then hissed between her teeth as the manacles singed her wrists and ankles, reopening small wounds from Scarlett’s damn shadow snakes. The shackles around her ankles were attached to the floor. The ones on her wrist were anchored to the wall, but both sets had some give, allowing her to move a bit. Not enough to get near the bars though. “What do you mean they are discussing matters? He needs to go now. They are already searching for her.”

“You said Abrax was with her.”

“You cannot be serious. Briar is not going to her?”

“He is going to get her, Talwyn,” Azrael said. “But it is unwise to go there without proper planning. Drayce knows this.”

“It is foolish not to go right now,” Talwyn spat back. “Did you fools miss the part where I told you she is with child? She is not well, Az. She has been unwell since Nasima left her, and now she carries twins. You know how taxing Fae pregnancies are. He needs to go now!”

“Calm down,” he ordered. “You are injuring yourself further.”

She looked down to find the manacles digging into her wrists, blood welling around them. She hadn’t felt it, hadn’t realized she’d been straining against them. She was too panicked. She came here to get help for Ashtine, and they were still only planning?

“I want to talk to Scarlett,” she said, sitting back to relieve the strain on her wrists.

“Scarlett will kill you if she lays eyes on you,” Azrael said dryly.

“She is apparently the only one who truly understands what Alaric is capable of,” Talwyn snapped in reply. “None of us knew, did not realize... *I did not understand.*”

More silent seconds ticked by.

“How did Sorin survive?” she finally asked.

“You did not know?”

“How would I have possibly known Sorin was alive?”

“Because they knew,” Azrael said pointedly. “They have known since they attacked us at sea. Lord Tyndell. Mikale. Alaric. They all saw him. He fought against them.”

She did laugh now, her head tipping back against the wall she was seated against. And she couldn’t stop because it was all just so godsdamn poetic. She briefly wondered if this was how Nuri became so insane. If life and guilt and Alaric had

chipped away at her sanity little by little until she became what she was. How had Scarlett survived him? How had Scarlett survived his mind games and power struggles?

Azrael stepped closer, concern etched onto his features. His arms uncrossed as if he were going to reach for the bars, but then thought better of it, hands falling to his sides.

“Look at me, Talwyn,” he said, his voice a low, rough command.

She lowered her chin, meeting his stare once more. The laughter died at the way he was looking at her.

A way she no longer deserved to be looked at.

She cleared her throat. “I do not know that there is anything I can tell you that you do not already know,” she said. “Clearly I was kept in the dark about much. Alaric made that clear enough as well.”

“What did he do?”

“What did he not do? You were right, Az. Right about all of it. Letting me believe I was still ruling the Courts. Using my people to get what he wants. Using me...”

“Where was Ordos during all of this?” Azrael ground out.

His features were his usual mask of indifference, but Talwyn still knew him. Knew the nearly invisible twitch of his left eye when he was livid. Knew without looking that his fingers were curling ever-so-slightly into fists at his sides. Knew that small, unnoticeable vibration was his earth magic being siphoned off in the smallest increment possible.

She barked a humorless laugh this time. “Tarek? You were right about him too. Have to give him credit though. It was a brilliant, long-game plan.”

“The only thing I will give to him is death,” Azrael muttered.

Her gaze shot back to his, but he was fixated on a spot beside her. If she had to guess, he was visualizing exactly how he would kill Tarek based on the violence flickering in his

eyes. She cleared her throat again, pulling him from whatever reverie he'd been in.

“You said Alaric wants to free the Sorceress.”

She nodded. “He wanted me to persuade the Shifters to join his side and figure out how to get into the Water Prison. Those were the two tasks he gave me.”

“Stellan and Arianna would never side with him. Not when Scarlett freed them from their containment,” Azrael said.

“I tried to tell him that, but he gave me little choice but to at least try. I went to them. They humored me. Let me plead my case, and then effectively told me to fuck off.”

“And the Water Prison?”

“He thought I knew the work-around to get into the prison without Briar's bloodline. When he figured out what I knew, I found myself in the same place I sit now. In a cell. He would siphon power from me to fuel his own.”

“His draining power,” Azrael mused, rubbing at his jaw.

“You know of it?”

He nodded. “Cethin can do the same.”

“Cethin?”

“Cethin Sutara. The Avonleyan King and—”

“Scarlett's brother,” Talwyn muttered. “I met his Hand.”

Azrael's lip curled slightly in annoyance. “Razik is a prick, but he's a damn good fighter.”

He somehow fits in with her Court quite well.

That's what Nuri had said to her, and gods, Azrael really, really did. He brought some balance to the other two princes, to all the Fae Royalty really. Briar and Sorin sometimes let their emotions play too much into their decisions. Azrael rarely did. And Ashtine... Well, she brought knowledge in her own way.

And the reality crashed down on Talwyn that *she* had always been the weak link among the Fay Royalty. She had

fancied herself stronger and more powerful, had thought she was in charge and demanded loyalty even when others resisted. How incredibly stupid she'd been to not realize that the princes and princess were not there as lessers but as equals. If she would have just treated them as such, so much could be different. But she'd thought she had something to prove. She'd thought...

She'd thought a lot of things.

Azrael was looking at her as if he could read her thoughts, as if he knew exactly what she was working out.

"I was never meant to be a queen," she said, more to herself than to him.

"That is not true."

"You cannot possibly believe that."

"Were you perfect? Of course not," Azrael said. "But were you a good queen? You were, Talwyn. You cared for your people. We all know that. I know you thought you were protecting them in the beginning. You were a good queen until you weren't. You were a good queen until you became blinded by your own motives, and then tried to make the needs of your people align with what you wanted."

You were a good queen until you weren't.

She wanted to believe him, knew that Azrael Luan would not mince words to spare her feelings, but she just...didn't.

"When this is over, if you and the others win this war, be sure you and Ashtine fight for the Wind and Earth Courts. Not to rule over. But to continue to lead them. Under her."

"Of course we will, Talwyn. My people have always been my highest priority. I will always fight for them. That is my job as their prince."

She nodded, fighting to control the flood of emotions clogging the back of her throat. "I know that..." She had to stop to swallow back the tears burning in her eyes. "I know I am not worthy of a Farewell, but can you at least make sure my body is burned, Az?"

His mask slipped the smallest amount. “I will talk to Sorin, Talwyn. I will see if he can speak with Scarlett. Maybe if he is the one to ask for her mercy—”

“I do not want her mercy,” Talwyn said, two tears finally slipping free. “I will face the fate I created. I am the one to blame for this, even if Sorin does still live.”

“There are other ways for her to claim her vengeance,” Azrael said, a sharp edge seeping into his tone.

“Do not save me, Azrael Luan. I will do what I can, help wherever I am able, with the time she allows me. But when the time comes, do not try to save me. Swear it.”

“I won’t.”

“What?”

“I will not swear that to you.” He stepped right up to the bars. “I told you that when you were standing among the destruction you brought about, I would be out there. I told you that you and I were not done.”

“There is nothing left of me, Azrael!” she cried. “Can you not see that? The weight of my sins? It is killing me. I cannot breathe.”

“You wish for death?” he demanded.

Her gaze dropped to the dirty stone floor she was sitting on. Grime and mud covered her feet. They’d taken her boots off of her before they’d secured the shackles around her ankles.

“Answer me, Talwyn Semiria. Look me in the eye and tell me you wish for death.”

“Look into *my* eyes and tell me what you see, Az! Because there is nothing left of me but rubble and lies and betrayal.”

“Do you wish for death?” he repeated.

“Death will come for me whether I wish for it or not.”

“Answer the damn question, Talwyn. Do you wish for death?”

“No!” she cried, irritation bursting forth at his repeated demand. “But you cannot save me.”

“You are right,” he answered. “Only you can do that.”

“My life does not lie in my hands.”

“No, but you can at least try, Talwyn. You can *try* to save yourself instead of repeating the self-depreciating monologue that clearly runs through your head nonstop.”

“Gee, Az. Tell me how you really feel,” she muttered.

“I will fight for you even if you will not,” he replied. “Even if it seems hopeless and impossible, I will fight for you.”

“You will fight her?”

“That is not what I said,” Azrael answered. “I said I will fight for you. Even if it amounts to nothing, at least I will be able to say I tried. Just like I tried to tell you who Tarek was, what he wanted. Just like I tried to make you see reason about this kingdom. I *tried*, Talwyn. I can live with myself knowing I tried to do something, even if it amounts to nothing.”

She didn’t know what to say to him, so she said nothing.

“You have made costly choices, Talwyn, but that does not mean you cannot do some good before you leave this world. You proved you are capable of such by getting word to Briar about Ashtine.”

“Only if you lot can get there in time. If you cannot, it was simply another failure.”

Azrael shook his head, stepping back from the bars. He sent a message off among a swirl of leaves, then stood waiting for the guards to return.

“This hate you find yourself so deserving of? It is the same hate that ruled you and led you to make the choices that landed you here.” The sound of boots on the stairs filtered in. “Look at what you were capable of with hate. Imagine if you put that much effort into something else, something far less exhausting than this self-pity and self-loathing you have developed.”

“Like what?” she snapped, the guards appearing and taking up their posts. The sentry stood by the archway, waiting for Azrael.

“Like living, Talwyn.”

CHAPTER 45

CYRUS

“This is not your call, Scarlett.”

“It is my call. I am telling you, as your queen, you are not going, Cassius. It is an order.”

Cyrus could hear the yelling coming from Cassius’s room all the way down the hall, and he quickened his pace to find out what the hell was going on.

“I am one of the most powerful here, and you will keep me back? Because I refuse to do this?”

“Yes,” came a shrill response. “What if you deplete your power while there? How much will you have to drink from Cyrus, weaken him, to refill your reserves in the middle of a fight? How long will that take?”

“What is the difference?” Cassius returned.

Cyrus had never heard him yell like that. Certainly not at Scarlett.

“The difference is everything!” she cried. “I would know. I have drunk from Sorin, and I have drawn from him as my Source. You know when I became the most powerful? When I took a fucking Source, Cassius. You will not go unless you take a Source.”

Cyrus had stopped outside Cassius’s door, listening to every word that was being said.

“And you?” Cassius retorted. “I am your godsdamn Guardian, Scarlett. You are really going to go and possibly face *Alaric* without me at your side? Don’t be an idiot.”

“I am not going, you insufferable ass,” she snapped back.

Cyrus jerked back at those words.

She wasn't going?

“What do you mean you are not going?” Cassius asked.

“I mean I cannot go,” she answered, and Cyrus could hear the crack in her voice even from this side of the door. “Sorin has enough power to refill my reserves fully one more time, Cass. One. I cannot go because I cannot risk using that power there. I need you to take a Source because soon I will have to draw from you. It will be exhausting and physically draining on both you and your Source, and it still will not be the same. It is no longer just about you taking a Source. This is so much bigger than that now. And drawing from you? It is not the same as drawing from a Source, Cassius. It still might not be enough to end this.”

Cyrus barely heard the murmured “come here” from Cassius. There was a long stretch of silence where Cyrus could only assume he was comforting her. But then came, “I will stay back with you and Sorin. We will figure out a Source.”

Figure out a Source?

Fuck that.

Cyrus pushed the door open to find what he expected. Cassius's arms were wrapped tightly around Scarlett, his chin resting atop her head, and they both started at the sound of the door. Scarlett pulled back, swiping her fingers beneath her eyes.

“Do it now,” Cyrus said.

Cassius's brow furrowed. “Do what?”

“Give me the Source Mark.”

Scarlett sucked in a breath, glancing back and forth between him and Cassius.

“No,” Cassius said.

“What do you mean no? I heard everything she just said. You need to take a Source.”

He turned to Scarlett. “Can you give us a minute?”

She nodded, sympathetic eyes landing on Cyrus as she made her way to the door. She reached out, squeezing his arm as she passed. Neither male said anything until the door clicked shut behind her.

“You are still going to refuse this? You need a godsdamn Source, Cassius.”

“And I am going to take one,” he answered.

“Are you telling me you are going to ask someone else?”

Cassius dragged a hand down his face, pushing out a long, harsh breath. “I do not know.”

“It sure as fuck sounded like you knew,” Cyrus said. “I heard you tell Scarlett you would stay behind with her and take a Source. Since I am not staying behind, it seems pretty clear you intend to ask someone else.”

“Because I care too much about you to let you do this,” Cassius snapped.

“Unless I take you to Aelyndee, right?” Cyrus sneered. “Once you’ve forced me to peel back every imperfect layer of myself, then will I be good enough?”

“Knock it off. You know that is not the reason.”

“You’re right. It’s not. What did you say to me? That I *deserve* more?”

