



MAGIC  
IN THE  
MOONLIGHT

THE MOONLIGHT DUET ~ BOOK TWO

JAMIE SCHLOSSER

MAGIC  
IN THE  
MOONLIGHT  
THE MOONLIGHT DUET ~ BOOK TWO

JAMIE SCHLOSSER

Copyright © 2022 Jamie Schlosser

All rights reserved.

This novel is for your enjoyment only and may not be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted without permission from the author except for brief quotations in a book review. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

This novel is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and events are a product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, or to locations or incidents are coincidental.

Due to language and sexual content, this book is intended for readers 18 and older. Please note that *The Moonlight Duet* contains themes of chronic illness and some suicide ideation. This is not a dark story, but readers who are sensitive to those subjects should be aware of the content.

Cover design: Furious Fotog

Photographer: Lindee Robinson Photography

Models: Daria Rottenberk and Andrew

Formatting: Champagne Book Design

Editing: Amy Q Editing, Emerald Edits

Proofreading: Deaton Author Services

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

[TITLE PAGE](#)

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

[CHAPTER 14](#)

[CHAPTER 15](#)

[CHAPTER 16](#)

[CHAPTER 17](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19](#)

[CHAPTER 20](#)

[CHAPTER 21](#)

[CHAPTER 22](#)

[CHAPTER 23](#)

[CHAPTER 24](#)

[CHAPTER 25](#)

[CHAPTER 26](#)

[CHAPTER 27](#)

[CHAPTER 28](#)

[CHAPTER 29](#)

[CHAPTER 30](#)

[CHAPTER 31](#)

[CHAPTER 32](#)

[CHAPTER 33](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[OTHER BOOKS BY JAMIE SCHLOSSER](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)



## CHAPTER 1

### *HANNAH*

*24 Years Old—July*

I hum as I pick the wildflowers. I love keeping fresh flowers in my kitchen during the summer, and my vase needs replenishing. I can't wait to get home to arrange this bouquet.

Today is one of those perfect days. Not too hot. Bright blue sky. As the sun sets behind the tall trees surrounding the meadow, it lights up the clouds with a yellow lining.

As I'm reaching for a Black-eyed Susan, a strong gust of wind knocks me over from my squatting position onto my knees.

I glance up at the sky, expecting to see a storm rolling in, but there's no indication of bad weather in any direction.

Shrugging it off, I go back to my task.

Not more than a minute later, a weird sensation comes over me. The back of my neck prickles with awareness, like I'm being watched.

Still kneeling, I turn my head to look over my shoulder. There's a couple coming straight for me. The man is wearing a red-and-black plaid shirt and a gray beanie, and he's carrying someone. A woman in a dress.

I'm not shocked to see anyone wandering on the property. Although it's after closing hours, people tend to linger.

However, as they get closer, I become alarmed because the woman in his arms is obviously unconscious with the way her limbs dangle limply, and her head lolls back.

They're coming from the direction of the barn. Maybe she snooped around in the hayloft and fell from the second story. I've been telling my parents we need to get signs up saying the area is off-limits.

I leap to my feet. "What happened?"

"Don't panic," he says with a calm, placating tone.

Tidbits aren't adding up.

Why isn't he freaking out? Why didn't he go to my parents first? And the woman in his arms... she's rail thin, unnaturally pale, and wearing a hospital gown.

Honestly, she looks dead.

Now that the man is ten feet away, I see dried blood on her neck, and there's a dark-red spot where it soaked into the fabric on her chest.

"Did she get cut on something?" I ask, confused, my heart pounding.

Still, the guy approaches slowly while he watches me with a strange intensity.

Something about his direct stare makes me shiver, but not in a bad way. It's like electric butterflies... all over my body, from the top of my head to the tips of my toes.

"I'll call 9-1-1," I offer, pulling my phone out of my back pocket.

My trembling fingers are having trouble punching in the numbers, and before I can press the call button, the man closes the space between us. "Put it down."

"What?" I balk, automatically stepping back because he's in my personal bubble.

"There's no need to call." His voice continues to be monotone, so matter-of-fact.

“Why?” My thumb hovers over the green circle, and dread churns in my stomach when I make the reluctant assumption, “Because she’s dead?”

“Yes.”

*No.* How could someone die on the farm?

My first concern is for the person who experienced the tragedy and, subsequently, for their family who will suffer from the loss.

The second worry is admittedly selfish. The blame—it’ll fall on us. We’ll get sued. At the very least, we’ll have to shut down for a while if an investigation needs to take place. We could lose our business over an accident like this.

I must be dreaming. This has to be a nightmare, but everything feels real.

Just to test the theory, I call on all my senses.

I wiggle my toes inside my sneakers, and my feet are a bit achy from walking around all day. The smell of wildflowers is around me, mixed with a pleasant scent I think is coming from the man. My pocket watch is ticking away on my chest. My mouth is dry, a natural reaction to an emergent situation.

All so real.

“How? How did this happe...” My voice trails off as I look at the girl.

Really look at her.

For a second, it’s like staring at a mirror. A distorted mirror, yes, but the reflection is still my own. Despite the missing patches of hair, the dark circles under the eyes, and the cracked lips, I recognize myself. She’s even wearing my pocket watch.

My own corpse is right in front of me.

The wildflowers drop from my hand.

Now I know for sure this is a nightmare. I just don’t know why I can’t wake up.



Frozen with fear, I stand completely still as the man kneels and spreads the body out on the grass.

My body. My emaciated, ugly, and absolutely terrifying body.

I can't tear my eyes away from it. Her. Me.

Standing, the guy reaches into his pocket while saying the most ridiculous thing he could in this moment. "Stay calm."

Fuck that.

Getting ready to scream, I suck in a breath.

"Hannah," the man barks sharply.

It's not his tone that makes me look up. It's the way he says my name like he knows me.

As soon as I lift my gaze to his face, a cloud of gray dust puffs out from his palm.

I can't help inhaling some of it, and I cough.

He blew something at me. He... He's...

My train of thought derails.

I... I forget.

I have no idea what I was going to say, and a calmness comes over me.

"There's nothing to worry about, okay?" I hear a masculine voice say, and I nod my compliance.

Nothing to worry about. Got it.

"Just sit down for a moment," he commands gently, guiding me by the shoulders. As my legs fold under me, he lowers me to the ground. "Stay here. I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?" I ask on autopilot. At least, I think I ask it. My words sound echoey in my head, and I don't think I get an answer to my question.

It feels like only a few seconds pass before he's back. Through a haze of confusion, I catch blurry glimpses of him.

First, he's crouching next to someone with a pile of clothes—my clothes. He dresses her before posing her body in a comfortable position on her side with her hands cupped under her cheek, almost like she's sleeping.

Then he's lugging a big pile of blankets over to me. The interior print on the brown sleeping bag is familiar. I know that flannel fabric. It's decorated with deer and trees. He must've gotten it from the hayloft.

Why would he do that? Maybe we're camping tonight.

With some quiet urging, he gets me to stand back up.

I'm all floaty and light. Tilting my head back, I look at his face, and I think I'm smiling. He's so handsome.

He makes me weak in the knees. Literally. My legs give out, and he catches me. Along with all the stuff he's carrying, it's awkward for him to be holding me up, but I'm too tired to care.

So tired.

My head lulls to the side, and my eyelids get unbearably heavy.

"I'm going to make this right, darling," the hot guy says, sounding far away as I close my eyes. "Don't be frightened."

Frightened? What is there to be frightened about?



## CHAPTER 2

### *HANNAH*

Don't be frightened.

The words reverberate around in my head like I'm coming out of a dream, but I'm not asleep.

I blink.

All I see is a blinding blue light with electric bolts flaring through it. Why can't I see anything else?

Suddenly, I'm aware of pain. So much pain.

My hand is stuck in something, and it feels like it's on fire. Heat radiates up my arm, filling my body with an unpleasant sizzling.

When I try to move away, I can't. I rotate from side to side, violently yanking and pulling.

Within the next second, the light disappears, and I fall backward when my arm gets released from the fiery heat.

Then I'm cloaked in darkness, and I feel myself going down. I tense as I brace for the impact of a hard landing.

Before I hit the floor, someone catches me by the shoulders. Their firm grip keeps me from busting my ass, and they sit me down on a soft surface.

"What the fuck?" I breathe out, totally disoriented. "What the fuck was that?"

Patting the space around me, I try to see by touch because everything's spotty. It's like when you look directly at a camera flash, and then someone turns off the lights.

My fingers grip soft layers. I'm on a bed.

No, not a bed. A pile of blankets. The sleeping bag and blankets.

Oh my God.

I'm in the cave. With my captor.

Only, he isn't the evil man I thought he was. He's Ellister. The man who came to my farm and made me fall for him in a matter of days. The man who showed me what true lust is. The man who killed me, then moved through time to save me.

Love comes rushing in, filling my insides with warmth.

My angel.

My monster.

Blindly groping around, I find his hand and squeeze tight. "Ellister?"

"Yes?" There's so much hope in his voice because I said his name. "Are you hurt, darling?"

Am I? Pressing a palm to my chest, I feel my heart beating overtime, but I'm not in pain anymore. The burn in my arm is fading quickly, and I'm feeling more like myself with every passing second. "Not really."

"Good. Let me get the candle." He pulls away from me.

I don't want to let him go, but after some light reassurance from him—complete with a cheek caress—I loosen my death grip on his fingers.

When he comes back over with the light, shadows paint his face, but I'm not scared of him anymore. Even though it's dim, I can piece together his features from memory. Because I know his face. I'm familiar with his unnaturally light eyes and his fangs.

“Are you sure she’s all right?” he barks at Astrid, flexing his own hand. “That was extremely unpleasant.”

The little woman harrumphs. “She appears well enough to me.”

Moving the candle around, up, and down, Ellister looks me over, studying different parts of me. That little wrinkle on the side of his nose deepens when he twists his lips with concern.

The adorable wrinkle. I’m well acquainted with it. I want to touch it.

So I do just that.

I reach up and smooth it out.

Ellister swallows hard, his emotions rising as he looks to Astrid. “It actually worked.”

“Of course it did,” Astrid snaps back like she’s offended he doubted her abilities.

After setting the candle down on the floor, Ellister winds his arms around me and pulls me to him. He repeatedly kisses the top of my head while patting various areas of my body, like he’s trying to assure himself that I’m in one piece.

I can’t believe how hateful I’ve been to him over the past few days.

All that staring and watching me... he’s been waiting for me to recognize him. He’s been begging me to look into his eyes and immediately sense him as my soul mate.

But I couldn’t because he doesn’t have a soul.

“I’m sorry.” My throat gets tight as I apologize to the man I care so much for. “I’m so sorry, Ellister.”

He releases me and pulls back. “You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“I didn’t remember you.”

“*Remember* isn’t the right word,” Astrid pipes up. “In your defense, you can’t recall what hasn’t happened yet. Most of what you’ve seen is from the future. I simply showed you

what would be if Ellister hadn't intervened. However, the memories will feel real anyway. Think of them as almost-memories." Hastily, she packs up the bowl and some of her supplies. "Now, you'll feel tired after that. Possibly a little confused, too, but the almost-memories should sort themselves out with time."

She's right. Rubbing my temples, I try to make sense of the puzzle pieces floating around in my brain. They don't fit together. I'm having trouble putting things into chronological order, but they fall in line slowly. Months of events that haven't occurred yet are getting organized in my head.

My first symptoms.

All the hospital visits and weeks of pain.

The fundraiser. The dance Ellister and I shared. The kiss.

The day of the tour. The kittens. The movie.

My quick deterioration, and my last moments next to the wildflowers with confessions of love and the siphoning of Ellister's memories.

What's weird is, I can actually see what happened after I died through Ellister's eyes. Somehow, putting both our hands in the electric bowl linked our minds. It's like I watched a movie about us, how Ellister begged for my soul and took me away from the evil overlord who wanted to claim it.

Vaeront. I can picture him so clearly on his creepy throne.

Ellister's gaze volleys back between me and Astrid. "So she's just as I knew her?"

"Just as," the witch confirms, short and to the point.

Smiling one of his rare smiles, Ellister displays his fangs. I don't think I've ever seen him look so happy before, but I feel like he's jumping the gun.

Things aren't going to be automatically hunky-dory.

With all the knowledge I've gained, I might be the same person he met on the side of the road, but there's still a lot we don't know about each other. It's not like we had much time

together before shit hit the fan, and Ellister is still a mystery to me. All the information I've learned about him is either from a two-day time span, the dream-like bits I soaked up right before my death, or our merged memories from what came after.

And even though I know he had good reason to do it, he still kidnapped my ass.

"You're being very quiet," Ellister comments, perturbed. "That's not like you. Are you still mad at me?" His expression turns determined as he adds, "Because I'm willing to do whatever it takes to improve your mood."

I'm not sure if he's talking about sex, but my mind goes straight to the gutter.

Oh, I want him to worship my body. I want his face between my thighs. I want his naked body writhing with mine.

"I'm not sorry I took you," he continues stubbornly, mistaking my silence for anger. "It was the only way to rescue you, and as your mate, it's my right to claim you. You're mine. Fate gave you to me, and you're the greatest gift I could ever receive."

I should probably be upset about being spoken of as if I'm a possession, but I get it. I really do. If our positions were switched, I would've done the same thing.

I'm Ellister's soul mate, and he's mine, and that's that.

"There's one thing I'm still pissed about," I say seriously.

"Do tell."

I twist my lips to the side as I motion to my toilet. "The bathroom situation sucks."

Grimacing, Ellister glances at my bucket. "Now, that, I will apologize for. Water doesn't travel well through the vortex. At least not large amounts of it." He pats the waterskin attached to his belt. "That's why I fill this up. It holds just enough to keep you hydrated. I could take a couple extra trips to a stream if you'd like to wash up a bit."

"Can I come with you?"

“Not yet.”

I scan the dome ceiling of reddish rock. “Is it really necessary for you to keep me in this... place?”

“Yes. I’m an unregistered citizen in Valora, so it’s best if we hide for now.”

“Where are we?”

“Inside a mountain with secret caves and passages. It’s called Yelissa’s Peak. It’s a forbidden area located in the northern part of the Day Realm.”

“Why is it forbidden?”

“Rumor has it, the territory is dangerous. There are mysterious happenings and unexplainable disappearances. Some say the entire mountain is haunted.”

“Is that true?”

“No. Those rumors were started to keep people away. Safety and secrecy is the foundation of Yelissa’s Peak. These caves were hollowed out ages ago by wizards who needed refuge from those who would seek to take advantage of their power. No one would think to look inside a mountain. The only way in or out is magic; either through a portal or my vortex.”

So that’s why I couldn’t find a damn door.

“How long do we have to stay here?” I shiver, not just because the air is chilly, but also because I can’t imagine living in this darkness without eventually losing my mind.

“Not much longer. I could never cage you like that. When I go out for food, I’ve been searching for an abandoned house for us. Somewhere in a rural area. The less attention we draw to ourselves, the better. We both have skills to survive—me with my power to go places to retrieve certain items, and you with your knowledge of a self-sustaining lifestyle.”

“And how long will we do that?”

He tilts his head as he calculates. “At least twenty-five thousand years or so.”



“Twenty-five thousand?” I practically shout at him.

“Possibly thirty, if we’re lucky. Once you turn fae, you’ll be damn near invincible.”

“Once I turn fae?”

“Yes. After so much time here, your body will adapt, just as mine would’ve if I’d stayed in the human realm. As long as you don’t get speared in the heart with iron or decapitated, you’ll have a very long life. We don’t have natural illness. We don’t even need to breathe to live. Considering you’re afraid of death, this should make you happy.”

It’s not the length of time we’ll live or the thought of isolation that’s upsetting me.

He’s right—I don’t want to die, especially now that I feel like I’ve already been there and done that. I keep picturing my corpse. I can’t stop seeing my colorless skin, my exaggerated cheekbones, or the dried blood on my neck.

But he’s talking like we’re staying here. Forever. If that’s the case, I’ll never see my parents or the farm again.

“You’re not taking me back home,” I conclude with dread.

“We’ll make our own home.”

“I didn’t even get to say goodbye to my mom and dad. You have to let me go back, even if it’s just for a short visit.”

“I can’t.”

I refuse to accept that. “Can’t or won’t?”

“Either. Both,” Ellister clarifies firmly. “You’ll get sick when the dark fae reemerge from the Lost Land.”

“But that doesn’t happen until September, right? We have two months until then.”

“I won’t risk your health, Hannah.” His voice is stern and uncompromising. “I don’t want to go anywhere near that timeframe, because once the illness takes hold, it doesn’t let go.”

“But I can’t just go missing. I have to explain what’s going on. My parents will never stop looking—”

“They won’t think you’re missing.” Brief shame makes the shadows on his face deepen as he casts his gaze to the floor. “The powder I used on you is very disorienting. You probably don’t remember, but I made sure to set up a scenario where there won’t be a question of your whereabouts.”

More flashes of my corpse are flitting through my head.

Ellister dressed my dead body. He posed me.

So they could find me like that.

My eyes go wide. “You want them to think I’m dead?”

“It’s the only way. Of course, the circumstances of your death will be very mysterious with the deteriorated shape you were in. There will be many questions. Still, Bobby and Catrina will have closure.”

“No.” I shake my head violently. “We can’t let it end that way for them.”

“It’s the only way.”

Astrid clears her throat. “Excuse me, but this is extremely boring. I’m not interested in being witness to a lover’s quarrel. I’ve done my duty. Now take me back to my time before I get angry.”

Torn, Ellister glances at me as he stands and moves away. “I promise to be back soon, darling.”

“But we’re not done—”

He digs out his flask from his pocket, takes a few swigs, and within seconds, he and the little woman are flying backward into a dark abyss. Wind sweeps through the cave, then stops once they disappear.

“—discussing this.”



## CHAPTER 3

### *HANNAH*

In the few minutes Ellister is gone, all I do is worry. About my parents. About my future. About the fact that Ellister seems to think we can fly under the radar here for thousands of years.

Doubtful.

How could we possibly be off grid for that much time?

So. Much. Time.

And what if we get tired of each other?

Smiling a little, I strike that thought from my mind. I don't know where the confidence comes from, but I'm sure that won't ever happen.

I'll be enough for Ellister. He'll be enough for me.

Still, we're bound to run into someone eventually. I have no idea what the social norms are in a faerie world. Everything is unfamiliar. The customs are different, and I definitely have no hope of blending in if I stay in my current outfit.

I look at the pile of folded dresses several feet away. Most of them have matching ballet flats to go with them—such dainty shoes. Now I understand why Ellister got all this for me and why he's dressed like a pirate. He's just blending in.

Huffing out a breath, I decide to try one of the dresses on. I find a yellow gown with an empire waist and cap sleeves. I

really don't understand why the fabric is so thin. When I hold it up, I can see the candle flame through it because of how sheer it is.

As I shed my clothes, I shiver so hard my teeth chatter.

It's way too cold for the dress, but I slip it over my head anyway. Needing another layer, I wear my dad's flannel shirt over it. Then I put my jeans on under the long skirt. It's a total fashion faux pas, but I'm not about to freeze.

Next, my shoes and socks go back on.

As I glance down at my mismatched outfit, I'm reminded of the scene of my first meeting with Ellister—how his clothes didn't look right.

Human fashion is not his expertise, and apparently, fae fashion isn't mine.

When a gust rushes through the cave, disturbing my skirt and hair and nearly blowing out the candle, I know Ellister is back.

I turn around, and his shadowed lump is sprawled out on the floor ten feet away. With a groan, he starts to push himself up.

“Do you always land that hard?” I ask as I go to help him.

Seeming unbothered by the tumble, he shrugs. “Used to it. No need for concern.”

Once he's standing, he sways unsteadily on his feet, contradicting his statement, and I firmly grip his forearm to keep him balanced. “Yeah, that's why it looks like you might fall over any second.”

He rubs his forehead. “I'm all right, really. I took Astrid from a future time—from the real present—which means I had to jump back and forth twice. Time travel is ten times more draining for me than crossing universal planes.”

“That's why you have the Glow.” My gaze drops to the flask sticking out of his pocket. “Should you drink more of it?”

“I’ll recover with rest.” Changing the subject, he scans my dress with a small smile. “You look nice.” Then he frowns at my untouched plate on the floor behind me. “You haven’t eaten your meal.”

“Yeah, see, this crazy thing happened,” I drawl wryly. “I got kidnapped, and then someone electrocuted me. It’s funny how those things disrupt my appetite.”

“I’m glad to see your sarcasm is in place. You had me worried there for a while.” He tenderly strokes my cheek with his knuckles, and my heart pounds out an extra beat.

If he’d tried to touch me like that before Astrid’s spell, I would’ve screamed my head off, but my body immediately craves him now.

It’s weird that I have memories of doing things with him—orgasmic things—but it hasn’t actually happened.

The vision of us in the hayloft comes to mind. When I think of the incident, I can still feel his erection pressing against my clit.

My nipples tighten and wetness floods my panties.