“You do deserve more than being my godsdamn power source, Cyrus. You deserve so much more than that.”

“That is a godsdamn excuse,” Cyrus retorted.

Cassius gave him an incredulous look. “An excuse for what?”

“You tell me I deserve more, that I do not value myself enough. When in actuality? You make everyone feel like they are never enough for you so that you don’t have to let anyone else in.”

Cassius lurched back as if he'd struck him. "What are you talking about? We have talked about plenty of personal matters, Cyrus."

"Who was with you when you met your mother, Cass? Who is the only one who could force your power to manifest when she was in danger? Who did you ask to come with you to meet Tybalt?"

"Scarlett and I have known each other nearly our entire lives," Cassius bit back. "I am her Guardian. I trained her at the Fellowship. We are soulmates. You cannot fault me for being close to her."

"I don't. I fault you for refusing to let anyone else see all of you. You accuse me of not being willing to let you all the way in, of not being ready for this, but you're the one not ready for this because you can't let me in either. You make anyone who tries to get past the masks jump through godsdamn hoops to prove that we are deserving of you. Me. The High Witch. You make demands that are damn near impossible. You make us feel undeserving of you because you make us feel unworthy in the face of your mask of perfection. But here's the real kicker: You're just as broken as the rest of us. The rest of us just have the balls to admit it."

"Get out," Cassius said, his voice low and gravelly. His pupils had shifted, eyes glowing. "Get the fuck out."

Cyrus stared at him for a long moment before turning and stalking to the door, but right before he pulled it open, he looked over his shoulder. "I was coming here to tell you that after we got back from the Southern Islands I wanted to go to Aelyndee with you. For the first time since Thia, you made me feel seen. I never want to step foot in Aelyndee again, but for you, I would have. I would have jumped through every godsdamn hoop if you'd have let me."

"Get out," Cassius said again.

Cyrus pulled the door open, stepping into the hall. He paused for the briefest of moments when the door had clicked shut, his hand still on the handle. He inhaled deeply before he

let it go and crossed the hall to his room to get ready to go to the islands.

To get ready to smell the sea.



Razik Traveled them to the Water Court, and from there, Briar made a Water Portal to the Southern Islands. Cyrus immediately turned away from the blue waters rolling onto the shore. He stared at the cliffs rising high above them off to the left. He'd never been to the Southern Islands. None of them had, other than Rayner. None of them had wanted to come to a place that had housed such horrors.

Rayner was beside him, his features hard, a muscle ticking in his jaw. Cyrus reached over, clamping a hand on his shoulder.

“You good, Rayner?”

“Let’s find her and get out of here,” he muttered back.

“Lead the way, brother,” he said, squeezing his shoulder once before releasing him.

Rayner stepped in front of their company and turned to face them all. In addition to Razik and Rayner, Azrael, Briar, Sawyer, and Neve had come. They shouldn’t need this many, but Azrael had said Talwyn was adamant they go today and be prepared for Alaric, that he might have already found her. Cyrus wasn’t sure how that would be possible. He had no way to get inside the cliffs.

“We stay together. No one touches anything,” Rayner said. “Those rooms are still spelled, even if no one has been in them in centuries.”

He turned, leading the way to the cliffs.

“Where is Abrax?” Neve asked, looking around for the spirit animal. “I thought Talwyn said he had been guarding the princess.”

“She did say that,” Cyrus said. It was concerning he was not here, and he tightened his grip on his bow. He’d talked Eliza into letting him borrow her Fiera arrows. They’d been a gift to her from Sorin when he had made her the general of the armies. Arrowheads made from the same material as their blades, mined from the Fiera Mountains and imbued at Anahita’s Springs to contain fire magic when wielded by a Fire Fae. Eliza had been pissy as hell about being relegated to the sidelines yet again, but she’d eventually relented and let him borrow them.

They reached the base of the cliffs in a matter of minutes, and when Rayner raised his hand, Cyrus saw the brand glowing on the inside of his wrist. It was a combination of Anala’s symbol and something else, and it flared brightly before disappearing once more. They all stepped back as an archway took form, a cavernous hall appearing within.

They waited for Rayner to go first, but Cyrus could feel Briar’s restless energy. He couldn’t blame him. If this had been Merrik or Thia or—

Well, if this had been someone he loved, he would be just as anxious.

He was grateful Rayner stepped forward into the cliffs or he would have started to wonder if Cassius was taking a Source at this very moment, and that was a path he needed to steer clear of right now. He needed to stay focused. In and out. That’s what they were doing because this place had evil exuding off of it in waves.

Why the hell would Abrax hide Ashtine here?

They walked down the long hall for a few minutes before it emptied into a huge, open cavern. Cyrus and Razik lit some nearby braziers with their flames illuminating the space. Rayner hadn’t been exaggerating. This place was its own city. The inside of the cliffs were bright white, and they looked like

they had just been cleaned. They were as pristine as if people still lived here despite the place being deserted for centuries.

The white cliff walls reflected the light, making the space even brighter. There had to be at least a hundred levels, each ringing this central space. Doors leading to horrors Cyrus never wanted to see were visible behind the gleaming gold railings that ran along each level. There were four separate staircases, one in each direction, and a small stream wound through the center with a wooden bridge on each end of the cavern to cross it.

“Where do we start looking?” Sawyer asked.

“No need,” drifted a cold voice.

The Fae all whirled, drawing weapons. Cyrus had an arrow nocked in his bow in less than a second, the end flaring with fire. They all locked shields into place as Alaric stepped from a room, his hand gripping Princess Ashtine’s upper arm. Talwyn hadn’t been lying. There was a small round bump at her lower belly, and her hands rested protectively on it.

“Ashtine,” Briar breathed, stepping forward, but Alaric jerked the princess back. She didn’t make a sound, but she did suck in a sharp breath. She had always had a light complexion, but her face was as white as a spirit of the After now.

“Not one more step, Prince of Water,” Alaric said calmly. “I am doing your lover a courtesy and not draining her of all that magnificent power currently in her veins, but if any of you do anything unnecessary, that will change. I cannot imagine that would be healthy for growing babes.” He looked each of them in the eye. “Lower your weapons.”

They all slowly did so, and when the Maraan Prince continued to stare at them, they all tossed them to the ground.

“How did you get past Abrax?” Briar asked, lethal rage lacing every word.

“Even a spirit animal can grow weary in the face of a unit of seraphs, Prince Drayce. I just needed the horse distracted long enough to slip by anyway,” Alaric said.

“How did you get inside the cliffs?” Rayner asked.

Alaric's smile was a twisted thing, and gods. It mirrored the look Scarlett got when she was looking at them as Death's Maiden and not their queen. "All in good time, Ash Rider. We have some other matters to discuss first."

"You desire to enter the Water Prison, yes?" Briar interjected.

"That is one matter to be discussed," Alaric agreed.

"Fine. Done. Release Princess Ashtine. Let her leave with the others, and I will go with you and take you into the prison."

"Ah, the self-sacrifice," Alaric said with mock wistfulness. "I anticipated it would come to this."

"Then we have reached an agreement," Briar said, taking another step forward. "Release her and let them leave. We can go. Right now."

Alaric made a show of seeming to mull this over before he said, "I will gladly exchange Ashtine for you, but what of the other lives?"

"Other lives?" Briar asked.

Alaric glanced down at Ashtine's belly, and her hands slid higher, as if to shield it from his dark gaze. "Twins, I believe. Yes?"

"We will stay in exchange," Sawyer said, Neve stepping forward with him.

"Valiant of you, to stand behind your prince," Alaric said. "Unfortunately, Balam has made the request for the exchange of their lives. He would like his children returned in exchange for your children, Prince Drayce."

"Drake and Tava?" Briar said.

"For reasons only the gods know, yes," Alaric said, annoyance heavy in his tone. Then he shrugged. "But that is what I agreed to present to you. Princess Ashtine and the babes in exchange for you and the Tyndell children. Or rather, I suppose the Middell heirs, but do not call them that in front of Balam unless you wish for a dagger in your chest."

The Fae all stared back at this male because he had them up against a godsdamn wall. How were they supposed to agree to that? Drake and Tava were not even on the continent.

“This is seven on one,” Sawyer said suddenly. “Why are we even entertaining this lunacy?”

Then all the Fae were on their knees. Cyrus had felt this one other time. Cethin had done this to them briefly to prove a point to Scarlett, and it had been this excruciating then too. His magic was literally being clawed from his being, ripped from his veins. He fought to contain the cry of agony. Cethin had stopped after a second. Alaric did not. It was perhaps ten seconds, but the pain made it feel like ten minutes.

Razik, however, was still on his feet.

Alaric released the rest of them from his magic as he sneered at the Avonleyan Hand. “And then there is you,” he spat. “Offspring of the dragon master.”

Razik gave him the same insolent, bored expression he gave everyone else. Alaric almost appeared to bristle when Razik didn’t say anything in response.

“I see you learned the work-around for the Wards if you are on this side of them,” he finally continued.

Now a cool, amused smirk tilted on Razik’s lips. “From my understanding, our princess tricked you into using the work-around to free our allies.”

Alaric’s dark eyes narrowed. “That idiot girl repurposed the Avonleyan Keys.”

“That girl *is* an Avonleyan Key. The one to let us out, in fact. I guess that makes you the idiot. You sent her right to us. I suppose a thank you is in order for that.” Then Razik shrugged lazily. “But I’ve been told a fraction of what you did to her, so I’m inclined to say fuck you instead.”

“You lie,” Alaric seethed, and Ashtine let out a small whimper as the Marran Prince’s fingers dug into her arm.

Razik’s spine snapped straight at the sound, smoke flowing from his nostrils. Gone was the indifference. But he couldn’t

do anything. He could obviously shield against Alaric's power—had trained with Cethin extensively on how to do so—but it was eating away at his magic, and he was the only one who could Travel them out of here. And if he tried to attack Alaric, he risked all of their lives. None of them cared. They would all give their lives for Ashtine and those babes, but Alaric wouldn't go for them first. He'd go for her, and they all knew it.

“What other matters need to be discussed?” Razik demanded.

Alaric cleared his throat, watching the dragon shifter warily. “The matter of the mortal heirs you house.”

“You cannot have them. What else?” Razik said, and Cyrus had to work to control his reaction at Razik speaking so flippantly to the male.

“You misunderstand,” Alaric said smoothly. “If you wish for your companions to live, you will need to bring me the other two mortal kings in exchange.”

“You will keep six males and a female hostage for two mortal kings?” Razik asked, arching a brow. “Get your head out of your ass. That is not a fair exchange. A life for a life. That is what we are doing here, isn't it?”

Cyrus whipped his head to Razik because what the actual fuck was he doing?

Alaric stared back at Razik, and Cyrus could swear he seemed almost rattled.

“Well?” Razik pressed. “Are we negotiating or not? Choose wisely though. I am only entertaining one offer.”

“Who are you?” Alaric asked, his eyes narrowing again.

“Right now I am the one you are negotiating with. Do you want the mortal kings or not?”

Alaric's mouth pressed into a thin line before he said. “Fine. Two lives for two lives. The two Water Fae stay behind.”

“No.”

Alaric blinked. “No what?”

“No. On behalf of Avonleya, I reject the offer,” Razik said. “We keep the mortal kings, you keep the Water Fae. Kill them. Whatever. Truth be told, I like the mortal kings more than them anyway.”

“What?” Briar and Cyrus said at the same time.

“It seems your companions disagree,” Alaric said with a sneer.

“My companions are not Hand to the Avonleyan King,” Razik snarled in reply, straightening to his full height. “You have bartered with them and stated your terms for the Wind Princess. If they follow through, you will already have one mortal king. The other mortal kings are also in my kingdom, under our protection. One of them resides under my king’s rule. If you want them, you negotiate with me. Which we already did. What else?”

“I need a Fae Queen or getting into the prison is pointless,” Alaric gritted out.

“And? I thought you knew Scarlett was not actually Fae,” Razik replied.

Alaric inhaled through his nose as if he were trying to control himself. Scarlett had said more than once Alaric was a patient man, but when he ran out of it, it was never good. He was still gripping Ashtine, and her skin had taken on a greenish hue now, as though she were going to be sick.

“You are trying my patience, dragon,” Alaric said tightly.

“I don’t give a fuck,” Razik returned.

“You gamble with Princess Ashtine’s life and the lives of her unborn as freely as you do the lives of the Water Fae?”

Razik tsked in irritation. “We both know that if you kill her, I will kill you. We also both know that the reason I have not fried your ass with dragon fire is because you still grip her arm. Clearly I value her or I would have already sacrificed her to end you. Are all Maraans this moronic?”