He smirks like he knows how he’s affecting me.

Since he mentioned food, my stomach is catching up with how hungry I am. It growls loudly, echoing in the cave.

Ellister raises an eyebrow with a pointed look at my plate.

“Okay,” I breathe out, exasperated. “But we need to have a serious talk.”

“I’ll happily listen to your grievances, darling. As long as you eat first.”

I have no argument to that. I’m starving.

I’m surprised when I touch the meat—it’s still a little warm. The skin is unseasoned, but it’s crisp and toasty.

It felt like Astrid was here for hours, but that whole thing we did when we stuck our hands in the bowl must’ve lasted for a couple minutes at most.

As I gobble up my breakfast, Ellister sits against the far wall and watches me.

Just like he does every time I eat.

I couldn't understand it before. I'd started to think he had some kind of fetish with watching a woman consume food, but I recognize his expression for what it really is.

Satisfaction. He likes seeing me taken care of, but the glint of pride in his eyes is mixed with caution.

Even though my fear of him is completely erased, he's wary.

And I kind of hate that. I can't stand the thought of making him suffer rejection from his own soul mate.

After wiping my greasy fingers on a cloth napkin, I pat the sleeping bag. "Will you come closer?"

Face lighting with happiness, he crawls over to me. "You want me near you?"

"Of course I do," I answer honestly. "When you sit over there, I can barely see you."

"I've been trying to give you space."

"You've been freaking me out. You're just this shadow with fangs."

He reaches up to touch one of the sharp teeth. "I had thought seeing me without my caps would trigger some recognition. I was very wrong about that. My fangs are frightening for you."

"Not anymore." If anything, they turn me on. A lot.

Before, I just didn't have the memories necessary to recognize anything about him.

But now...

Now that I know what it's like to have him latched onto me, sucking my blood, I can't stop thinking about how good it felt to have him bite me.

Poking a few berries left on my plate, I get back to the topic of making a brief return to the farm. “So, about going home... Are we going to come to a compromise or are you going to be a difficult brute?”

I think I can convince him. I’ve seen into his mind. Into his heart. If he had a soul, I’d be immersed in that part of him, too.

I’m confident that his soft spot for me will get him to cave to my request.

Abruptly, Ellister stands and extends a hand. “Dance with me.”

I blink up at him. “Right now?”

“Now.”

“There’s no music.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Ellister’s trying to distract me from my question. I can see that, but I’m going to let him get away with it for now.

When I flex my toes inside my shoes, I’m so unbelievably thankful for the ability to dance. The symptoms I experienced during the illness are fresh in my mind, and I don’t want to miss the opportunity to be mobile. Every step I take for the rest of my life will be done with appreciation.

Popping the last couple berries into my mouth, I chew the icy fruit as I get up. As simple as the food is here, it’s pretty great. The berries are frozen and sweet, kind of like a sorbet.

“Is it winter out there?” I nod my head to the wall as I slip my fingers against Ellister’s.

He pulls me up and my pulse increases once our faces are just inches apart. “No. Actually, it’s always hot in the Day Realm.”

“Then why is it so cold in here?”

He hikes a shoulder. “Caves.”

“How are the berries frozen?”

Ellister's eyes soften as he curls a hand around my waist. "I know you like sweet stuff. That's why I went all the way to the Dream Realm to pick some ice berries for you."

"Ice berries," I repeat, still having trouble comprehending the new world I'm in. "How far is the Dream Realm?"

"Far. Basically the opposite side of the world." He starts a waltz, and our feet move together like we've been dance partners our entire lives. "It's always cold there, and this particular fruit stays frozen for a couple of days after being picked."

When I look to the rock wall, I try to imagine anything beyond it. Ellister's talking about an entire world I've never seen, but from the glimpses inside his mind, I know it's magical. I know the air smells fresh and sweet. I know the sky in the Night Realm has three moons.

If I try, I can picture Ellister's childhood cottage and feel the devastating loss of his soul as if I experienced it myself.

"It's weird," I say absentmindedly.

"What is?"

"Feeling like I'm so connected to a stranger."

His face ticks with a flinch. "You still think of me as a stranger?"

"No. And yes. In a way, I feel like I've always known you."

"But...?"

"But there's so much I don't understand."

"Such as? Ask me anything and I'll try to answer as best I can."

"Simple stuff. Like, how are you cooking the meat?"

"A fire. How else?"

I snort. "I actually spent the last couple days thinking you're a serial killer who lives in your parents' basement or something."



His nose wrinkles. “Why would you think that?”

“You’ve had hot and cold food readily available, so I figured you have access to a stove and a refrigerator somewhere.”

“There’s no electricity in Valora. I’m afraid that will take some getting used to for you.”

I nod, my attention going to the candlesticks and old-fashioned clothes. “Right. Because we went back in time. How far back?”

“About forty thousand years.”

Surprised, my feet mess up on the steps. “Forty thousand?”

“That’s right. Although Number Two suggested fifty thousand, I didn’t want to follow his instructions exactly in case he decides to follow us.” When he sees my jaw opening and closing like a fish out of water, he reassures, “Don’t worry. I don’t think he’ll find us.”

“I’m not worried about that. The time travel... we went back too far. People are cavemen right now.”

“Valora time is very different from Earth time,” Ellister informs me, shaking his head. “A year here is merely one day on Earth, so we’re not as far back as it would seem. Civilization is very much intact. Architecture is advanced. Agriculture is booming. Our lack of technology is a choice. It’s not that we can’t manage it—we just don’t want to because there are creatures in this world that wouldn’t be able to survive certain fumes or electronic frequencies.”

“What kind of creatures?”

“Sprites. Little things that look like miniature people. They fly very fast, and a sighting is rare. Then there are trolls and gnomes. All lesser beings, of course,” he states matter-of-factly.

“Whoa. Discriminate much?”

“What?” Ellister’s totally clueless.

“Lesser beings?” I ask pointedly.

“We sacrifice for them so they can keep living. We could have moving pictures and telephones, but we don’t so they can survive.”

“And your motive is purely selfless? They contribute nothing to this world?”

Ellister blinks as I poke holes in his defense. “Well. Not entirely. Some of them have magical abilities. And the sprites can carry messages across entire realms within hours.”

“What kind of person was Astrid?”

“Troll.”

“She didn’t seem lesser to me—just different. In fact, I’d say she’s probably superior in many ways.”

Perplexed, Ellister frowns. “I suppose. After all, she did what I couldn’t—got your heart and mind in tune with mine.”

“See? If she hadn’t helped, I’d still be terrified of you. Her power might be different from yours, but that doesn’t make you better.”

“You’re passionate about this,” Ellister observes with a hint of surprise.

“It’s not the first time I’ve had to defend someone for being different.”

“Cody?”

“Yeah. Some people underestimate him because of his uniqueness, and they write him off when they automatically assume he isn’t as valuable as the average person. But the truth is, he’s extraordinary.”

Seeing my point, Ellister inclines his head and concedes, “You’re right, darling. My way of thinking is outdated. The fae tend to be conceited and overconfident. It’s just engrained in us, and it’s even worse with the dark fae. Vaeront’s group is filled with the worst offenders because when you believe you’re above others, you start to think you’re above the law. Above reason and morality. And when you live that way, no action is off-limits, no matter how despicable it may be.”

I can sense his shame. It comes off him in heavy waves as he admits the truth.

“You’re not a dark fae anymore,” I remind him. “Not in *this* time. Not with me.”

Emotion shimmers in his light eyes, and he gives my hand an affectionate squeeze. “You’ve saved me, Hannah Wildwood. In so many ways. Before I met you, I was lost, ancient, and ready to die at a moment’s notice. Now, I’m renewed. My life has just begun, and it’s all because of you.”

“Want to know how you could repay me?”

He looks intrigued. “Anything.”

“Indoor plumbing,” I quip.

He laughs, then gives me an apologetic half-smile. “I’m afraid you’ll have to get used to the chamber pot.”

My hopeful face drops with disappointment. “You’re not serious.”

“Unfortunately, I am. The palaces have running water and working pipe systems, but most rural houses don’t. With how remote we’ll be, it’s very unlikely the luxury will be available. But hey, you love camping. Just think of it as a permanent vacation. I realize it might sound uncivilized, but the magic here makes up for our basic ways of life.”

“Will I ever have a power?”

“It’s possible but unlikely. I haven’t witnessed enough human-to-fae cases to say for sure.”

“What happened to the other people from the bargains you collected?” I realize this is a subject Ellister has remorse about, but we need to cover it sometime.

Instead of looking guilty, he seems relieved when he replies, “They were infants and toddlers when the dark fae were caught, and obviously, they were innocent. The royals confiscated them. Took them from us and gave them to families who wouldn’t mind raising a soulless child.”

“They didn’t get their souls back from Vaeront after he was banished?”

“No. The only way their souls could be released is if he allowed it, and he would not.”

“What an asshole.”

“Indeed. I don’t know what became of those children, but I like to think of them being loved, getting pointy ears, and growing wings. Thriving and having offspring. Their descendants could be living in Valora to this day.”

“Hang on a second, will I grow wings? Could I fly?” That’d be pretty cool.

“Having wings and being able to fly are two completely different matters.” He sounds a bit sad, like he’s speaking from experience.

Curious, I try to look behind his shoulder. “Where are your wings?”

“Tucked away inside.”

“Will you show me?”

“Someday but not now.” His eyes flit away like he’s embarrassed. “My wings are in bad shape from being in the Lost Land. Going eons without food or water was detrimental to my health, and most of my feathers fell off long ago. They’ve been slow to grow back. That’s why my hair is short, too.”

Studying his inky locks, I disagree, “It’s so long it covers your ears, and it’s almost in your eyes. It’s positively shaggy.”

“By human standards, my hair is fine, but fae are very vain, even the men. Longer styles are a source of pride and a show of strength.”

I stop dancing and make sure he hears me when I say, “Ellister, there isn’t anything you could do to make me stop wanting you. I think by now that’s pretty apparent. Patchy wings and short hair are nothing compared to what we’ve been through. We’ve seen each other at our worst. You’ve literally seen me dead.”

“Hannah, don’t.” Ellister winces at the reminder, as if I’ve physically hurt him.

“I guess the bright side of starting a relationship this way is the fact that we’ve already been at our lowest together,” I go on optimistically. “We can only go up from here, right?”

He splays his hand on the side of my neck, lightly rubbing along my artery. “Oh, how I’ve missed your sunshine, my mate.”

My mate.

The term of endearment sends a funny thrill through my body.

Sure, he’s told me we’re soul mates, but he’s never used it as an endearment before, and it strikes a chord in me, deeper than if he’d called me his wife.