“I am told you have Queen Talwyn,” Alaric snapped.

“Now you are just getting greedy.”

“A Fire Court Second should do,” Alaric said, ignoring Razik’s sarcasm.

“A Second for a Queen? Try again.”

Cyrus started to say something, but the look Razik shot him made him hold his tongue. He clearly had some sort of plan.

Gods, he hoped he had some sort of plan.

But Alaric was apparently done negotiating.

“Enough of this,” he spat, Ashtine crying out again as she was yanked forward. The princess hadn’t said a single word since they’d arrived. Alaric must have threatened the babes if she did. “Here is what is going to happen. You are going to leave, and when Prince Drayce returns, he will have the Middell heirs with him.”

“I am not leaving her here,” Briar snarled.

“You are if you want her to remain breathing,” Alaric said simply. “Besides, she will no longer be alone. The Fire Second and Water Third will remain behind with her.”

“There was never an agreement to that,” Razik interjected.

“I am done negotiating, dragon. The only person I will negotiate with now is Death’s Maiden. She has taken what belongs to me, so I am taking what belongs to her.”

“You want a Second and a Third rather than the Princes?” Azrael asked. “Keep me and Drayce instead.”

Alaric’s lip curled back as he looked the Earth Prince up and down. “I already possess one Fae Royal. I am about to possess another, and I already control the Courts. When Scarlett returns my queen *alive*, that shall suffice. Prince Drayce needs proper motivation to follow through on his bargain, and I do not need Tarek distracted by his petty feud with you.” His gaze shifted to Briar. “When you are ready to fulfill your end of the deal, send word to the Baylorin castle, and a place and time shall be arranged.”

“This is fine, Drayce,” Cyrus said. “Neve and I will be with her. We will watch over her until you get back.”

“Are we done here then?” Razik asked sharply, arms crossing over his chest.

Alaric’s attention returned to him. “Three days. Tell Scarlett to meet me here with Talwyn in three days, or I will start taking lives. Kindly remind her I have access to hundreds of innocent magic wielders now, and they are as expendable to me as the children in the Black Syndicate were. When she comes, she only comes with her Guardian. No one else.”

“You expect us to send our princess to you with only her Guardian for protection?” Razik asked. “You cannot possibly be this stupid.”

Alaric was clearly clinging to his last shred of control with Razik. “Fine,” he gritted out. “Send the Ash Rider with them. There is a room on the tenth floor that nullifies magic. We will meet there. I am certain he knows where it is.”

Cyrus glanced at Rayner, who was so rigid he could see the tendons straining in his neck.

“You never said how you entered these cliffs,” Rayner said tightly.

A knowing smile appeared on Alaric’s face. He lifted his arm, the sleeve of his jacket sliding up and a brand flaring beneath his skin. “My mother made sure I was able to enter her domain when I came to this world.”

Rayner visibly flinched. “That is not possible.”

“Oh, but it is,” Alaric replied. “Do you think Deimas would trust just anyone to give him powerful weapons?”

“They were not weapons. They were people,” Rayner rasped. “Innocent men and women and children.”

“*Powerless* men and women and children,” Alaric corrected casually. “That is what is wrong with this world. None of you understand that without power, you are nothing. Power is the currency of the realms.”

“We are leaving,” Razik said, already moving to the hall they had entered through. Cyrus and Neve stayed rooted to the spot as the other Fae followed Razik.

“I will come for you, Ashtine,” Briar said, palpable agony lacing every word.

“I will watch over her, Prince,” Neve promised.

Briar nodded, but Cyrus could tell the words did nothing to ease his anguish.

“Do tell Scarlett not to keep me waiting,” Alaric called after them. “As she is well aware, my time is running out, and so is my tolerance for her antics.”

The four of them stood there in silence for several minutes until he suddenly released Ashtine.

“They will learn what lies hidden here,” the princess said immediately. “With or without me. Scarlett will figure it out.”

“Then for the sake of your unborn children, you had better hope I find it first,” Alaric said calmly. Cyrus looked back and forth between the two, Neve doing the same.

“Briar will not let you harm them,” she replied lightly.

“Prince Drayce will do anything to ensure you and his children are unharmed. I do not worry about the Water Prince,” Alaric said dismissively, striding towards the same hall the others had left through.

Her head tilted, silver hair shifting over her shoulder. “Then you are as moronic as the Sargon Heir observed you to be.”

Alaric paused mid-step, turning back to face her. She gasped, hands coming back to her belly before she dropped to her knees. Cyrus and Neve both rushed forward. Neve dropped down beside her, an arm going around her shoulders. Ashtine seemed to relax a moment later, and Cyrus turned back to Alaric.

“I know what power you hold right now, Princess Ashtine, and I am the one who decides if that power enters this world or

not,” he said coldly. “It seems you would do well to remember that.”

He turned once more, continuing down the hall. “Bring her,” he called back to them. “And if you try to retrieve any of those weapons, a babe will pay the price.”

Cyrus and Neve exchanged a look before they both helped Ashtine up. Then Cyrus scooped her off her feet all together. She settled against him, hands once again cradling her stomach.

“What is hidden here, your Highness?” Cyrus asked quietly as they made their way down the passage that would lead them back outside.

“The lock,” she answered faintly.

“What lock?” Neve asked.

“The lock that opens the mirror gates.”

CHAPTER 46

CALLAN

Callan and Tava were seated next to each other around a council table in the Avonleyan Castle. In fact, the only people not here were Scarlett, Sorin, Cassius, and Razik. Callan had been told they wanted everyone else gathered before they alerted them that the others had returned.

Most of the others that is.

Cyrus and Neve were notably missing, and Princess Ashtine had also not joined their company. If she was with child as he had been told, perhaps she was resting, but Callan did not think that was the case with Briar seated at the table looking tense.

“They are coming,” Razik said tightly when he entered the room. “You are ready?”

Cethin nodded, getting to his feet. Kailia remained in her seat to his right.

Callan heard muffled chatter before the doors opened again, and Sorin was ushering Scarlett in ahead of him. She smiled at them, her eyes scanning the room and brightening as they ran over Rayner and Briar. But they quickly dimmed when she stopped halfway to the table.

“Where are Cyrus and Neve?” she asked carefully.

“Sit, Scarlett,” Cethin said. Razik had undoubtedly briefed his king before summoning them here.

“Where are they?” she demanded again. Her gaze swung to Rayner. “Answer me.”

Rayner held her stare, grey eyes swirling. “Your former master has them.”

Scarlett stumbled back, bumping into Sorin who instantly slid an arm around her waist.

“What happened?” the Fire Prince asked, voice harsh and commanding.

“Sit and we will fill you in,” Razik said, already in his seat to the left of Cethin.

They all sat and listened as Razik told them what had happened in the Southern Islands. Callan admittedly did not know much about the islands. He had been taught they were uninhabitable. Rocky cliffs and sweltering jungles that offered no natural resources or other necessity to their kingdom.

“You are telling me we sent *seven* of you, and Alaric managed to best you all?” Scarlett hissed, her palms flat on the table before her.

“He had Ashtine,” Briar said. “None of us were about to risk her life or the babes.”

Her furious eyes went to Razik. “You could do nothing?” Then to Rayner. “Or you? The male I saw rip organs from bodies? Neither of you could do something? *Anything?*”

“He had my power locked down from the moment I entered those cliffs, Scarlett,” Rayner said. “His magic was latched onto mine just enough to keep me from moving among the ashes.”

“And if I had done anything, the princess’s life would have been the cost along with her children,” Razik added.

“What are these demands he made?” Sorin asked, reaching over and interlacing his fingers with Scarlett’s.

Razik had skipped over this part when he had been relaying the events. He had only mentioned that Alaric had tried to negotiate for several things.

“He wanted Callan and Hale. He initially was going to keep Sawyer and Neve for that trade. I told him no,” Razik answered.

“Excuse me?” Scarlett asked.

Razik leaned forward so he could see the queen better. “I know they are friends of yours and part of your Courts, but the mortal kings are more important here. If they fall back into their hands, those wards we took down will go right back up.”

“But Sawyer sits here and Neve does not,” Sorin cut in.

“I managed to distract him from the mortal kings, and he moved on to the prisoner in our cells. He wants Talwyn back. Alive. Should you agree, he will exchange Cyrus and Neve for her.”

Scarlett sat back in her chair, fingers drumming on the table. “And Ashtine?”

“I offered to take her place, to take him into the Water Prison if he released her,” Briar said.

“He declined?” Sorin asked, a brow arching.

Briar shook his head. “He agreed, but that was only one life. There were two more to be exchanged.”

“The babes,” Scarlett whispered in realization.

Briar nodded, then his icy blue eyes settled on Drake. “He wants you and Tava. Or rather, Lord Tyndell wants you.”

“No,” Callan said. The words were out of his mouth before he’d even realized he was speaking. All heads turned to him, and he gripped the arms of his chair. “It was just stated they cannot have the mortal kings. We cannot give them Tava or Drake for the same reasons.”

“He makes a point,” Razik said. “With the Necropolis in Rydeon, that is the last place we want magical wards going back up.”

“So you will sacrifice unborn children?” Kailia asked sharply.

“I never said that,” Razik replied. “But we need to look at all sides of this before decisions are made.”

“We also need to think about the fact that either way, he has access to the prison,” Azrael cut in. “If we give him

Talwyn, he can and will release the Sorceress.”

“He said if we refused to make the trades, he would start killing innocents,” Sawyer added. “That he had access to more than the Black Syndicate now.”

Callan glanced at Scarlett. Her face was unreadable, features hard and lips slightly pursed as she listened to the debates around her. He didn’t know what she was thinking, but if it had to do with trading Tava, he would argue against it until the end.

“He has killed already,” Tybalt said from down the table. “It is not said to be callous, but this is the start of a war. There will be lives lost and sacrifices made.”

“Not the lives of my children or Ashtine,” Briar growled.

“What makes your children more important than the others that will be lost if the trades are not made?” Callan argued. “What makes one life more worthy than another to be saved? Who gets to decide that?”

“We do,” Scarlett said quietly. She lifted her eyes to Callan’s. There was something soft and sad in them. “We do,” she said again. “It is a burden as a ruler. We have to make the hard calls. The choices that leave blood stains on our souls. You made that choice when you killed Sybil to save Eliza. You chose one over the other.”

“That was different,” he sputtered.

“Perhaps,” she conceded, “but you still decided. Sometimes the choice is an easy one. Sometimes it is an excruciating one that will haunt you for the rest of your days.”

“She is not well, Scarlett,” Briar pleaded from across the table. “I cannot leave her in his hands. I will not do it.”

“I understand, Briar,” she said. “We will not leave her there. We will figure this out. A different agreement can and will be reached.”

“He said he will only negotiate with you in regards to Talwyn from here on out,” Razik supplied.

“I am sure he did,” she answered.

Callan relaxed the smallest amount. For now, it appeared Tava was not going back to Lord Tyndell, that she would figure something else out. Of course she would. This was Scarlett. She had figured out ways out of harder situations than this. She had outsmarted the Assassin Lord before. She could do it again.

Beside him, Tava was watching everything unfold around her. Listening to every detail like she always did. Hands in her lap, shoulders back and poised. Ever the Lady she was raised to be. Drake was at her side. Hale was next to him. Both of his fellow kings had solemn looks on their faces as they listened to the Fae and Avonleyans debate the merits of meeting Alaric's demands. Then the conversation turned to what counteroffers could be made.

But if Alaric's demands were a life for a life, how could they possibly meet them?



The light knock on his door had him setting aside the book he'd been reading. Or was trying to read. It was well into the night, but he couldn't sleep. Like every other night. If it wasn't the memories of the last few months, it was that they had left that meeting with nothing decided. There had not been mention again of agreeing to trade Drake and Tava, along with Briar, for Ashtine and the babes she carried, but the fact that nothing else had been agreed to told him the possibility was still on the table.

He padded barefoot to the door, not surprised in the slightest to find Tava on the other side. He was surprised, however, to find her in her robe rather than a dress or even pants and a tunic.

She gave him a small smile. "I thought you would likely be awake."

“You thought right,” he said, stepping aside so she could enter.

She slipped past him, and he closed the door behind her. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” she answered dismissively, already settling onto the sofa.

He didn’t believe her though. She’d hardly said anything at that meeting outside of formalities. When they had all finally departed from the council room, it had been late. They’d all taken dinner there, not wanting to pause discussions for a formal meal. Then he, Drake, and Tava had been taken back to the Greybane estate afterwards, and he hadn’t seen her or Drake since.