“What?” He tilts his head at my stunned silence.

“You... you called me your mate.”

“Because that’s who you are.”

*Who* I am. Not *what* I am.

The word choice stands out. He states our relationship status as if it’s part of my identity.

I guess it is. Being with Ellister makes me different. Makes me more... myself.

For the first time in my life, I feel right.

Whole.

In the past, when I’ve grieved the loss of relationships, it wasn’t about my exes. Not really. I could never pinpoint where my heartbreak came from, but now I know it’s because I was missing something—someone—I didn’t have yet.

“I promise you this,” Ellister rasps passionately. “I’ll spend the rest of our lives giving you—my lovely, wonderful mate—everything you deserve. You’ll have the finest dresses, even if I have to steal a new one every day. We’ll have a sturdy house on a farm good enough to call paradise. I’ll learn how to bake

the best desserts, and I'll find a way to make you the sweet tea you love."

His solemn vow fills me with warmth and triggers a sugar craving.

"Speaking of sweet tea, I need some, stat. All this healthy food is making me too skinny," I comment playfully. "I can already tell I've lost weight during the time I've been here."

Mouth tight with stress, Ellister is all seriousness when he asks, "Have you?"

His hands drop to the dress, and he starts tugging the floor-length skirt up. Without any decorum, he gropes the waist of my pants. He sticks his fingers inside and starts feeling the looseness.

Gasping at how good it feels to have his knuckles caressing my lower belly, I grip his biceps to steady myself.

It's the morning in my bedroom all over again when he had to button my pants for me.

So much sexual tension.

"Ellister, you better stop that unless you plan to do something about it."

Ignoring me, he presses his palm to my forehead, then my cheeks. He's breathing hard, and there's a tremble in his fingers. "Are you feeling all right? Are you sick?"

He's genuinely rattled, and I feel for him.

He's traumatized. Not only does he harbor guilt over what happened with me, he's terrified of it happening again.

"I'm fine," I insist softly. "Just hungry."

"I've been starving you." Stalking over to the sleeping area, he swipes my empty water cup. It's a rustic thing—just a hollowed-out tusk from some large animal. Maybe a boar. "I'll get you something special."

My hair gets blown around as a vortex suddenly opens behind Ellister.

“Where are you going?” I step toward him, wanting to cling to his arm so he stays with me.

“I’m going to remedy this at once. I must do better. I have to keep you well.”

Before I can reassure him of my health again, the breeze kicks up. The air behind him starts moving faster.

Quickly grabbing the candlestick to try to see better, I shield the flame with my hand so it doesn’t go out.

Distorted and churning, the rock wall looks like water swirling down a drain.

I can feel the power of the vortex. The pull.

“Take me with you,” I blurt.

“It’s too dangerous.” The vortex is spinning and spinning. “Don’t fret, Hannah.”

“I don’t want you to leave me—”

He catapults backward and vanishes.

“—alone.”

Man, he just really loves to disappear when I’m in the middle of a sentence.



## CHAPTER 4

### *HANNAH*

Jolting under the cover of the sleeping bag, I wake with a start. I must've fallen asleep. Ellister has been gone for such a long time, and with nothing but a single candle flame and silence, I got bored and eventually dozed off.

Plus, Astrid was right—the electric spell she did made me really tired.

I don't know how long I napped for, but the candlestick is completely spent, so there's no light.

Now I'm bored *and* I can't see.

And I'm agitated and restless. Ellister has been away for hours in previous excursions, but that was before I knew who he is. Before I knew what it's like to miss him.

Fluffing one of the blankets I've folded into a makeshift pillow, I close my eyes so I don't have to stare into the darkness.

But as I lie here, I hear a gruff, throaty noise. It's hard to tell if it came from the other room because sound echoes in the cave.

"Ellister?" I call, sitting up.

There's no answer, so I say his name again, louder this time.



Still nothing.

Maybe I imagined it, but I'm freaked out anyway.

Just as I'm about to burrow under the blankets like a kid after a nightmare, there's a groan and a husky, "Hannah."

And it's close.

"Ellister? Are you hurt?" Groping around, I pat the rock floor to try to find him as I inch forward. "I can't see you. I need you to tell me where you are."

"Here," he replies, forced and weak. "Right here."

I quickly go that way on my hands and knees.

"Did you fall too hard? I told you, it looks painful when you bite the dust." After some crawling around, my fingers find the rough fabric on his legs. The first thing I notice is it's soaked. "Why are you all wet?"

He doesn't respond.

He's lying on his back, and I take the liberty of reaching into the breast pocket of his shirt to find the matches he always has on hand. At least the cardboard isn't too damp.

Once I've gotten a match between my fingers, I scrape it so it lights.

When I get a good look at Ellister, I gasp.

Raised welts decorate his face, forehead, neck, and arms. Each one has what looks like a needle sticking out of it.

"What happened?" My heart starts pounding. I reach out to touch one of the bumps but think better of it because I don't want to hurt him worse. "Are these thorns?"

"Stingers," he rumbles, his fingers flexing as he squirms from the extreme pain.

"Stingers?"

"Not regular bees. Valora bees."

"Valora bees," I repeat, horrified, then I remember something he told me in my almost-memories the morning of the tour.

He'd said something about the stings being paralytic where he's from. I didn't understand his reaction to a little honeybee, then. Now, I get it.

God, he must be in agony. I've been stung several times in my life, but not all at once. Remembering my nightmare—the one where I got attacked by bees—in my almost-memories is bad enough. It's indescribably awful to see him in this condition.

“You're not going to be able to move soon, are you?” I ask with panic seeping in.

“Correct.”

“Are you going to die?”

“No.”

“How long will you be like this?”

“Don't know. Never been stung this many times before. One sting—a few hours. This many? Time will tell.” His lips are getting stiffer, his tongue heavier.

The wings Ellister had spoken of earlier are out, like he'd tried to fly away from what was happening out there. They're mostly smashed under his weight, but I see the fine bones with downy gray feathers growing in some places.

The match burns out. I'm so focused on Ellister that I don't even notice how close the flame is getting to my fingertips, and I end up hissing when my skin gets a little burned.

I quickly light another. This time, I find a new candlestick in a pile of supplies next to the dresses, and I bring the flame to the wick.

When I turn back to Ellister, his wings are... shrinking. Retracting, until they're absorbed by his body.

With the paralysis setting in, the cup falls from his grip and clatters to floor. He nudges it toward me with trembling, uncoordinated fingers. “For you.”

I glance inside the container, and my stomach drops when I realize what he did.

“You got honey for me?” There’s a long chunk of honeycomb inside, with the honey draining to the bottom of the cup. I’m seriously touched that he would make such a heartfelt gesture, but I’m also pissed that he risked himself. “Dude, you’re not a beekeeper. Even I don’t get into my hives without protective measures.”

“I smoked the hive,” he defends, his words stilted. “Then it started raining and ruined my plan. The bees were very vengeful about my intrusion.”

Going into damage-control mode, I count the stings on his exposed skin, but I lose track at about twelve. There could be more under his clothing.

Although he claimed he couldn’t die from this, I’m scared.

He looks terrible. He’s swelling up like a balloon. One of his eyelids is completely shut, and his bottom lip resembles a small hotdog.

I make a distressed noise. “I think you need medical attention, Ellister.”

“No use. Can you feel the pain through our connection? Are you hurting?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Good. Another benefit to losing my soul. Fated pairs can sometimes feel each other’s pain, but if you can be spared this, I’ll consider us the luckiest couple in Valora.”

Suddenly, the weirdest thing happens—the floor beneath us starts to lose its solidness. It swirls, and under my hand the stone crumbles, going from hard and rough to feeling like loosely packed sand.

“What’s happening?”

“Vortex. Grab onto me, Hannah. Need to get you outside the mountain. Can’t leave you trapped with no food or water.”

Thinking quickly, I gather the few supplies within arm's reach—A blanket, the matches, and the cup of honey. Ellister's already got his floppy water canteen attached to his beltloop.

“Now, Hannah.” His demand is urgent.

Clinging to his arm, I try not to touch a place where he was stung. Then I shut my eyes tightly as I kneel next to his inflamed body. I let out a shriek when the ground completely gives out.

I'm falling. Not just dropping, but spinning, too. My body is jostled this way and that, and Ellister and I keep bumping into each other.

As much as Ellister's power impresses me, it also kind of scares the hell out of me, and my scream gets swallowed up in the chaotic suction.

Thankfully, the trip doesn't last long.

The landing isn't very smooth. As we tumble onto a bed of soft grass, daylight enters my vision for the first time in a while. I'm on my back, facing the sky, and it's bright. Blindingly so.

And really fucking hot. I'm instantly sweating.

Suddenly feeling weighted down by all the layers of clothing I have on, I look to Ellister as I shed the flannel shirt.

He's sprawled out on his side a few feet away, facing me with his arm outstretched as though he's reaching for me. His one good eye is open, blankly staring ahead.

As I set the honey cup on a nearby rock, I gently scold him through gritted teeth. “This was an idiotic thing to do. I love you for it, but it was dumb. Do you realize that?” When he doesn't answer, I continue my rant. “It's a good thing I know who you are now. If this had happened before I met Astrid, I would've been free to run off. And I would have, too. I'd have taken my chances and literally left you in the dirt.”

Clearly unable to form words, he makes an incoherent noise. The sound is followed by more throaty grunts.

Shit. He's lost the ability to talk.

Shading my eyes with my hand, I scan our surroundings. We're at the edge of a forest. The trees are filled with white and pink petals, reminding me of the apple trees when they blossom in the spring, but I see no actual fruit.

Behind us, the expansive mountains reach high into the blue sky.

If I needed any more proof that I'm no longer on Earth, I've got it. There are two suns, one suspended by the highest mountain peak, the other over the forest.

I glance around some more.

In between the forest and the mountain, there's an expanse of the purest green grass I've ever seen. The overgrown blades sway with the hot breeze, showing no signs of ever being trampled on by anything with feet.

There's no evidence that anyone else has been here for a long time. I don't see anything man-made or trails in the woods to indicate this is a place where people hike often. I don't even hear any birds.

Ellister wasn't exaggerating about how remote this area is, which is both good and bad. We won't be discovered by anyone dangerous, but we also won't be found by anyone who could help us.

I realize he brought me out here so I'd have a chance to fend for myself.

Therein lies the problem.

I don't know how to in this world. Any of the plants could be poisonous. There could be predatory animals lurking. I could venture off on my own, but then I'd risk getting lost, and I'm not willing to leave Ellister helpless and unprotected.