“What do you think of everything that was discussed today?” he asked, settling down beside her.

“I think there are a lot of hard decisions to be made,” she answered.

“What do you think those decisions should be?”

“I do not think there is a right or wrong choice to be made here. No matter what decisions are made, people lose. Lives are risked. Some are sacrificed. There is no answer where everyone wins.”

He reached over, brushing golden hair over her shoulder. “Scarlett always seems to find a way to win.”

“Does she?” Tava asked, eyes falling to the sash of her robe she was fiddling with.

“What do you mean by that?”

“The things she has achieved? Her wins? They have come with great sacrifices, Callan. You look at her and see a queen who has won, but do you think of what it has cost her?”

“I was not insinuating things were handed to her.”

“And you see her wins, but what of her losses?” Tava continued. “She did not win when she was forced to kill Juliette. She did not win when she was forced to flee Baylorin

to escape Mikale. She did not win when Tarek found her. She is not winning when her twin flame is about to lose his magic.”

“Tava, slow down,” Callan said in alarm when her voice started quavering the more she spoke. He slid closer, pulling her into his arms. “Tell me what is wrong.”

She let loose a shuttered breath. “I am sorry.”

“Do not apologize to me,” he insisted, hand running up and down her back. “But please tell me what is wrong.”

She shifted slightly, her cheek pressing to his shoulder. “It was an intense discussion today. For both Drake and I. He was never part of these types of discussions back home.”

“We were not on the brink of war back home,” Callan said gently.

“You know what I mean. This is new. For both of us. New expectations have been placed upon us.”

“No one is expecting anything of you.”

“Of course they are, Callan. Drake has been shoved onto a throne, and if you think it is not expected that I will marry you or Hale, you are sorely mistaken.”

“And that matter has already been settled,” he replied tightly.

“But they do not know that yet,” she said. “And when they learn of it, I would guess it will only make these decisions even harder.”

Callan tensed at what she was implying. “They are not handing you over to him, Tava. I will not let them do that.” When she didn’t say anything, he tipped her face up to his. “Is this what is worrying you? That they will ask this of you? Because I will not allow it to happen.”

She smiled sadly at him. “I know.”

“You do not believe me?”

“I know you will not let them force me into something, Callan.”

Something eased in his chest, and he brought his lips to hers. She relaxed further into him, and his hand slipped into her hair, cupping the back of her head. A small contented sigh left her and had him pulling her closer, his tongue gently running along the seam of her lips. She instantly opened for him, letting him slide his tongue along hers. He angled her head, taking the kiss deeper, and he swallowed down his groan of want.

He tried to pull back, but one of her hands had slid to his cheek, and her fingers tensed, trying to keep him there. He smiled against her lips, kissing one corner of her mouth and then the other. But when he tried to pull back farther, she followed, sliding all the way onto his lap. He couldn't swallow down his groan this time.

Because she was in a robe.

And those were bare legs visible beneath it.

“Tava,” he rasped, not knowing what else he was going to say. He had kissed her plenty since their talk in the gardens around that pond, but nothing like this. Nothing with her in his rooms in the middle of the night. Sitting in his lap. In a robe.

“Can I stay here tonight?” she whispered.

“That...”

Gods, he wanted nothing more than that. But she had told him he was only the second person she had ever kissed. He was certain she had never been with anyone in any other way either. She was a Lady, raised to save herself, even if she had snuck out with Scarlett on occasions.

He cleared the gravel from his throat, cupping her jaw. “You can have the bed. I will sleep out here. Like we have done before.”

But she held his gaze, shaking her head slowly in refusal of that arrangement.

“Tava,” he rasped. “I do not think you understand—”

“I understand,” she whispered, leaning in and brushing her lips on his. “I understand that the world is on fire.” Another

feather-light kiss. “I understand that we could wake up tomorrow and the world could look different.” Another kiss. “Tonight, I just want some light, Callan.”

His hand was still on her cheek, and he brushed his thumb over her bottom lip, staring into turquoise eyes. “Are you sure about this, Tava?”

“This is the only thing I am sure of in my life right now,” she replied, pushing off of him. She got to her feet, grabbing his hand and tugging him up.

He took her face in his hands, tipping her head back, bringing his mouth back to hers. Her fingers gripped his wrists, her lips moving tentatively against his. He pulled back just enough to see her face. “*You* are my light, Tava.”

She smiled softly, and then there were no more slow kisses. There was the desperate meeting of lips and exploring touches. He walked her back towards the bedchamber, his fingers reaching for the sash of her robe. She let go of him to let it slide down her arms while he turned to close the bedroom door behind him. When he turned back, his mouth went dry.

The nightgown she was wearing was the same color as her eyes. Its straps were thin, mere strings, and the front plunged between her breasts. The silk material was sheer, and he could see the faint outline of her peaked nipples through it. It clung to her torso and hips, stopping mid-thigh. If he’d had any doubts about her knowing what she was doing, he didn’t any more. She came here tonight knowing this would happen.

Wanting this to happen.

His eyes swept over her again, taking in every inch of her, memorizing the way she looked right in this moment. When he made it back to her face, he found a slight blush on her cheeks.

“I have been shopping with Scarlett a few times,” she murmured. “I have seen her buy similar things, and she has spoken of how Sorin likes them.”

Callan’s brow arched, and he fought the satisfied smirk trying to form on his lips. “Did you go shopping for me, Little Fox?”

Her cheeks flared brighter, and her eyes dropped to the floor.

He chuckled, pulling his tunic over his head as he made his way over to her. He heard her breath hitch when the tunic landed on the floor beside their feet. His hands settled on her hips, and he skimmed his fingers up her sides, the silk cool and smooth. He could feel her trembling, and he slid his fingers into her hair once more, tilting her face back up to his.

“You are breath-taking, Tava Tyndell,” he said, his voice low and gruff. “I am going to ask you one more time: Are you sure about this?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

He slid his other arm around her waist, pulling her into him. He kissed her shoulder, moving along her collarbone and up her throat, exploring the taste of her, until he found his way back to lips. She was gripping his upper arms, and when she finally loosened her grip and slid a shaking hand to his chest, a shiver rolled up his spine at the touch.

He kissed her cheek, bringing his brow to hers, and she looked up at him from under her lashes. There was a hesitancy in her eyes that he didn't like, and he skated his fingers down her arm. “What are you thinking?”

“That I do not know what I am doing?”

He huffed out a breath of laughter. “I assure you, Tava, you cannot do this wrong.”

A small frown formed on her lips. “This seems like something you could do wrong.”

He chuckled again, brushing hair off her face. “For someone who tends to overanalyze everything, I can see how you would think that. But this, Tava?” He kissed her temple, along her jaw. When his lips moved to a spot behind her ear, he felt her suck in a sharp breath, stumbling forward into him. “This is just feeling, Little Fox.”

“Just feeling?” she breathed.

“Mhmm,” he hummed onto her neck as he worked his way down it. Her fingers began moving again, and he buried his nose in the crook of her neck, letting her explore. Her nails scraped lightly along his chest, down his stomach, around his sides, and up his back. He wanted to give her time, take his time, but he was already reaching for the hem of that nightgown she’d bought, thinking of him when she did so.

“Tava,” he breathed, fingers slipping under the hem, grazing the smooth skin of her thigh.

“Callan, if you are about to ask me if I am sure again, don’t,” she said, her finger tracing the waist of his pants. “I want this. I want this with you.”

And he was pulling the nightgown up and over her head before walking her back to the bed. He nudged her backwards, letting his hands skim over bare flesh as she went. Flesh only he had touched. Skin only he would ever see. Her cheeks were flushed for a different reason now, and he liked it.

He liked it a whole lot.

He slipped his pants off as she scooted up the bed, and he crawled up after her, kneeling at her feet. He stared down at her, golden hair fanned across the pillows, turquoise eyes warring between lust and anxiousness.

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

“Looking, Tava,” he rasped. “I am just looking.”

She blushed again. “Well, stop and do something. This is...”

“Is what?” he asked, fingers brushing her ankles and climbing up her calves.

“I have...never been this exposed with someone,” she gasped when his fingers reached her inner thighs.

“I know,” he answered. “I like that.” Her legs parted as he moved his fingers higher, gliding over her hips, her bare stomach. “But I want you to know that I would be content to simply look at you the rest of the night, even if we did nothing else.”

“I would not be,” she replied breathlessly.

He barked a laugh. “Always so candid,” he murmured, and then she was arching up off the bed as he cupped her breasts in his hands. Her hands flew to his sides, and her fingers dug into his ribs. He bent down, taking one nipple in his mouth. The small sound that came from her had him moving to the other breast to hear it again. She did not disappoint. He peppered kisses across her chest and back up to her lips until he was bracing himself above her on his elbows.

“Tava—”

“I took the monthly aid,” she blurted.

Callan blinked down at her. “You did?”

To be honest, he hadn’t been thinking about that at all. He hadn’t been with anyone since Scarlett, but he’d continued taking his own monthly aid just to be safe. But of course Tava had thought of that.

She nodded, biting down on her bottom lip. “I asked Magdalena to get it for me. If that is what you were about to ask. I just did not want you to be worried about that if—”

He silenced her with his lips. The woman only rambled when she was anxious. Normally he would listen to her and talk it through with her, but there was only one way he was going to calm this anxiousness.

She froze beneath him as he started kissing his way back down her chest, pausing at her breasts again before continuing down her torso. When she realized what he was doing, her entire body went taut.

“Callan, no. I— This is not—”

He lifted his mouth for her skin, looking up at her with a soft smirk. “You may not be able to do this wrong, but I certainly can.” A small crease formed between her brows. “Trust me, Little Fox,” he murmured, brushing a kiss near her navel. “If I do anything you do not like, I will stop. Or...” He paused, pressing another kiss to her soft skin a little lower. “In the alternative, you can tell me when I do something you like, and I will keep doing it.”

Her hands flew to her face, and he bit down on another roguish grin at the embarrassed noise she made. He knew her cheeks were bright red beneath those hands. It likely made him somewhat of a prick, but he enjoyed teasing her like this. Getting her a little flustered.

Helping her learn what she likes.

He sat up, running his palms along her thighs, her muscles tense beneath his hands. “Take a deep breath, Tava,” he coaxed. “Relax. This is just feeling. *Feel*, Tava.” She nodded, her hands still on her face, and he huffed another laugh before leaning down and pressing a kiss to her center. Her hips jolted, and he splayed a hand across her stomach to keep her still.

When he kissed her again, he heard her suck in a sharp breath. And when he slid his tongue over that bundle of nerves before sucking gently, he heard the soft “oh” that came from her too as her hands slowly started sliding from her face.

He kissed and teased and explored, his other hand softly stroking her thigh, feeling her relax more and more with every passing glide of his tongue. He took his time, learning what she liked. How she squirmed away when he would up the pace. How these little gasps would come from her when he would tease her, alternating between long, languid licks and hot, open-mouthed kisses. How she would rock against him when he would suck lightly on her center.

Slow and steady. It didn't surprise him that this is what it took to get her to the brink of pleasure. It was how she did everything in life, and he certainly would not complain. He'd spend all the time she needed between her legs, tasting her, devouring her.

A soft, keening whimper came from her when his lips closed around her sensitive center again, and when she ground against his mouth in sheer desperation, he groaned hungrily. She was getting closer. Her breaths were becoming more erratic, these small staccato gasps. Her hands were fisting in the sheets, and he idly wondered when she'd get the nerve to slip them into his hair while he gave her whatever she needed and more.

He slid his hand down her inner thigh again, but this time when he reached the apex of her thighs, he slipped his finger into her and groaned again when she instantly clamped around it.

“Oh my gods,” she gasped. “That. I like that.”

He huffed a laugh, lazily thrusting his finger in and out, going deeper and deeper while his tongue continued its ministrations. Yeah, he could definitely do this all night and be just fine.

“Callan,” she said hoarsely, his name more a garbled sound than the actual word. It was desperate and unsure and wanting.

“I know, Tava,” he replied, his own voice husky. “Just feel, Little Fox.” This time when he sank his finger back into her, he curled it just right and felt her come apart. Her entire body shook as she clenched around his finger, a muffled cry filling the room.

When she had gone still, her breathing still somewhat erratic, he dropped soft kisses to her inner thighs as he sat up. Heavy-lidded turquoise eyes met his, and he brushed his fingers along her legs, over her hips. He couldn't stop touching her.

She lightly cleared her throat. “I do not know what the appropriate thing is to say after...that.”

“Nothing, Tava,” he answered, fingers skating higher. “The look on your face is more than enough.”

“Oh,” she whispered, eyes darting to the side. She was still flushed from what he'd done to her, and he licked his lips, tasting her again.

“Tava?”

“What?” she breathed.

His hand was at her breast now, fingertip circling her nipple. “You taste delectable.”

“Oh my gods, Callan!” she gasped, hands flying back to her face as her flush deepened for a different reason.

Callan laughed, leaning his weight on one elbow as he settled over her. He gently tugged on a hand, pulling it from her face.

“I cannot believe you said that,” she murmured.

“I was just speaking truth,” he replied, tracing along her hairline.

“It was very...crass.”

“It was,” he agreed, running the tip of his nose along her temple, breathing her in.

“I think I liked it.”

He barked another laugh. “We will discover everything you like and more, Little Fox.”

She shifted slightly under him, and her hip grazed against his cock. She went utterly still when he hissed under his breath at the contact. Cupping her jaw, he held her gaze when he said, “I will understand if you have had enough firsts for one night, Tava.”

She shook her head, her hand coming up and fingers brushing along his cheekbone. “I want to do it all,” she whispered. He opened his mouth to ask if she was sure, but her finger pressed to his lips. “I want this, Callan.”

He brought his mouth to hers, distracting her with a deep kiss while he lined himself up with her. “It will hurt for a moment,” he said softly.

“I know,” she breathed.

He felt her tense when he pushed slowly inside her. Gods, she was tight. He tried not to grip her hip too hard, as he worked in a little more while simultaneously trying to lessen the discomfort. Tava buried her face in his neck, muffling her sharp breath of pain. “I know,” he murmured, cupping the back of her head. He eased in the rest of the way. “Breathe, Tava. Take a breath.”

She was nodding against him, and he lifted off of her enough to see her face. He was trying to hold perfectly still, give her a moment to adjust and just breathe. Her eyes were

squeezed shut tight, tears leaking from the corners. He brushed his lips along her brow, her nose, her cheeks, salty liquid coating his lips and mixing with the sweet taste of her.

He felt her inhale deeply before her eyes fluttered open, unshed tears glimmering. “You still with me, Little Fox?” he whispered.

She nodded, her hips moving experimentally beneath him, and he groaned at the movement.

“Tell me when you are ready,” he said tightly, because gods, he could feel his muscles trembling with restraint at being buried deep inside her and not godsdamn moving. It was tight and hot and bliss. She was pure and utter bliss.

“Ready for what?” she asked, her brows pinching together.

“For me to move, Tava.”

“To move?”

He pulled out slightly before sinking back in, and she sucked in a sharp breath, her hands clinging to his shoulders. “Yes,” she rasped. “I am ready for that.”

He smoothed her hair back before pressing a tender kiss to her lips, and then he did move. Slow thrusts at a steady rhythm that had a shaky noise coming from her. Her fingers dug in harder to his shoulders, nails pressing crescents into his skin.

“Are you all right?”

She nodded. “Yes, Callan. I am good. So good.”

He increased his pace then, and a groan came from him at the same time a soft moan came from her. He shifted slightly, watching her eyes widen when the small change in position hit a different spot for her, and the turquoise went hazy with lust and pleasure. He ran a hand down her chest, over a breast. The movement had her arching into him even more.

Eventually she unlatched her hands from his shoulders, fingers beginning to tentatively explore. They brushed down his back, up his sides, over his arms, and she had started moving with him. The hand he had on her hip slid down, hooking around her thigh.

“Wrap your leg around me,” he rasped.

She instantly did so, and the moan that came from her lips at the new angle had him thrusting faster. Her touch was becoming almost frantic, as if she couldn't decide where exactly to touch him, and he knew the feeling. He couldn't decide where to put his mouth, moving from her neck to her breasts to her collarbone.

He felt her beginning to tighten around him, and she didn't seek out any reassurance this time. His thrusts were erratic and frenzied now, and he slid his hand down to rub her center and push her over the edge again. When she came this time, his lips were back on hers, swallowing down every sound of pleasure she made, drinking her in. All her light. All her warmth. All of her. He wanted all of her, his and his alone.

She was still trembling beneath him when he found his release, groaning deeply into her neck. He was breathing as hard as she was, and he propped himself back on his elbows. Her fingers drifted up, brushing back a lock of hair from his eyes before tracing his jaw and over his lips. He kissed the tips of her fingers, bringing his hand to hers and interlacing their fingers. Kissing her knuckles, he asked, “Are you all right?”

“I am perfect, Callan,” she said with a contented sigh. “Absolutely perfect.”

He slowly eased out of her, kissing her brow at the slight wince, before climbing from the bed to get a warm cloth from the bathing room. He helped her clean up before climbing back into the bed and settling in beside her.

She rolled into him as she whispered, “Thank you, Callan.”

He stroked a hand down her hair. “For what?”

“You gave me a choice.” Her fingers traced down his torso, his belly caving in as they skated lower before moving back up. “I would have married Hale if Drake had asked me, but this? I got to choose this, Callan. I got to choose all of this.”

He kissed her brow, pulling her in closer to his side. Her smooth bare skin pressed against him, and she nestled into his chest.

“Sleep, Callan,” she murmured. “The world may look different when we wake, but for now, the dark cannot find us.”



He didn't know when he had finally drifted off to sleep, fingers dragging up and down Tava's arm as her breathing deepened, but he did know it was the best sleep he had gotten in months. Did she realize what she had done? That now he would want her next to him every night?

He rolled over, hand seeking the warm body that had fallen asleep in his arms, but when it found nothing but cold sheets, he shot up.

“Tava?”

He flung the blankets off, scooping his pants from the floor as he climbed out of the bed.

“Tava?” he called again, stumbling as he attempted to walk and slide a leg into his pant leg at the same time. Maybe she had gone back to her room to bathe? He knew she didn't regret last night. Tava did nothing without thinking it through first. She wouldn't have initiated any of that without being sure of herself. That had been clear by the nightclothes she had been wearing when she came to his rooms.

But those nightclothes were not on the floor where he had dropped them. Nor was the robe in the sitting room where it had slid from her body.

He finished getting his pants on before he pulled open the main door, rushing down the hall to her rooms. He rapped his knuckles on the wood.

“Tava? Are you in there?”

“She is not here, your Majesty.” Callan turned to find Magdalena standing in the hall holding a bundle of linens in her hands. “She mentioned you might need new bedding this morning.”

“Do you know where she went? Did she go to help with the children?”

“I do not know,” she answered. “She and King Drake left before dawn.”

Before dawn?

“But Queen Scarlett is in the dining room,” Magdalena added. “Perhaps she knows.”

Scarlett was here? None of the Fae had stayed here since Eliza had been injured. They’d all been staying at the castle.

“Thank you, Magdalena,” he said, hurrying back down the hall to his room.

He quickly finished dressing before he rushed down to the dining room where Scarlett was indeed seated at the table. She was not eating though. She was sitting at the head of the table, one leg crossed over the other, her fingers wrapped around the ends of the armrests. She was completely in black.

She was dressed as Death’s Maiden.

“Scarlett,” he said, unease already blooming his gut. “What are you doing here?”

She rolled her lips, eyes darting to the side, before she met his stare. “I just returned from the Water Court.”

Callan felt the color drain from his face. “What did you do?”

“They came to me, Callan. I did not ask this of them.”

“When?” he demanded. “When did they come to you?”

“Last night. After the meeting in the council room.”

“They came back here with me.”

“They returned to the castle. Sorin and I were in our rooms with the rest of the Fae, discussing matters further. They came

to me,” she said again.

“Where is Tava, Scarlett? Where is she?”

“This was her choice, Callan,” Scarlett said calmly. Too calmly. “She wanted to do this. None of us asked. We all told her we could find another way.”

“Where is she?” Callan bellowed, unable to move.

“The Water Court,” Scarlett said. “She is with Briar and Drake in the Water Court. To trade themselves for Ashtine.”

He had never hated the Wraith more than he did at that moment.

CHAPTER 47

CYRUS

“I expected someone...not so dirty,” Nuri said.

Cyrus stifled his sigh at her complete lack of caring about anything.

The Sorceress moved forward one step, violet eyes brightening. “Child of the Night.”

“Contessa,” Nuri corrected with a saccharine smile.

The Sorceress sniffed the air, her brow furrowing. “You smell of other worlds.”

“I get that a lot.”

“By the gods, Nuri,” Cyrus muttered. He’d drag a hand down his face, but the shirastone shackles on his wrists didn’t provide for much movement and burned with the smallest shift of his hands.

But the Sorceress’s face had been filled with an eerie smile that Cyrus did not like one bit.

“You have a lover, Contessa.”

Nuri scoffed. “I have many.”

“At one time. But now you have only one.”

Nuri’s mouth snapped shut, her features darkening.

The Sorceress’s eyes moved over Cyrus and Neve with disinterest before landing on Ashtine who was standing between him and Nuri. The princess was studying the Sorceress as much as the Sorceress was studying her.

The Sorceress stepped closer to the bars again, hunger glimmering in her eyes. “You carry power in your belly, Princess of Wind.” Then she let out a shrill laugh. “You broke the rules. Water and Wind. Wind and Water. What will they do about this, hmm?”

Ashtine’s head tilted. “Perhaps one should worry about what they will do to you, yes?”

The Sorceress’s laughter abruptly stopped, her gaze snapping back to Ashtine’s. She sniffed again. “You walk among the winds.”

“Not any longer.”

“The one in your belly will.”

“The other will sing to the water and see among the waves,” Ashtine agreed.

The Sorceress’s eyes dropped to Ashtine’s swollen belly again. “So much power,” she murmured. Then her head whipped to the stairwell. “You lurk in the shadows. Enter.”

Alaric stepped into the room that housed the Sorceress’s cell, an arrogant curve on his lips.

He had taken them from the Southern Islands straight to the Black Halls where shirastone had immediately been slapped onto all three of them. Cyrus had been escorted to the cells below the Halls, but Neve told him she had been allowed to attend to Ashtine in a guest suite. The Assassin Lord had even summoned a Healer to check Ashtine over. Neve had seemed surprised, but Cyrus wasn’t. This was how he operated. Scarlett had told him countless tales of how he had punished her and then taken care of her. Hurt her then soothed her. Broke her and then made her dependent upon him.

He had just finished a meager breakfast of cold porridge and a hard-boiled egg when guards had come for him. He’d been brought to the prison with Neve and Ashtine, Alaric apparently not planning to wait for Briar. The Maraan Prince wouldn’t be able to free the Sorceress, but he could talk to her. Why Cyrus had been dragged down here though, he hadn’t quite yet figured out.

The Sorceress's eyes roved slowly up Alaric, and when they landed on his face, she said, "You are older than when I saw you last."

"So are you," he answered, hands slipping into his pockets as he sauntered slowly to the center of the room. "The last time I saw you, you were with child."

The Sorceress hissed at him, a look Cyrus couldn't decipher crossing her face.

"You do not look well, Gehenna."

The Sorceress's lip curled up into a snarl. "Do not call me that here."

"You do not appear to be in a position to make demands."

"If you wish me to aid you, you will rethink that position."

"You will aid me because Achaz demands it of you," Alaric replied sharply.

The Sorceress gripped the bars, a wince crossing her features at the bite of the shirastone. "He is here?"

"Not yet."

She shoved off the bars in disgust. "Then you waste my time. I can do nothing from in here." She whirled back, fury lighting her features. "You have left me in here for centuries, Alaric." She was back at the bars again, face pressing to the shirastone, bare feet scraping against the base of the bars. "I am starving. That girl tricked me," she spat.

"Shh," Alaric soothed, stepping closer. "I know what she did, Gehenna, and we will make her pay for all of it. I will free you soon."

"If you are not here to do so now, then leave. The price of my aid is my freedom from this cell. No more deals. No more bargains," the Sorceress said, wrenching herself off the bars once again.

Cyrus watched as she paced the cell, hands pulling at her limp black hair. He had never seen the female before. Never been this deep in the Water Prison. She had clearly lost her

mind down here in the centuries of solitude with rarely a visitor.

“Now, now,” Alaric chided. “You do not need to be like that. I am not here to make a deal or a bargain. I came to bring you a gift until I can free you.”

“A gift?” she asked, head cocking eerily. Her eyes darted to Ashtine’s belly. “The babes?”

Ashtine lurched back, hands splaying over her stomach, and she shifted to hide it from the Sorceress.

“Unfortunately, no,” Alaric said sympathetically. “They have been promised to another.”

The Sorceress made a sound of disgust. “I want nothing else.”

“Then I shall take my leave and take my gift with me,” Alaric said with a shrug, turning to the stairwell.