"We're going to need water and shelter," I tell him, even though he can't respond. "It'd be great to have both, but I doubt we'll get that lucky. The best bet for a drink is in the forest. It's likely there's a stream somewhere. Shelter, though, is probably with the mountain."

Reaching for the canteen on Ellister's belt, I shake it, noting how full it is with the sloshing liquid inside. I quickly decide it'll have to be enough.

Shelter it is.

We need to find a cave. Hopefully an easily accessible one.

"Before we do anything, we have to get these stingers out." Since I'm not familiar with the Valora bees I decide to take extra caution and not touch the stingers with my bare fingers.

Bunching the fabric of the flannel around my fingers, I start with the barbs on Ellister's cheeks, pulling them out one by one. I've never seen stingers like this. They're unbelievably long. Some are at least two inches. They look like thorns that get thicker in the middle, which makes yanking them out harder because I'm encountering resistance from how embedded they are.

"Sorry, sorry," I apologize over and over again as a little bit of blood oozes from the punctures.

If I'm hurting Ellister, I'm not sure. For his sake, I hope he's numb.

The paralysis has fully set in now. When I ask him questions, I don't even get a huff. In fact, his lungs don't appear to be working at all, but when I press the side of his neck to get a pulse, it's there.

I know Ellister said he doesn't need to breathe to live, but it's still disturbing to see him so motionless.

After working on all the stings on his exposed areas, I start to unbutton his shirt.

I feel a little bit like a perv as I undress him. I shouldn't find anything about this scenario sexy, but I've never seen him with his shirt off, and I can't help my body's reaction as I bump over his abs on the way down his torso.

Ellister is lean and chiseled. With clothes on, he actually appears to be quite skinny, but underneath these layers, I realize how muscular he is. The definition of his pecs, every

indent of his six-pack, the V leading into his pants... He's like a sculpted statue.

A statue that's currently limp as a ragdoll.

He's easy to manipulate as I search for more stingers. I roll his body from side to side to get a good view of his back. Luckily, there are only two more stings. One on his neck, the other by one of his shoulder blades. Seems the bees went for the most accessible places and the fleshy areas where they could sink in easily. Which makes sense. They wouldn't want to do more work than they have to.

Running my hands over Ellister's khaki-clad legs, I don't feel any bumps or stingers.

Last, I check his ankles, but his boots are high enough that they provided protection on that part of his body, too.

"Okay," I breathe out, contemplating using what's left of the water to clean his wounds, but just as fast, I decide against it.

I should save it for drinking. Ellister might be damn near invincible, but I'm not. I have no idea how long he's going to be incapacitated, and I'm going to need every drop of water if I don't want to die from dehydration.

I grab the honey cup.

Dipping into it, I rub the sticky substance between my fingers. "It's not a magic fix, but honey can actually be used as a balm on stings. It can help with inflammation. Maybe it's the same with the honey here. I don't know. I'm gonna try it. I really hope it doesn't do more harm than good."

After applying a generous layer to each sting, I sit back on my heels to admire my work.

My eyes connect with Ellister's unblinking one, and the vacantness there is unsettling. Gently, I close his eyelid for him, just like they do in the movies after someone passes away.

Ellister isn't dead. His beating heart is proof, and I keep reminding myself of that fact by checking it.

Placing the side of my head over his chest one more time, I listen to the steady and reassuring thump.

Once I've laid the blanket out and folded it in half, longways, I decide to move Ellister's body onto it.

After a lot of straining and grunting on my part, I manage to get the job done. Positioning the honey cup and the flannel shirt in the crook of his arm, I make sure we've got our supplies, then I go to the end of my makeshift stretcher.

I grasp the blanket near Ellister's head, and I pull backward. We move about a foot. I do it again with more oomph. This time, I drag him about two feet.

I glance back at the mountain, eyeing a side where I see some cracks and indents. A deep crevice would do, but it's farther than it looks.

Well.

This is going to be a laborious journey.

With another heaving grunt, I continue with my purpose and hope the blanket holds up while being raked over the ground.





## CHAPTER 5

### *HANNAH*

Ellister's rhythmic heartbeat is underneath my ear as I lie curled up next to him in the shade of the cubby I found. It's not a cave like I'd wanted, but the overhang provides shelter. A blessing in this heat.

At this point, I'd give just about anything for a drop in temperature. A storm would be nice. I never thought I'd hate good weather, but these suns are ridiculously relentless.

They never set. Ever. They just keep going around and around in the sky in opposite directions, passing each other but never sinking below the horizon.

Just like when we were in the cave, I can't tell how much time has gone by because darkness doesn't seem to exist here. I estimate it's been about two days, but I could be wrong.

Pleasant chirping and trills come from the forest. Turns out, there are birds around. They're just quiet most of the time. They tend to get riled up when the suns collide over the trees, just like now. Their song has an actual tune to it, seeming structured with happy notes.

Sweat trickles down my temple as I listen to the noise and watch the clouds float by in the blue sky. My mouth is uncomfortably dry, and it feels like I have sandpaper in my throat every time I swallow.

I drank the last sip of water hours ago.

I'm just so damn thirsty, and I'm having trouble concentrating on anything else.

I even got desperate enough to fish out Ellister's flask, hoping I could drink the Glow.

Unfortunately, the damn thing didn't have a drop in it. It's probably for the best. I don't know enough about the magical substance to be sure it wouldn't affect me in some way.

Lightly squeezing the empty waterskin, I fantasize about when Ellister will finally snap out of the condition he's in. Then we'll be able to find water and food.

I'm too scared to go off in search of it myself, so I've stayed near him, waiting.

Boredom eats away at me, and I consider taking yet another nap. I've been sleeping as much as I can to pass the time, but I'm not used to lying around so much.

After fluffing the lump of my folded jeans and bunched up shirt under Ellister's head, I place my ear over his chest once again and let the steady thumping lull me to sleep.

I doze off quickly. It's not a deep sleep, because I'm in that place between being awake and on the edge of a dream.

I might be hallucinating. I keep seeing rushing rivers and streams, but every time I try to reach out for the water, I'm yanked back to consciousness. It's so frustrating.

"Hannah," Ellister whispers. At first, I think it's in my dream. Then it comes again, more insistent. "Hannah."

I jerk as awareness comes back to me, and I glance at Ellister's face. The eye that had been swollen shut is better, and he's blinking with both eyes. His chest rises and falls with a breath.

The paralysis must be wearing off.

I sit up a little too vigorously, and that's a bad idea. Bringing my hand to my pounding skull, I groan at the headache.

“Are you sick?” Ellister asks through gritted teeth, seeming unable to use his jaw yet.

“No. Just thirsty.”

“Your body feels very hot next to mine, and you were talking in your sleep.” His words are slurred because he doesn’t have full use of his lips and tongue yet. “You were having a fever dream.”

“Fever?” I touch my own cheeks, but they feel normal to me. “I don’t think so.”

“Hannah, if you’re ill, you need to tell me.”

“I’m not. Really. It’s just been a rough couple days, and it’s so fucking hot.”

Ellister’s chest fills with a deep inhale, and he quietly blows out, “Silly woman. The honey was supposed to be for you. Why did you use it on me?”

“I thought it could help you. Did it?” Yesterday, I spread the last of the honey on Ellister’s welts, and they do look better. Much less red and swollen. Unfortunately, I didn’t get to taste any of it, and I’ve been saving the honeycomb for when my hunger situation is really dire.

“Yes. The pain was excruciating until you put the honey on me. Relief was almost instantaneous.”

“Then I’m glad I did it. Can you move?” I take his fingers in mine, but they’re limp and malleable. “Seems not, but you’re breathing, so that’s great. Do you need to, like, go to the bathroom or something? I keep thinking you’ll eventually pee yourself, but you haven’t.”

“The paralysis shut down my organs.”

“Oh. Is that why you haven’t been sweating either?” I touch his forehead. It’s a normal temperature and completely dry.

“Yes.”

“Not gonna lie, it’s been scary to see you like this.”

“No worries, darling,” he reassures me. “Think of my condition as a sort of stasis. I’ve been perfectly safe this whole time, and I’ll come out of it preserved to the state I was in when I was stung.” He scans my face, and it’s so good to see his eyes moving again. Unable to pull an expression, he thins his lips into what I think is supposed to be a frown. “But you... you look awful.”

“Gee, thanks.” I self-consciously fluff my gauzy skirt.

The dress is still pretty, despite being a bit dirty. I took the jeans off once we found this place. My shoes and socks, too. Turns out, the see-through fabric is totally weather-appropriate.

“Your hair is damp and matted,” Ellister continues. “Your cheeks are flushed, and your lips are dry and cracked.”

I narrow my eyes, laying on the sarcasm when I say, “Please, do go on. This is incredibly charming.”

He’s not amused. “I’m serious. I’m supposed to be taking care of you, and I’ve failed miserably.”

“This is just a little hiccup.” I spread my hands, indicating our less-than-ideal location. “It’ll get better. You’ll make it up to me once you recover.”

“Why are you like this?” Anger sparks in his eyes.

“Like what?”

“Optimistic. Cheerful. You shouldn’t be trying to comfort me when I so royally fucked up.”

Raising an eyebrow, I tilt my head. “Really, Ellister? You spent days trying to win me over, and now that you have, you’re trying to change my mind? I think the better question is, why are *you* like this?”

Pause. “I won you over?”

Pursing my lips, I tilt my head. “I think that’s pretty obvious.”

“Just so you know, I didn’t mean you’re not pretty. You’re as gorgeous as ever. You look the way you do because you

sacrificed for me. Nothing is more beautiful than that.”

Blushing at his sincere compliment, I tuck a chunk of wild hair behind my ear. “I really could use a shower, though. And a cold drink. How much longer until you’ll be able to vortex us out of here?”

“Half a day, maybe.”

That seems like an eternity. In the grand scheme of things, twelve hours isn’t much, but right now, it’s daunting.

I take the honeycomb out of the cup. “Would eating something speed your healing up?”

“Probably, but I can’t chew yet,” he says. “I can only swallow.”

I frown and mutter, “I should’ve saved some honey for you.”

“Nonsense. You’ll eat the honeycomb now.” It’s funny how Ellister manages to sound so bossy when he’s out of commission.

But he doesn’t need to order me twice. Like a ravenous animal, I bite into the network of hexagonal shapes, thoroughly enjoying the chewy texture and the sweetness. Briefly, I recognize the slight taste differences from the honeycomb I’m used to. I don’t know if it’s because I’m starving, but I swear this stuff is even better than what I get from my hives.

When I’m down to the last inch-by-inch square, I realize I should leave a bit for Ellister, but as I start to put it back in the cup, he demands, “All of it. Right now.”