“Wait!” the Sorceress cried, flinging herself back onto the bars and causing all the Fae to take a few steps back. The reverberating clang made Cyrus wince. That had to hurt the way she threw herself at shirastone like that.

“Tell me what the gift is.”

“Too late,” Alaric called over his shoulder, not breaking his stride.

“Come back!” she wailed. “I will barter with you.”

That made Alaric pause. He turned back slowly. “I could be persuaded.”

“What is my gift?”

“Blood.”

Her eyes widened. “How much?”

But Alaric shook his head, that arrogant smirk tilting again. “First, what I get from you.”

“What do you want?”

“A location Mark. To find something,” he replied.

“What is it?”

“Not your concern.”

“Then I do not want your gift.” The Sorceress pushed off the bars again, moving to the wall and dragging her nails along it as she went. The high-pitched sound had Cyrus grimacing.

Alaric growled, cursing under his breath. “The lock, Gehenna. I wish to locate the lock.”

“The lock?” the Sorceress repeated, looking back over her shoulder. Her head tilted again. “I gave that to your mother before I was put in here.”

“And she hid it within her cliffs. I cannot find it.”

The Sorceress eyed him thoughtfully, before she stooped down and began drawing in the dirt of her cell with her finger. “How much blood do I get for this?”

“Enough to play with,” Alaric replied. “Along with company.”

The Sorceress’s head cocked again, indicating she was listening as she continued to draw the Marks. Alaric ambled closer to the bars, watching her intently. “I thought you may want to...practice some before you are released.”

“I do not need practice. I just need my spell book,” she muttered, wiping away at the dirt before drawing again. Cyrus couldn’t help but think of how Scarlett often did the same thing when she would work with the Marks.

“I bet he knows where she hides it,” Alaric said nonchalantly.

The Sorceress’s head snapped up. “Who?” she snarled.

Alaric nodded at Cyrus. “This one is particularly close with Queen Scarlett. I bet he has knowledge of where she keeps your spell book hidden.”

“Is this true?” she hissed, furious eyes landing on Cyrus.

“What? No,” Cyrus said, stepping back again from the crazy female behind the bars.

“You are lying, Fae of Fire,” she sang. “I can taste it in your words.”

“My locating Mark, Gehenna,” Alaric encouraged, nodding to the dirt at her feet. “Then I give him to you.”

Cyrus looked at Ashtine and Neve, who both looked as shocked as he felt. He turned to Nuri. “Did you know?” he hissed at her.

Nuri’s lips were pressed tightly together. “I was not told of this, Cyrus.”

“No,” Alaric sneered, glancing back at them. “My *daughter* is not told all of my plans.”

“Your hand,” the Sorceress demanded.

Alaric pulled a small knife from his side, sliding the blade along his palm, before slipping his arm between the bars and letting his blood drip onto the Marks she had made.

“It will call to you within the cliffs,” the Sorceress said, standing upright once more. She licked her lips, eyes moving to Cyrus. “My gift.”

“Of course, Gehenna. I am, after all, a man of his word,” Alaric said smoothly. He nodded at Nuri. “Take the females up. I will be along shortly. I have a meeting with a Water Prince tomorrow morning that I need to prepare for.”

Nuri began ushering Ashtine and Neve towards the stairs. The look in her eyes was full of regret as she glanced back at Cyrus, but he did not need her pity. She had made her choice to swear loyalty to Alaric. There was nothing she could do for him.

A slice of pain at his forearm had him lurching back, but Alaric had a firm grip on his elbow. His blood was dripping into a small vial, and when it was full, he corked it. The Sorceress was at the bars, watching eagerly, that hunger back in her crazed violet eyes. Alaric reached through the bars, extending the vial of blood to her, and she snatched it up, clutching it close to her chest.

Alaric slipped his hand into his pocket producing a small key and fitting it into the shackles on Cyrus's wrists.

"These are rather pointless down here, don't you think?" Alaric asked conversationally.

He wasn't wrong. Once you passed a certain point in the prison, magic was locked down. No one could access their gifts, including the royalty.

"You are going to leave me down here?" Cyrus asked, trying to figure out what exactly was going on.

"You are a prisoner, are you not?" Alaric asked, unlocking the other manacle.

"You cannot open her cell," Cyrus said.

"I am well aware of that," he said harshly.

"Are you taking me to another?"

"That will not be necessary."

"You are going to leave me down here?" Cyrus asked again in confusion.

"I promised Gehenna some company in exchange for her services," Alaric said, stepping back, the shirastone shackles in his hand. He turned and headed for the stairwell.

"What is to stop me from simply taking the stairs?" Cyrus asked, tailing him.

A look of amusement filled Alaric's face when he turned back, already on the first step. It made him a little taller than Cyrus, and he leaned down to say softly, "Your demons."

Cyrus lurched back from him.

What the fuck did that mean?

"Do you know why she is so dangerous?" Alaric asked.

"Because she is fucking crazy?" Cyrus guessed.

Alaric gave him a tight smile. "She knows how to find your demons, Fire Second. She knows how to find them and likes to play with them."

“What does that mean?”

“You will soon learn,” he replied.

“And if Scarlett comes for me in three days as you agreed?”

His features darkened. “If she deigns to respond to my summons, I suppose I can easily come and collect you.” His head tilted, eyes scanning over Cyrus. “Of course, I never stated what condition you would be returned in, now did I?”

Cyrus felt himself pale at his words.

A cruel smirk curled on his mouth. “Oh yes, Fire Second. My wraith is about to learn what warfare truly is. She has pushed me to this. We could have all had everything we wanted, could have lived peacefully with each other, if she would have just done what she was trained to do. Now it has come to this,” he seethed. “Now she will watch as I hunt down everyone she loves and destroy them.”

“She will kill you before you kill all of us,” Cyrus retorted.

He tsked in mock sympathy. “Now, Cyrus, you of all people know there are things so much worse than death.” He looked over Cyrus’s shoulder. “See you soon, Gehenna.”

Cyrus watched him go up the stairs until his footsteps no longer echoed off the walls, then he slowly turned to face the Sorceress. She stood in the center of her cell, watching him intently. Her eyes were bright with excitement, and Cyrus moved to the wall across from her cell, leaning against it. His hands were loose at his sides. There were braziers along the wall, spaced between the windows that showed him an endless expanse of water. The occasional merguard swam by or a small school of fish, but that was it.

Several seconds ticked by as the two watched each other before she said, “Would you like to hear a story?”

“What will it cost me?” Cyrus countered.

She smiled, a terrifying, wicked thing. “You have already paid the price,” she said, lifting the vial of his blood in her hand.

He shrugged. “Then sure.”

The Sorceress began moving back and forth in her cell. “In all things there must be balance. Beginnings and endings. Light and dark. Fire and shadows. The worlds are no different. Beings emerged from the Chaos to create such a thing.”

“I already know this one,” Cyrus said, crossing his arms.

“Why must everyone always interrupt my stories?” the Sorceress snapped viciously.

Cyrus raised a brow. “My apologies.” He waved a hand dramatically. “Please continue.”

“Thank you,” she replied, resuming her prowling around the cell. “They went to various parts of the stars, setting up their own kingdoms, maintaining balance. The Firsts created the Lessers, and from them the various worlds grew and prospered. Some grew faster than others. Some worlds were favored more than others. But the scales began to tip as some grew more powerful than others, so two sisters were created to help keep the balance. Without them, new beings could not be created. And so new beings were brought into existence. Some were scattered among the worlds, and some were kept close.”

Cyrus’s arms dropped to his side once more. Maybe he hadn’t heard this one before.

“Do you speak of Taika and Zinta? The Sister Goddesses?”

The Sorceress’s face fell. “You do already know this story.”

“No,” he said quickly. “No. I do not. Keep going.”

The Sorceress immediately began moving again, dragging her fingers along the wall. “The ability to give new beings life was granted to the Sister Goddesses, but their gifts had to be combined with another’s. They worked closely with the other gods, eventually becoming loyal to Beginning or Ending.

“Beginning and Ending began to compete in what type of beings they could create, but when their Legacy needed something to feed their power, they came together to create a being specifically for them.”

“The Fae,” Cyrus breathed in fascination, taking a step closer to the cell.

“Yes,” she said with excitement. “Taika worked with Anala and Silas, Anahita and Sefarina. They created and brought to life the Elemental Fae. But Zinta?” The Sorceress paused, looking back at Cyrus over her shoulder, that manic delight back in her eyes. “Zinta was much more creative. She worked with others to create Fae that do more than control elements. These Fae could see into people’s minds, move things with a thought. They could amplify emotions or heal with a touch.”

The Sorceress stared at Cyrus expectantly. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“What did you think of my story?”

That was it?

“It was very...interesting. Thank you for sharing it with me,” he replied. Then she straightened, pulling the cork from the vial. She dipped a long finger inside and began to draw a Mark on the wall of her cell with his blood. “What are you doing?”

“They created more than the Fae, you know,” she said, finger moving rapidly now.

“I know.” Inching closer to the cell, he repeated, “What are you doing?”

“They created so many beings, but none as powerful as their own children. We can do so much with blood and the right combination of lines on a wall. Did you know we can create new Marks and spells?”

Her speech was coming faster, growing more hysterical.

“It takes years, sometimes decades, to get it right,” she continued, fury lacing her words now. “We keep them all in our spell books.”

Well fuck.

The Sorceress's arm slowly lowered to her side, the Mark she had drawn on the wall flaring brightly for a second before she turned to face him. "Where does she keep my spell book?"

"I do not know."

"No!" she cried, gripping the bars once more. "Tell me, Fae of Fire. Tell me where she hides it."

"Even if I knew, what difference would it make?" Cyrus countered. "You are stuck in there. We are both stuck in here."

The Sorceress went eerily still. "Have you ever been stuck in a nightmare?"

"I am fairly certain I am in one right now."

Her lips curved up. "You are amusing. I think I enjoy your company."

"You haven't had any in decades, so I guess it's not much to compare to, but thank you?"

She pressed her face to the bars. "I like you," she whispered. "But I like your demons more."

"Wh—"

But the word never finished crossing his lips because he found himself staring at a young kid, no more than eighteen. He was tall and lean, not muscled like Cyrus had been. His light brown hair fell forward over his brow and hung into his green eyes. He had high cheekbones and a square jaw, and when his mouth curved in a half-smile, a dimple appeared in his right cheek.

Merrik.

Cyrus stumbled back a step, the cry of a gull causing him to look up into the sky, the bright sun making him squint. He inhaled sharply, the smell of the sea assaulting his senses.

No.

No, no, no.

"No," he gritted out.

When he turned back to look at Merrick again, he was gone. He was staring into violet eyes behind bars.

“What the fuck was that?” he demanded.

“Where is my spell book, Fae of Fire?”

“I don’t know.”

The scent of blood hit him, and he whirled, falling to his knees at the body that was at his feet. Blood pooled around the female. Red hair the color of flames was flecked with mud and gore. There were puncture wounds at her throat, on her arms, on her stomach. Puncture wounds from fangs. Lifeless hazel eyes stared unseeingly at the roof of the cave they were in.

“Thia!” he cried, tears already wetting his face as he reached for her limp body. Blood coated his hands when he slipped them beneath her shoulders, pulling her into his lap. He buried his face in her hair, saying her name over and over again.

“Where is my spell book?” came a whispered voice.

Cyrus opened his eyes to find himself kneeling on the floor of the prison. He growled, swiping the wetness from his face as he turned to face the Sorceress. “Stop that,” he growled

“Where is my spell book?”

“I do not know.”

He found himself standing in a room with a male glaring at him, eyes glowing an amber-red with vertical pupils, and he turned away. His hands went into his hair, tugging at the strands.

This is not real.

He told it to himself over and over, beginning to pace. She would pull him out of this eventually. He just needed to wait her out, wait for her to take him back out of this nightmare.

A moment later he was back in the prison.

“You can alter reality,” he gritted out. “Like Lord Tyndell.”

“The Maraan stole that power,” she spat. “But not me. No, no, no, Fae of Fire. He can only use his power in short bursts. But me? I can climb inside that pretty little Fae mind. I can dig around and bring you with me. I can keep you where I like you to stay for as long as I want you to stay there. Where the nightmares lurk and the demons linger. I coax them out with promises of life.”

Then he was in a small room overlooking the docks. There was an unmade bed in one corner, a few blankets with holes thrown haphazardly across it. A table and two mismatched chairs were against another wall next to a small icebox. An open fire pit was in the center of the room, a trunk of clothing items along another wall.

Cyrus turned at the sound of footsteps on the stone stairs that led to their loft, and Merrik came through the doorway.