“Fine.” I pop the last piece into my mouth, my eyes locked with Ellister’s pleased stare.

As I lie back down, I rest my head on his shoulder, knowing I need to save my energy. And I get back to thinking, wishing there were more I could do to improve his condition faster.

The honeycomb was delicious, but thirst roars its ugly head as my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.

I just want a drink so bad.

Next time I close my eyes, instead of seeing water, I'm envisioning something else.

Red.

The rivers and streams in my fantasies are suddenly filled with blood.

Not the scary kind.

The tasty kind.

I remember sensing the satisfaction Ellister got when he drank from me in the meadow. I could feel his enjoyment during the siphoning, the fulfillment he received from me, and how it satiated a hunger inside him.

I could give that to him again, and it might get us out of here sooner.

"Ellister?"

"Yes?"

"You said you used to survive on blood."

"Yes."

"You said you liked mine more than anyone else's."

I think if his body could stiffen even more, it would. I actually sense his mood shift, because he knows where I'm going with this.

"Hannah, don't." He sounds even more growly than usual, and I'm not sure if it's because he's mad or because he can't move his jaw.

"Why not?" I lift myself on an elbow to look down at him. "If all you can do right now is swallow, and we don't have any water..."

"I can't let you offer yourself to me like that. Not when you're in a fragile state."

"I'm not offering out of the goodness of my heart. I'm thinking of myself, too. I can't be here for much longer. This heat is dangerous for me."

I have a point, and he knows it, but he still has that conflicted glint in his eyes.

“Are you afraid you’ll drink too much?” I press.

“No. I know when to stop.”

“Are you worried about hurting me?”

“No. It’s not painful, remember?”

Yes. Yes, I do. In fact, I recall it being quite nice.

Confused by his refusal, I shake my head. “Then what’s the big deal?”

“Before, I didn’t have a choice. Drinking your blood was a requirement of the ritual. But this... now... It would be completely different for me to do it recreationally.”

“Different how?”

“There’s something you have to understand about the history behind blood sharing. Committed blood partners have one of the strongest bonds I’ve ever seen. In some cases, they become addicted to each other. This happened in the Lost Land with a few couples. The fact that they were same-sex pairings didn’t diminish the validity of their relationship. I’d liken their connection to that of fated mates—you rely on that person for survival. You trust them to be monogamous with you. You get to know them, love them. You’d kill for them if you have to. It can make some people aggressive. Possessive to the point of being feral.”

“Someone wanting to protect their partner is natural,” I comment. “That makes sense to me, and I don’t see anything wrong with it.”

“Unfortunately, the lawmakers in Valora do.”

“They’re against homosexuality?”

“No, not that. Sexual preference has nothing to do with it. It’s the exchange of blood that they see as unnatural and dirty. Even the dark fae only used it as a last resort. In the Lost Land, it was necessary for sustenance, but here, there’s no reason for it because there’s ample food and water.”

I give an exaggerated glance around us, pointing out the lack of said food and water. “I’d beg to differ in this particular situation.”

“It’s a taboo practice,” he argues weakly. “Very much forbidden.”

Honestly, Ellister’s only making me want it more. Being told I can’t do something because it’s “taboo” is just too enticing. “How would anyone know if we do it just this once?”

“Punctures. Bruising,” he answers. “Those things don’t fade in a day. If we run into someone after we leave here, they could see.”

Disregarding his warning, I hold my wrist over his mouth. “Can you drink from me here? I’ll just make myself a nifty bracelet to cover the marks.”

“Once won’t be enough,” he warns emphatically. “The memory of tasting you already haunts me, Hannah. I-I crave you, and the more I have of you, the more I’ll want. Understand?”

“You crave me?” I ask, my heart beating faster at the compliment.

“So much. Be a good girl and get your wrist away from my mouth.”

“No.”

“Fuck,” he swears, but he’s not cussing at me. He’s upset with himself for wanting what I’m offering, and his self-control crumbles so fast. Within the next second, he rushes out, “I’ll only do it if you drink from me first.”

If he’s trying to deter me, that’s not the right tactic.

It’s a temptation.

I lick my lips as my thirst becomes unbearable. When I think about his warm blood flowing into my mouth, tangy and metallic, a surge of desire crashes into me.

I should be disgusted. The human in me should be running for the hills, but I stay right where I am.



“Shit.” Ellister immediately realizes his mistake when he sees how much I want it. “All right. I’m going to allow it this time, but only because you need it.”

Bobbing my head up and down, I quickly nod my compliance. “Just tell me what to do.”

“My dagger. It’s in my boot.”

Apprehensive, I pull the blade out and study the sharp, shiny edges with hesitancy. “You want me to cut you?”

“It’s the easiest way. Your teeth are too blunt to get a clean puncture.”

That makes total sense. Of course I’ll have to open his skin somehow. My brain is all foggy and sluggish from dehydration, and I just didn’t think of what that meant.

I don’t know if I can hurt him. The actual act of injuring him... I can’t stand it.

Reading my turmoil, Ellister offers another alternative. “You can use my teeth if that’s easier. You’ll have to lift my wrist up to my mouth and push against my fangs until my skin gives way under the pressure. That’s more natural, and they won’t cut too deep.”

“Okay. I’ll try.”

Natural or not, it’s still difficult. Not only is Ellister’s arm heavy as fuck when it’s all floppy, but there’s that whole part about me being a wuss when it comes to hurting a man I care so much about.

The first couple times I try to get his fangs to cut his skin, I fail.

“Harder,” he commands. “You can’t be gentle about it.”

I give it one more attempt, putting some muscle behind it.

It works.

Two tiny holes well with blood on the inside of his wrist. The dark red liquid overflows and drips down his arm toward his elbow.

There's no going back after this.

If I do this, it'll change me.

It'll change *us*.

And that's what I want. I want our connection to be stronger. I want to be as close to Ellister as possible.

"You don't have to do it," Ellister says, assuming I paused because I'm grossed out.

Tentative, I put my mouth to one of the bleeding spots, almost like a kiss. Testing the taste.

It's interesting. There's a surprising richness in it. A sweetness.

Addictive, indeed.

As his blood makes it to the back of my throat, a craving takes hold. Instinct kicks in, and next time I bring my lips to him, I don't hold back.

When I get a good suction around both punctures, my mouth floods with the most satiating gulp.

Ellister and I both moan at the same time, and as I keep drinking with long pulls, something starts happening to my body.

My veins sizzle. My fingertips vibrate. My lips tingle.

The pleasure zones in my brain light up, making me giddy and weightless.

Is this what Ellister experienced when he drank from me?

It's out of this world.

My empty stomach fills, relieving me of the hunger pangs. My head gets clearer, the fogginess fading away.

I feel energized and strong.

Arousal suddenly slams through me, pulsing between my legs. I'm hot all over, but not in a bad way. My breathing gets faster as I clutch his arm, my nails making crescent indents on his skin.

Ellister would probably let me drain him dry before he tells me to stop, but I know I need to on some intuitive level. As if Ellister and I are physically connected, I can sense his body reaching a threshold as I drain him.

*Stop. Stop!*

It's hard, but I do.

Breaking away, I scramble backward. I scoot until my head bumps the slanted wall, putting enough distance between us for him to be safe from me.

I'm a fucking shark.

"I'm—I'm sorry." With wide eyes, I cover my mouth in shock as his decadent blood lingers on my tongue. "I think I liked that a little too much."

Ellister's lips lift with a stiff smile. "It was a sight to see. You've got a bloodthirsty side."

He's got that right.

His arm is sprawled out, his palm facing up so I can see the wounds. He wasn't kidding about leaving a mark. There's a giant hickey around the area where I'd been sucking. I marked him up good, and a big part of me likes seeing the evidence of what I did.

He's still bleeding a bit, but it's slowing. A few drops have pooled on the rock floor, and I'm resisting the urge to lick it up.

After crawling over to him, I rip the sleeve of my dad's flannel shirt and wrap it tightly around Ellister's wrist to bandage his wounds.

Once it's secured, I bravely let my inner wrist hover above his mouth. "It's your turn."

I'm a little bit worried he's going to go back on our deal and refuse. But he doesn't.

"Closer." His lips brush my skin with each syllable, sending goose bumps up my arm. "Wedge your bone under my teeth. On my command, push back."

Doing as he says, I try not to wince or cower from anticipation of the sting, but any apprehension disappears after the initial puncture.

The brief pain turns into a pleasant heat when he begins drinking from me with as much fervor as I did with him.

It tickles, and my veins fizzle with dozens of little sparks as my blood flows into his mouth. Without full use of his tongue and jaw, he's a messy eater, and some trails down the sides of his face.

Seeing the streams of red on his skin does something to me.

My chest feels full, my heart is pounding, and the flesh between my thighs pulses from being so turned on.

I release a slow breath to stop myself from moaning.

Somehow, being fed from is even better than drinking from Ellister, and I know he was right to warn me.

Once won't be enough.

It'll never be enough.



## CHAPTER 6

### *ELLISTER*

I shouldn't be surprised by how much Hannah enjoys the blood exchange, but her reaction is extreme.

Her pupils grow until they're unnaturally large as I feed from her wrist. Her nipples are so stiff, I can see them through the layers of her bra and dress. Her lips are parted, quick breaths rushing past the plump flesh that's brightly colored from my blood.

She has no idea how fuckable she looks right now—her chest heaving up and down, a red smear down her chin, her thighs squirming because her pussy needs some friction.

Yes, some people get turned on when they feed, but I've personally never become aroused from it... until now.

I meant it when I told Hannah the blood can make someone aggressive, and for the first time, I understand the viciousness displayed by some men in the Lost Land.

If anyone else ever tried to do this with Hannah, I'd go insane with jealousy. I'd kill without hesitation.

Hannah's mine. Her blood is mine. Her body is mine.

I suspect the reason this practice was outlawed in Valora has less to do with it being revolting and more to do with it being a recipe for ruthlessness. It's alluring and powerful. It

takes the bond between fated mates—two people who are attached by destiny itself—and turns it into something deeper.

Something deadly to outsiders.

More of Hannah's sweetness oozes out on my tongue, and I know we're going to do this again and again, even if it isn't necessary for our health.

We're going to fuck and feed. Feed and fuck.

Hannah lets out a series of gasps, and I realize I've been so engrossed in the taste of her, I closed my eyes. I haven't been paying attention to her body's threshold.

Thinking I might've taken too much from her, I release the suction on her wrist, plug the wounds with a firm press of my tongue, and immediately search her for signs of dangerous blood loss.

But her cheeks are a healthy pink, and she's not woozy.

No, she's touching herself.