“You’re dead,” Cyrus whispered, stepping back and bumping into one of the chairs. It was the one with the crack down the back that made it uncomfortable to sit in.

“Thanks to you,” Merrik sneered, moving to the trunk of clothes and bending down to dig through them.

“You didn’t say anything,” Cyrus rasped. “You didn’t tell me what you were doing.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that I’m dead while you live,” Merrik replied, straightening with the ratty tunic he always insisted on wearing. Cyrus hated that thing.

Merrik moved back to the doorway, pulling the wooden door open. “Then again, looks like I got the better deal in the end anyway. I get to rest in the After while you?” He huffed a laugh. “You got what you deserved. You get to be alone.”

The door banged shut, and Cyrus found himself standing in the empty loft again. Exactly as Merrik had said. Alone.

Exactly as he deserved to be.

CHAPTER 48

SCARLETT

Scarlett stood on the balcony off her bedchamber staring out at the Nightmist Mountains. She was leaning on the railing, arms folded in front of her, wishing she could hear the sea. She'd thought of Traveling to the docks, but her family would be here any minute.

Callan hated her. She could see it in his eyes when she'd told him she had taken Tava to the Water Court. She had smelled their intertwined scents on Tava when she and Drake had met them in the foyer of the Greybane manor before dawn. Tava had met her gaze with a tight, sad smile, her arms wrapped tightly around herself before nodding once. Scarlett wasn't sure if it had been a nod of confirmation that she had slept with Callan or a nod of determination to go through with this. Perhaps both.

Scarlett had insisted on being the one to take them, both as their queen and as their friend. Just as she had insisted on being the one to tell Callan. The trip had been fast. She hadn't refilled her reserves since fighting with Talwyn, and she'd had Azrael come with just in case she couldn't get back. She was going to be drawing from Sorin tonight anyway, so it didn't really matter if she drained her reserves dry at this point. They had been gone less than five minutes, but she had asked them all one final time if they were sure about this before she and Azrael had Traveled back to Avonleya. She had tried to convince them that they could find another way, but she knew there would be no changing Briar's mind. If Drake and Tava were willing to do this, he wouldn't try to talk them out of it,

and the Tyndell siblings were far too selfless to let innocent babes suffer because they refused to go back to Lord Tyndell.

So she had left them there with Briar. Sawyer had gone as well to take care of Ashtine when the exchange happened. Then he would take her to Anahita's Springs. He had given Azrael the small mirror that was connected to the Springs and would let them know when they were ready to come back. Razik and Azrael would be the ones to go get them. Who knew when Alaric would agree to meet them. Knowing the Assassin Lord, Scarlett wouldn't be surprised if he made them wait a day or two after arriving, just to make them fret and further prove his control. Maybe he'd make them wait until Scarlett showed up in three days. Maybe he had other plans.

Of course he had other plans.

"Hey, Love."

She muttered something in acknowledgment, and a moment later, she felt a light kiss pressed to her temple before Sorin was leaning on the railing beside her. "We did the right thing," he said.

"I know," she replied. "But knowing that does not make me feel like any less of a terrible friend, especially after everything he has gone through as of late."

"Give him some time. He is a rational man," Sorin said, shifting so he was leaning back on his elbows to see her better.

"He and Tava slept together."

"Okay..."

"They have never slept together before, Sorin," she said, turning her head to finally meet his stare. "Tava has never been intimate with anyone. They are together, and I sent the woman he loves into danger. He has every right to be upset with me."

"Drake is a king as much as Callan is, Scarlett," he said gently. "We have to respect his choices and decisions as much as we respect Callan's, and Tava has a right to make her own choices as well."

“Again, that does not make me feel like any less of a terrible friend.”

“To Callan maybe, but to Drake and Tava, you are a wonderful friend by respecting their wishes. To Briar, you are an extraordinary friend and queen.” He reached over, tugging her to him. “A wise queen once said it is the burden of a ruler to make the hard calls.”

“She sounds pretentious,” Scarlett grumbled.

A half smile tugged at his lips. “She is anything but.”

His mouth met hers for far too brief a moment, and she sighed when he pulled back. “Are they here?”

Sorin nodded, tucking her hair behind her ear. “All the way through the darkness, Scarlett.”

“I love you too,” she murmured, stepping from his arms.

They stepped off the balcony and moved into the sitting room where Cassius and Eliza were waiting for them. The former was paler than normal with dark circles under his eyes. Scarlett knew Cassius hadn’t slept since learning Cyrus had been taken by Alaric in the Southern Islands. What they were about to do would not make things any better. Callan hated her for taking Tava back to their continent, but she could live with that knowing Tava had truly wanted this. But what Cassius was about to do? She would never forgive herself, even if there were no other options anymore.

Sorin took a seat on the sofa while Scarlett went to where Cassius stood, staring into the unlit hearth. She reached out, gently touching his arm. “Cassius?” He turned to look at her, and the haunted look in his eye broke her heart. “We are going to get him back, Cass,” she whispered hoarsely.

“That doesn’t change this though, does it?”

“No,” she answered quietly. “No, it doesn’t.”

“Someone needs to fill me in on what is going on,” Eliza said from the armchair she was perched in. She was nearly back to perfect health. The dagger Sybil had stabbed her with had been shirastone, so it had taken longer than a regular

wound to heal, but Niara was as skilled as Beatrix. If anything, it took longer because Eliza wouldn't stay in godsdamn bed.

"Tonight when Scarlett draws from me, it will be the last time I will be able to fill her reserves," Sorin said.

"What?" Eliza started, sitting forward in her chair. "Already?"

"If she didn't fill them completely, I could last a little longer," Sorin said. "But if she is going to see Alaric, they need to be full."

"And then what?" Eliza asked.

"And then I will be drawing from Cassius when the Guardian Bond senses I need it," Scarlett said. She glanced back at Cass before she added, "Which means Cassius needs to take a Source."

"I thought Cyrus was going to do that," Eliza said.

Scarlett winced. "He was. But he is not here, and it cannot wait. Not with everything going on. We are out of time."

"Then who is it going to be?"

"That is why you are here, Eliza," Sorin said. He was leaning forward, elbows resting on his knees, hands clasped in front of him. "You are now the most powerful Fire Fae. Cassius will need a powerful Source."

"You want me to be his Source?" Eliza asked, something in her face turning to dread.

"It is your choice, of course," Scarlett said quickly. "We would never force you to do this, Eliza. You just seemed like the best choice now that... Well, you just seemed like the best choice."

Eliza swiped a hand down her face, and Scarlett glanced at Sorin. They had thought she would be fine with this.

"Eliza?" Sorin said tentatively. "You can tell us no. You know that, right?"

"Yes, I know that," she said irritably. "I *am* going to tell you no, but not because I want to."

“What does that mean?” Scarlett asked, her nose scrunching in confusion.

Eliza pushed out a harsh breath. “I cannot be Cassius’s Source because I am already someone else’s.”

“What?” Sorin exclaimed, lurching to his feet.

Eliza pushed the sleeve of her tunic back, and sure enough, a Source Mark adorned her forearm. Scarlett was gripping her arm, examining the Mark. “Who did this? And when?” Her gaze flew to Eliza’s. “Did someone force you to do this? Cethin promised me—”

“No one forced me to do anything,” Eliza said, snatching her arm from Scarlett’s grip and tugging her tunic sleeve back down.

“Whose Source are you, Eliza?” Sorin asked.

Eliza’s hands were bunched into fists at her sides, and she wouldn’t look at any of them when she muttered, “Razik’s.”

“I’m sorry. What?” Scarlett said in disbelief.

“I am Razik’s Source,” Eliza said a little louder, crossing her arms. “If I had known that Cassius would need one, I obviously would not have agreed to it.”

“When did this happen?” Sorin demanded.

“Before they went to the Southern Islands. I heard Scarlett and Cassius were not going, and I knew Razik’s power still had not fully replenished from Rydeon. If he was going to be their way in and out, he needed to be at full strength. So I offered,” Eliza explained.

“Why not simply give him blood?” Sorin asked.

“Because it is not the same,” Scarlett said, completely dumbfounded. “And who knows how much he would need. If he has fed from Fae before, he could need quite a bit to fully refill his reserves.”

Razik and Eliza loathed each other. The Source Bond was something based on unwavering trust and faith in the other person to be there when needed and to not take advantage.

Why either of them thought this was a good idea was beyond her, but there was no changing it. The only way to break a Source Bond was the death of either party.

“Okay,” Scarlett said, taking a deep breath. “Okay. So we ask...” She turned back to Sorin. “Rayner? Probably not. His power takes so long to refill as it is because of the Avonleyan blood. Sawyer? Can he be a Source with his Avonleyan blood? Is it weaker?”

She turned to Cassius to ask him what he thought, but the words died in her throat at the two tears tracking down his face.

“Oh, Cass,” she whispered.

We will go. Sorin’s voice came down the bond at the same time she heard the door open and close.

There was a low table between the sofa and armchairs, and she climbed on top of it so she could wrap her arms around Cassius without having to strain on her tiptoes. Cassius’s broad arms looped around her waist, and he buried his face in her neck. She could feel his tears soaking into her tunic as she ran her fingers through his hair.

“I’m sorry, Cass,” she whispered, tears welling in her eyes. “I am so godsdamn sorry.”

“Why did I fight you so adamantly on this?” he said, his words muffled against her skin.

“Because it is a big thing to ask of someone you care so deeply for,” she answered gently.

“The last thing I said to him was ‘get out.’ And now, when he returns, I will have another Source. If he returns at all.”

“We will get him back, Cass,” Scarlett said, leaving no room for argument.

“And he will think I chose someone else. I made him think he was not good enough, Scarlett,” Cassius said. “But he saw through my bullshit. He always saw through it all.”

“Shh, Cass,” she soothed, clinging to him as tightly as he was clinging to her. “He is going to understand. He would

want you to... He will understand.”

“I cannot do this with someone else.”

“I do not know what else to do, Cass,” Scarlett said, agony twisting through her soul. “I do not have any other answers to this. We are out of time.”

She had never seen Cassius cry. In the entirety of the years she had known him, she had never witnessed it. But now, he wept.

“We can wait until tomorrow to talk to Sawyer,” she whispered, fingers going through his hair again. “Maybe...” She swallowed down her emotions. “Maybe things will look different in light.”

But they couldn’t wait any longer than that because when the sun rose tomorrow, Sorin would be powerless, and she would no longer have a Source she could draw from.

She rested her cheek against the top of her soulmate’s head, holding him close, knowing she wasn’t who he wanted.



She sat on their bed, one of Sorin’s tunics bunched at her thighs while she waited for him to come back from the bathing room. She’d spent the rest of the day with Cassius, and when he’d finally passed out from sheer exhaustion on the sofa in the sitting room they’d just let him stay there and sleep.

In the morning, they would be going to Sawyer to ask him to be Cassius’s Source. She did not expect him to decline. Unless, of course, he was already someone else’s Source too, because what the hell?

She still could not believe Eliza was Razik’s Source. That she had done that without telling anyone, without telling *her*. But *Razik*?

Even if Sawyer agreed to be Cassius's Source, it was going to take time—so much time they did not have—for them to get to the point of being able to move and work seamlessly with each other. The males hardly knew each other outside of council meetings and casual evenings of cards or visiting. And the intimacy that comes from the Source bond? Cassius didn't open up to anyone. This was going to be a complete disaster, and yet it was one they could not avoid. Honestly, a female Source would be better. But the only other option was Neve, and she was across the Edria with Cyrus. She also wasn't powerful enough to be Cassius's Source.

She shook her head at everything that had gone to utter hell in the last day. She had felt like they were making progress with all the blows they'd been able to land against Alaric. His one act of retaliation had set them back fifty paces.

The sound of the bathing room door drew her attention to the Fire Prince walking shirtless towards her, pants on but unbuttoned as he climbed onto the bed. He settled against the headboard, and Scarlett immediately crawled up his legs to straddle his hips, looping her hands around the back of his neck.

She was already swallowing down the tears burning at the back of her eyes, but one snuck out anyway.

Sorin reached up, thumbing it away. "None of that, Love."

She nodded, her throat working as she got herself under control.

"This changes nothing," she whispered, resting her brow against his. "You are mine, and I am yours. Bond or not. With or without fire in your veins. I love you, Sorin Aditya."

"You are mine, and I am yours," he replied. "A you and me. All the way through the darkness."

She felt his flames brush down her soul, and she cherished every second of it. Of feeling his heat lick along her flesh. Of feeling his fire wind around her, warm her bones. She let her shadows loose to mix with them and felt Sorin tense beneath

her, a shiver of pleasure skittering through his limbs that she felt in her core.

His breathing was harsh as he reached for the dagger he had set on the pillow. He drew it along his forearm, and then golden eyes met hers as she held up a shaking palm. He made the cut, and Scarlett brought her hand to the Source Mark. Their magic collided, and she sucked in the same sharp breath she always did when they did this.

Except they would never do this again.

This was the last time she would feel him in this way. This was the last time she would be able to sense his presence, feel his emotions, hear him in her mind.

At the thought, the tears she had been holding back broke free, along with a sob.

I love you, Scarlett Aditya.

The whispered words down the bond only made her cry harder, and then she was feeling him, his emotions crashing into her. And it wasn't the agony of what was ending. It wasn't the sorrow she was feeling clawing at her soul. It was everything they were. The love that transcended the realms. The love that had found her in the shadows, that had loved her in the middle of the darkness. The love that filled all the spaces in her soul that she thought no one would ever want. He was making sure that the last thing she felt from him in this way was the love that would not dim just because they would no longer have this. What they were would remain. Would still tear the stars from the sky.

She brought her other hand to his face, thumb brushing over his lips as her power filled, and she felt his slowing, emptying.

And then she watched as the Mark on her hand slowly began to fade from her skin. This wasn't like last time. Sorin wasn't dying. She didn't feel like her soul was being ripped from her being, but the pain of watching that Mark dim wasn't any less excruciating.

"Here, Scarlett. Keep your eyes right here," he whispered.

And that's what she did. She stared into golden eyes as they dimmed to a muted amber, never to be as bright as they'd once been. She held his gaze as the last of his power went into her, as he gave her every last ember.

And when it was done, when he was no longer the Prince of Fire, she rested against his chest, power thrumming in her veins. His arms came around her, clutching her close. His skin was cool beneath her cheek. Not cold, but not the warmth she was accustomed to. His hand slid up and down her spine. Fingers toyed with her silver strands. Lips brushed the top of her head occasionally.

She didn't know what he was feeling. Was he trying to ground himself? Adjust to not having fire at his fingertips? Was he cold?

She didn't know because she couldn't feel him.

She couldn't fucking feel him.

Because he was no longer her twin flame.

His breathing had shifted to a deep and steady rhythm when she slipped from his lap like the wraith she was. She dressed in a close-fitting black tunic and pants and grabbed a cloak before she slipped out of their rooms. She left the princess's wing all together, making her way down to the small den with the piano, her resolve growing with each step.

She laid the cloak over the back of an armchair before pouring herself a knuckle's length of liquor. She took a sip, then set the glass on top of the piano as she settled onto the bench. Her fingers hovered over the keys, her eyes going to the window where the mountains were dark splotches against the starry night sky.

But she wasn't staring at the mountains.

She was staring beyond them, at the forest she could not see that was hidden deep inland.

She began to play, and her song was one of sorrow and grief as she worked through everything going on in her soul.

Sorin.

Cassius.

Cyrus.

Drake and Tava and Callan.

Briar and Ashtine.

Her song shifted to chords of anger, and then they became the sound of tenacity and conviction. Because she had been working something out for weeks, trying to figure out how to keep Sorin from losing his power. It had come to her one night while studying the Sorceress's spell book. She hadn't told anyone, not wanting to get hopes up unfounded, but while she had listened to Sorin's heart beat beneath her ear tonight, the final pieces had clicked into place. It shouldn't work, but she had both Witch gifts from Eliné and the blood of a goddess in her veins.

She could feel Sorin's fire under her skin, her starfire flaring within it, and she'd be damned if this was the last time she would feel this. She would not allow it. The gods, the fates, could not take one more thing from her.

Her brother stepped from the air. She could just make out the concern lining his features in the few flickering candles in the otherwise dark space.

"Scarlett?" He took a tentative step towards her. "I got your message." She looked up at him, fingers still moving over the keys, and he took in her tear-stained face. "It is done," he said sympathetically, glancing up at the ceiling as if he could see where Sorin slept.

"It is done, but it is not over," Scarlett said, her song ending on a chord that clanged in a challenge. She picked up the liquor, knocking back the last of it. She stepped from behind the piano, moving to the armchair and slinging her cloak around her shoulders, beginning to fasten the buttons.

"There is nothing to be done about this, Scarlett. The gods did this. The *Fates* require balance."

Her head tilted, a cold smile filling her face. "I make my own fate," she said, finishing the last button. She took a step towards him, and he had the good sense to take one back.

“And if the gods want me to fight in their petty war, then they will bow to me.”

“There is nothing to be done, Scarlett,” Cethin said again, his voice low and tense, a thread of panic slicing into his words. “Think about this before you do something you cannot undo.”

“Too late,” she breathed.

She pulled a dagger strapped to her thigh, dragging it across her palm and letting her blood drip onto the floor.

Onto the Mark she had drawn there before she’d sent Cethin a message to meet her.

Onto the Mark she had created.

“What did you do?” Cethin demanded in a horrified whisper.

“I make my own fate,” she repeated.

The snarl of a big cat broke through the still of the night. Shirina prowled from the shadows, large paws silent on the ornate rugs.

“Scarlett, do not do this,” Cethin pleaded.

“You named me, brother,” Scarlett replied, darkness coiling up from the Mark between them. Shirina prowled around her, tail switching, eyes glowing. The darkness swirled and wove, dark mist dancing with itself, until it became an archway to a void of nothing. “A Lady of Darkness belongs in the dark, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Scarlett...”

But she stepped into the dark, letting it swallow her whole.

Letting it take her to Shira Forest.

To the goddess of shadows and night.

WHEN NIGHT & DARKNESS MEET

The female strode through the forest. A circlet of stars was on her brow, shadows drifting around them as if they were in the night sky itself. Long silver hair flowed behind her as she moved quickly, misty shadows trailing in her wake. She could not be here. Not yet. It was not time.

She stepped into a clearing, peering into the darkness until a figure in black stepped from shadows of her own. Her bare feet were floating on a cloud of night, and white flames wound through her silver hair, mixing with orange embers and dancing ice crystals. On her head sat a crown worthy of the queen she had been born to be, and resting on her shoulder sat a phoenix that was bonded to a Fae of Fire. She had thought that bond would break when the Fae lost his magic, but she could still feel it emanating from the spirit animal.

“Starfire,” Saylah breathed, taking in her daughter, who stood before her as the darkness she had needed her to become. Shirina prowled back and forth between them in clear agitation, glowing eyes always watching.

“Mother,” she said coldly, her lips pursed, features tight.

“How did you get here?”

Her head cocked to the side, silver eyes glinting with a wickedness only the gods were capable of, as she reached up a hand and slid it along Amaré’s feathers. “One could say I made my own way.”

“You cannot be here yet,” Saylah said.

“And yet here I stand.”

“You cannot be here until you have found the lock,” Saylah insisted. “You do not understand what is at stake. You do not know everything yet.”

“I do not care.”

A sneer curled on Saylah’s lips. “You need to *care*, Child. This is your destiny.”

“Not anymore.”

Saylah stilled, shadows coiling around her fingertips. Shirina let out a low snarl. “What do you mean ‘not anymore?’”

“It is my understanding that you brought this upon this world, not me,” her daughter replied calmly, her own shadows writhing around her.

“I have sacrificed everything to try to fix that mistake,” Saylah said sharply. “I sacrificed *you*.”

“And I am no longer willing to be your sacrificial offering of repentance,” Scarlett said with an air of arrogant indifference.

Saylah’s brows shot up at her audacity. “You do not have a *choice*, my daughter.”

The corner of Scarlett’s lips tilted up. “You will find a way to restore Sorin’s power, or consider my services no longer available.”

“I cannot do so. It will upset the balance,” Saylah retorted.

Scarlett shrugged. “That is not my problem.”

Saylah took a step towards her. “It will be if Arius comes to correct the balance himself.”

“If Arius could come here, he would have done so already. Same with Achaz.”

“You know nothing of this war, Child,” Saylah hissed.

“I know enough,” Scarlett replied, her voice going lethal and starfire flaring in her silver eyes. “You will fix this,

Mother. Or when I return from collecting my family, I am bringing Alaric with me, and he can have you.”

“You will sentence an entire world to death?” Saylah demanded.

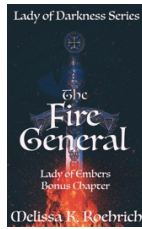
“*You* did that when you came here,” Scarlett retorted. “But no. I will not sentence an entire world to death. I will save them, but I will not save you.”

“I am a goddess,” Saylah said sharply.

The smile that filled Scarlett’s face was as dark as the darkness she’d come from. It was worthy of Arius himself. “And I am your salvation or your destruction.” She took a single step forward. “It appears *I* am your god now.”

BONUS CHAPTER

THE FIRE GENERAL- LADY OF EMBERS
BONUS CHAPTER



Wondering how that Source mark went down between the fire general and the dragon?

Don't miss out on a special bonus chapter from Eliza!

You can find it [here](#) or on my website at <https://www.melissakroebich.com>



The final book in the *Lady of Darkness* series will be out March 30, 2023 and is available for preorder NOW on [Amazon!](#)

Title and Cover coming soon.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Holy moly! Another part of Scarlett's story comes to a close. What a wild ride. I know, I know. I originally thought there would be four books in her series, but then Cyrus started telling me he had things to say and a story to tell too. You try telling the Fire Second no. It's not possible. The journey to Avonleya took longer than expected, and then Ashtine piped up and mentioned the twins... Guys, it would have never fit in one book.

So there will be one more book in her story, and it will be out in early spring 2023! But there's even more goodness coming your way. The Avonleyan King? He's got a prequel series coming! You'll get to find out what he was up to locked behind those Wards, learn his history with Kailia, and find out more about Razik.

There's a secret novella in the works too about a certain Ash Rider and what went down under those cliffs. (So maybe it's not really a secret.)

And on top of all that, my next series is already in the works! It will take place in another world with brand new characters, but you'll see references to some familiar gods and goddesses. I am beyond excited about this series!

Finally, but most importantly, THANK YOU for reading and falling in love with Scarlett and crew. You make the writing process so much fun, and I love interacting with you all. Your comments, messages, and unending support mean more to me than you will ever know. I save them and pull them out to read on the days when imposter syndrome rears its ugly head.

Until next time, remember to never settle for anything less than you deserve. Make your own fate, and give grace to those who haven't found the beauty in their darkness yet.

XO- Melissa



ONE MORE THING

Your reviews on Amazon and Goodreads are HUGE for me as an author. I'd be forever grateful if you could go over to one (or both!) of them and leave a short review of *Lady of Embers* to help Scarlett's story reach others. Word of mouth is an author's best friend and much appreciated. Shouts from rooftops are great, too.

My social links are below, but I'd also like to extend a special invitation to you to join my reader group on Facebook at [Melissa's Nook & Posse](#). I drop teasers as I'm writing new books, share about my writing process, my life, and love interacting with all of you. I'd love it if you joined us.

To stay up-to-date on release dates, new series, and more, be sure and sign up for the [newsletter](#), too!



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to all of you have cheered Scarlett and crew on from the beginning. Without your love and passion, this series would not be what it is today, and to say I am constantly blown away by your love and support is the understatement of the century. Your kind messages and sweet comments lift me up on the hard days and give me encouragement on the days I feel like quitting. You make the drafting process fun and exciting when interacting in the reader group, and you make me smile every time you tell me you introduced the books to someone else. I write for you. To show you that you are not alone in your darkness. To tell you that you deserve every star and more. To make sure you know there is someone one else who battles shadows. To remind you that you create your own fate.

My Book Slut Besties... What would I do without you? Sara Abel, Brittney Irvin, and Tracey Goodson, you make my world a brighter place just by being in it. Thank you for reading my atrocious rough drafts. Thank you for lifting me up on the hard days. Fuck it, I'll even say thank you for telling me to add more spice, even if I whine about it. You make me a better writer. It never ceases to amaze me that we found each other because of a CC2 spoiler, but I am forever grateful that we did. Thank you for being you, for making me laugh on the regular, for... Listen, if I list it all, this will be longer than the book, so know that I love you guys.

To Megan Visger, Ashton Taylor, and Diane Dyk for helping make this book the best it can be. I know I stuck you guys with a tight timeline this time. You guys are absolute saints for putting up with my time crunches. I adore you, and thank you will never be enough for all you do for me.

To my ARC/Street Team, your enthusiasm for these books knocks my socks off. Thank you for loving on me, reviewing

my books, and spreading the word about them. I appreciate you more than you will ever know.

And to my husband— I couldn't do this thing called life without you. You set my world on fire.