My cock hardens even more in my pants when I see her left hand shoved under her skirt, her fingers moving on her pussy. Her head is tilted back, her eyes shut, mouth open.

She's in her own little world right now, and I don't think she's even realized I stopped drinking or that I'm watching her.

I try to lift my arm to join in, but I can't. My shoulder twitches—a good sign. Hannah's blood is nourishing my body. I can feel it working, delivering warmth to all my extremities. I'm able to curl my fingers. A definite improvement, but I'm not better yet.

“You just wait until I can move again.” There's an edge of warning to my voice, and she startles at my statement, her light brown eyes gazing at me through heavy lids.

A blush rises to her cheeks because she got caught, but she doesn't stop touching herself.

Raising her eyebrows, she taunts, “What is the big bad fae going to do to me?” She looks down at where I'm engorged

and throbbing inside my pants, then snorts humorously. “Well, you’re not paralyzed everywhere.”

“All my senses are intact. I just can’t move,” I defend. “And I suppose that appendage has a mind of its own anyway.”

Stopping the titillation of her clit, she cups my erection and gives it a squeeze. “So you can feel that?”

“Absolutely,” I groan, then ask, “What are you doing?” when she undoes the top button on my pants.

“Having fun,” she responds coyly, seeming much better now that she’s had my blood.

Perhaps she was right to push for it after all.

I feel extreme pride at knowing I helped her. That I gave her something she needed. Something no one else could.

I’ve heard rumors that the blood of true mates is supposed to be the most glorious nourishment possible, and now I know it’s true.

Hannah’s fingers move down to the next button, and she keeps going until the khaki material has parted over my crotch.

Only my cotton boxers are in the way, and she slowly unties the drawstring of the underwear. Undergarments are so basic in Valora. There’s no elastic. Zippers don’t even exist yet. It’s all buttons and bows.

The extra effort it takes to unwrap someone’s body makes it more erotic. Builds the anticipation.

When Hannah finally takes my length in her warm hand, I clench my fists. She notices my improved mobility and smiles.

Running her finger over my cock, she starts at the slit on the head and moves down to the base. “Can I...?”

“Yes,” I rasp, just short of begging. “Anything. You can do whatever you like.”

In complete awe, I watch as she strokes me up and down. Then she lowers her head. Her warm breath puffs against the sensitive tip, right before her tongue darts out to lick me.

I release a rough sound.

Taking my girth in her fist with a more confident grip, she points my cock up toward her face and closes her lips around me, sucking me in an inch before popping off again.

It's the sweetest torture. I'm restrained by the paralysis, unable to participate. I'm high from ingesting her intoxicating blood. Sweat starts to dot my forehead as my inner system kicks back on.

Hannah turns her face slightly toward mine. "Ellister?"

"Yes, darling?"

"Is having a big dick a dark fae thing or is it just you?"

"I don't know," I answer honestly, letting out a husky laugh.

It's not like the dark fae went around having cock measuring contests. We were either too focused on survival or too disoriented from the chaotic atmosphere of the Lost Land to pay attention to each other's private parts.

In general, I don't have much memorable experience in the romance field. My love life from before my imprisonment was short-lived, murky, and tainted by betrayal.

"I just... I want to make this good for you," Hannah continues with a hint of self-consciousness. "But I'm not sure how much I'll be able to fit into my mouth."

"Anything you do will be amazing."

I'm not worried about our chemistry, my rusty skills, or the ability for our bodies to fit together.

We're meant for each other. Designed by fate to mesh in every way.

With Hannah, sex will be effortless. Our interactions will come naturally, just like it did in the hayloft. The bond will guide us.

Push us, even.



Hannah puts my cock back into her mouth, her jaw opening wide as she tries to shove as many inches as she can toward her throat. She bobs a few times, recruiting the use of her hand to stimulate the rest of my length in time with her head.

It's exquisite.

Pulling back, she sucks on the tip, and I miss the warmth of her tongue immediately when she releases me from her lips. "Is this okay?"

"Don't stop." It doesn't exactly answer her question, but it's all I can think of to say.

I want more. So much more.

I want to put my hand on the nape of her neck. I want to gather her hair in my fist as I drive myself deep into her mouth, as I make her go faster. I want to feel my cock hit the resistance as she gags around me.

As if she already knows what I need, she sheathes me once again, filling her mouth as much as she can, pushing her own limits. Her throat contracts from the intrusion, but she forces her muscles to relax to let me in all the way.

I let out a ragged moan when I bottom out in her throat.

She's good at this. Too good.

After several moments of retaining a steady rhythm, a tingle starts up in my balls. I'm close to coming already.

"Hannah," I warn, breathless. "Slow down."

Her mischievous eyes bounce to mine, and her response is just a muffled, "Hmm?" because she's stuffed full of my dick.

I imagine she's asking why, and I answer, "I want this to last."

She doesn't listen. If anything, her efforts become more vigorous.

My face lifts, and that wrinkle she likes so much creases by my nose. "What a brat you are."

She giggles in response, obviously having fun, and the vibration of her laughter doesn't help matters.

I make a noise of utter defeat as I give in to the rapturous pleasure. To the tantalizing sensations. To her.

Hannah does this to me every time we're together. She unwinds my control in a way no one else ever has.

The paralysis is wearing off much faster now. I can flex my toes inside my boots. My arm jerks. My stomach muscles tense as I approach completion.

Huffing a hoarse groan, I slightly thrust my hips up, surprising Hannah when I shove myself deeper into her mouth.

She gags around my cock again, squeezing me, and I lose it.

My eyes slam shut, and blinding light bursts behind my eyelids as I come.

While I spill into her mouth, I'm aware that her hand is back inside her panties. Her fingers are moving furiously on her pussy, and she moans around my cock as she reaches her own climax.

My cock is still shooting hot jets onto her tongue, and when I force my eyes open so I can watch her, the scene enhances my orgasm to new heights.

I shout as a second wave hits.

Bucking from her own pleasure, Hannah keeps sucking and swallowing, trying to drink down everything I have to give her. And it's a lot. Spurt after spurt erupts from my cock, filling her mouth so much that some leaks out and runs down my shaft.

Even after I'm done, Hannah keeps licking, chasing every drop she can get.

I taste good to her. That much is clear on her face.

As she daintily wipes at the corners of her mouth, she looks at me with unfulfilled desire. Even though we both got off, it's not enough.

The bond wants completion, and that won't happen until we fuck.

“Soon, darling,” I promise. “Very soon.”



## CHAPTER 7

### *HANNAH*

Just as I've gotten done rebuttoning Ellister's pants, he stiffly moves his arms and grits his teeth as he pushes himself up to a sitting position against the rock.

I'm so excited to see him up again. "You're all better?"

"Almost." He's breathing a little hard, and I'm guessing it's not just from the orgasm. Every move is taking a lot of strength. "But the good news is, I think I'll be able to get us out of here within a few minutes."

"Really?" That's a lot sooner than his original estimation, and I mentally pat myself on the back for being such a genius. "Who knew oral sex was such a fix-all?"

Ellister's mouth lifts with a grin. "It was your blood, you pervert."

I mock pout. "Damn. I thought I gave you a magical blow job."

His amusement turns into a full belly laugh that echoes in the rock cubby, and his happiness is a wondrous experience. It's almost like seeing a shooting star, something rare and special.

"Oh, Hannah," he breathes out. "Never change. Promise me you'll always be this way."

"Unbearably charming and sexy? Done."

He laughs some more, and the sound makes my heart flutter. Knowing the devastation he's suffered, how hard his life has been, and the evil he's committed... I wouldn't think it'd be possible for him to be cheerful. Ever.

All his smiles are for me. *Because* of me.

And that's beyond flattering.

We stare at each other with silly smiles until I think about the next unknown step.

Turning my head, I glance the expanse of blue sky, the forest in the distance, and the unfamiliar landscape fading into the far-off mist at the horizon. "Where will we go?"

Improving by the second, Ellister moves away from the support of the rock, keeping himself upright with one arm.

He reaches out to take my hand with the other. "I didn't have time to tell you before, but I found a house for us while on my last outing. That's what took so long. It's actually on the same property as the hive, so we'll have access to honey any time we want."

I give him a look. "I don't think you should go near the hive again."

Offended, he scoffs. "I know what I'm doing."

"Obviously not."

"The rain wasn't supposed to happen," he insists. "Have you noticed how it doesn't rain very often here in the Day Realm? How there are no storms?"

I nod. "From what I've seen, yeah."

"Well, the storm that came upon me was sudden, without warning."

"So?"

"It wasn't a natural occurrence. Someone made it happen. Weather manipulation is one of the more common powers for the fae people. There must've been a Naturopath at a neighboring farm. They probably caused the storm to water their crops."

Skepticism makes me twist my lips. “We’ll have neighbors? But you said we shouldn’t have contact with anyone.”

“Their house is about a mile and a half away. It’s closer than I’d hoped for, but it’s the best abandoned location I’ve found with buildings that aren’t completely dilapidated. Besides, it might come in handy living near a Naturopath. They could unknowingly help us when we try to grow our own food.” His eyes get intense. “I won’t keep you in that cave any longer, Hannah. I can’t deprive you of the sunlight you love. This is a risk we have to take.”

A bit reluctantly, I nod my agreement.

I have no choice but to trust Ellister and take his guidance.

We’re stuck here. Even if Ellister were willing to take me back to the farm, he couldn’t do it. I suspected that as soon as I found his flask bone-dry.

“You don’t have any more Glow, do you?” Even though it’s posed as a question, it’s a statement, and Ellister knows what I’m really asking.

His stare is filled with sympathy. “I used the last of it to get Astrid back to her time.”

I knew the confirmation was coming, but something close to claustrophobia tightens my chest because seeing my parents one last time is impossible.

“Come here.” Ellister lifts his arm to invite me in, and I snuggle up to his side. At the physical contact, I get immediate comfort, and I have a feeling I’m going to become seriously codependent and clingy in this relationship. “I can’t replace your family, but together, we can make a new one. We’re going to have a great life. We’re going to flourish with more love than you know what to do with.”

His reassurance does little to quell my grief, but the truth of it is, if I had to choose between him or my parents, he’d win. Every time.

A big part of me believes him when he talks so positively about our future. The other part of me, though... It’s not like

me to be pessimistic, but I can't ignore the whispered doubts in my mind.

And I wonder what the consequences will be if he's wrong.



## CHAPTER 8

### *HANNAH*

I'm getting used to the vortexes. They're disorienting, but Ellister always holds me close during the spiral and he's sure to break my fall with his own body if he can.

Gently rolling me to the ground, he jumps up after our landing. With his hands on his hips in a defensive stance, he scrutinizes the area as if he's checking for danger.

I don't think I've ever seen him so alert. He seems to have an endless supply of energy since we left our mountain crevice.

First, he took me back to the inner cave to collect the few possessions we have. Inside the sleeping bag, we rolled up my fae attire, all our human clothes, and any spare candles. We left some of the blankets behind because the bundle was already big enough.

Next, he brought me to a waterfall deep in the forest where I was able to rehydrate. Apparently, Day Realm water is not only safe to drink, but it's one of the most refreshing beverages in Valora. In addition to filling my belly, I also got to thoroughly clean myself. The water was naturally warm from the suns, and as I stood under the rush, it massaged my scalp.

It would've been a sexy location to mess around, but Ellister was in a hurry to bring me to this house he found for



us.

Once he assesses the area for any threats, he helps me to my feet.

I brush myself off as I stand in the front yard of a farmhouse.

It's more of a cottage, really.

The one-story home is small, with a bumpy stone exterior and wooden shingles. On the left side, there's a chimney, but Ellister told me we shouldn't need fire for heat because there are no seasons here. It's just sunny and warm all the time. On particularly hot days, cooking and boiling water can be done outside in a firepit.

I guess it really is like a permanent camping trip.

The absence of air conditioning is going to take some getting used to. In the meantime, I'll be relying on cool baths to get some relief.

As the sun beats down on us, I imagine the inside of the house is sweltering. We'll need to open the windows immediately. The glass panes are coated with a grimy film and framed with wooden shutters.

Could this feel like home eventually? I think so. Once we make it our own, it'll be cozy.

My lightweight fae slippers feel ridiculously out of place as I step onto the cobblestone path leading up to the front stoop. I realize these shoes match the dress and they're meant for a lady, but they're not practical for outdoor labor of any kind.

Which I'll be doing a lot of.

Grass, weeds, and bushes are overgrown everywhere from years of neglect. They spring up along the side of the house, the split-rail fence lining the property, and the old barn.

Honestly, I can't wait to get my hands dirty.

"Can you get me some boots like yours?" I ask Ellister, envious of his sturdy footwear.

“I suppose I could find some boys’ shoes that might fit you. That would be more conspicuous than your modern sneakers and safer than the slippers.”

“Boys’ shoes?” I repeat. “What, women don’t wear boots?”

“Rarely.”

“Why? Aren’t they allowed to work in Valora?”

“Of course they’re allowed, but they only do it if they must.”

“Well, I *must*,” I emphasize his word choice, “for my own sanity and for the sake of this farm.”

Grinning, Ellister gestures to the chicken coop and the barn. “After cleaning the inside of the house, I think our main focus this week should be repairing the outbuildings.”

Nodding, I study the missing boards and rotted wood. While the house seems to be in decent shape, the chicken coop and the barn are another story. Exposure to the elements has left them worn.

The barn needs the most work. There are holes in the wooden shingles on the roof, and the door looks like it might come off the hinges if it’s swung open too hard.

Still carrying the sleeping bag, Ellister points at the wild yard. “When we have cows, chickens, and goats, all this grass will be trimmed down regularly.”

“Nature’s lawnmower,” I comment. “Where will we get the animals?”

“An auction,” Ellister replies.

I follow behind him as he saunters up the walkway to the door, slightly distracted by how good his butt looks in his khakis because they’re a little tight on him. “Not gonna steal those, too, huh?”

So far, Ellister has been swiping people’s belongings on his outings from the cave. That’s why his pants don’t fit right.

My dress isn't perfect either. The light blue gown I chose from my little collection is beautiful, but it was taken from some unsuspecting noble. A skinnier, taller noble. I've never disliked my average height or size, but waif-like bodies seem to be the norm in Valora, and that's not me.

I might have to learn how to make my own clothes. Or at least how to alter the ones I have.

"I could transport the smaller animals," Ellister muses, staying on topic as he turns the knob and pushes the wooden door open. A cloud of dust puffs out along with some musty air. "But anything over a few hundred pounds wouldn't travel well. They could get injured on impact."

I sigh. "Stealing wasn't a serious suggestion. I get that we're outlaws or whatever, but that doesn't mean we have to live a life of crime. We can be law-abiding citizens."

"That's a nice sentiment, darling, but I'll do what I must to ensure your well-being. You need food."

"Can't we just live off each other?" I'm referring to the blood sharing, and he cuts me a dark look as he stands on the threshold, shadowed by the interior of the house.

"Don't tempt me with that."

Well, he didn't try to say it's not possible. It is. We could.

He disappears inside. When I go in after him, I find myself in a quaint room with an open floor plan and vaulted ceilings being supported by a thick wooden floor-to-ceiling beam.

To my left, there's a sink embedded in butcher block counter tops, but no faucet. When I peer into the basin, there's a drain at the bottom. I peek underneath it, pulling up the faded fabric covering the area. The pipe leads outside where it probably just releases the used water into the yard.

Standing, I glance out the cloudy glass of the window and spy a water pump about twenty feet away.

White ceramic dishes are stacked on shelves instead of being hidden in cabinets. The woodburning stove has a pile of logs next to it like it's ready to be fired up at any moment. A

metal tea kettle sits on one of the burners. To complete the rustic look, a dining table crafted from thick wood sits in the middle of the kitchen.

Two rocking chairs are in the living room, along with a bench seat with red handmade cushions. Not the most comfortable-looking furniture, but I doubt we'll be doing much sitting around anyway.

I spot several cobwebs, and I run my finger over the curved back of one of the dining chairs, collecting dust on my fingertip. The plaster on the walls is cracked and peeling in some places, but nothing is sagging. The wooden floor is flat, indicating a solid foundation.

I can feel Ellister watching me as I walk over to the large window overlooking the backyard where there's a canopy shading the patio. "Where did the owners go?"

"My guess?" He pounds his fist on the wooden beam to test its solidness. Some dust rains down with the disturbance, but the structure seems sound. "They died and didn't have any children to pass the property to. It's a common occurrence with the fae, unfortunately. A woman's fertility window is small, and if a pair isn't a fated match, it's unlikely they'd have children."

"How do you know they didn't just leave? Maybe they moved."

"It's possible, but the only reason a family would uproot is if one of them has a power the royals are interested in utilizing. In that case, they'd be moved to Hailene and elevated to noble status. But that's a very rare occurrence. People living this far away from the royal city are as common as commoners get, and their powers tend to be common as well."

"How far are we from Hailene?"

"Days of travel. The nearest city is Olphene, and that's fifty miles south." Ellister touches some dried-up flowers in a white vase, and the petals are so deteriorated that they

crumble, sprinkling to the end table like dust. “In any case, I don’t think anyone is coming back to claim this place.”

I scan the bare walls. “Is it weird that there are no pictures?”

“No. We don’t have photography here. There are artists who paint portraits, but it’s very expensive, and the average family wouldn’t have the money for it. I’ll tell you what...” Ellister comes up behind me. Since he dumped our stuff on one of the chairs, his arms are free, and he wraps them around me. “When we have children, we’ll have them draw all kinds of pictures, and we’ll frame them.”

Having kids isn’t something Ellister and I have discussed, but it’s not off the table. I want babies someday. I want the whole family experience—the one I didn’t think I’d get to have while I was dying.

And once we’re gone, our kids can keep the farm going.

I think of my own parents and how they’d wanted our farm to go to me. That’s no longer an option now that they think I’m dead.

It was a mistake for them to assume I’d outlive them. I’d always wished for a sibling when I was growing up, but they’d insisted one child was all they wanted. They should’ve had other kids. At least then I wouldn’t feel this awful guilt for leaving. Not like it was my choice, but still. I wish they had someone else to fall back on.

With my dad being an only child and my mom estranged from her family, their choices are limited.

I guess they could sell, but I don’t think they will.

Now that I know selling to Ellister was just a farce my dad never intended to follow through with, I’m assuming my parents will work until they’re wrinkled and gray. Until their fingers get warped with arthritis and their bodies won’t let them anymore.

Maybe Cody could run the farm someday. He’s not great with the physical labor aspect, but his organization skills are unbeatable.

Honestly, thinking about the whole thing is a downer. It's probably best if I put it out of my mind for a while.

Turning in Ellister's arms, I look up at his handsome face. Behind him, there are two open doorways. One leads to a bathroom. The other, a bedroom.

One bedroom.

The mattress is covered by a modest patchwork quilt, the colors faded by years of use and washing.

My mood lifts a little when I realize Ellister and I will be sharing a bed from now on. I imagine the two of us on the soft surface together. Comfortable. Safe. Free to explore each other for countless hours.

We won't have anywhere to be. No time constraints. No intrusions.

This isn't the future I always envisioned for myself. But maybe it's better.

We could be happy here. Our own little paradise.

A paradise where we fuck. A lot.



## CHAPTER 9

### *HANNAH*

When we got started on the house, Ellister and I easily agreed we should conceal any trace of human gear, so one of the first things we did was put our stuff on the top shelf of the closet, out of sight.

I'm fully immersing myself in the Valora ways of life, and if that means using what the house comes with, so be it.

Whoever lived here before, they were simple folks. The woman of the house was closer to my size, and she left behind some clothes I can wear. Unfortunately, none of them are pants. I'll have to learn to like the dresses until I can figure something else out.

I'm actually a fan of the nightgown I'm wearing. I'm not sure what it's made of, but it has a silky texture and a strange cooling effect. It'll be nice to sleep in.

Although, I don't plan on wearing it for long—I'm completely naked under here because I've been hoping to seduce Ellister at some point.

"You've got amazing stamina for a human," he remarks as I help him put the clean sheets back on the bed.

"For a human?" I roll my eyes at the backhanded compliment.

“I’m just saying, I don’t think anyone else could’ve kept up with me today.”

I beg to differ. My mom could’ve. Dad, too. And Jack.

That’s just how it’s been every day of my life. There’s shit to do, you do it.

And there’s so much shit. There’s been a lot of scrubbing, wiping, and good old-fashioned elbow grease.

Every surface in the house has been dusted or mopped. The dishes have been rinsed off and set back where they belong. All the clothes, towels, and blankets we found have been laundered and hung on the line outside to dry.

I almost feel like we shouldn’t be going to bed yet, but there’s a special Day Realm sundial in the yard, so we know it’s almost midnight.

The lawn remains a mess, but Ellister is determined to get those animals for me sooner rather than later. He said the auctions and street markets happen all the time in the city, so we’re going to have to figure out when and how to get there. Traveling to Olphene won’t be a problem—we’ll just vortex to a remote place on the outskirts of town. Returning, however, might be a challenge. We’ll have too much stuff to bring back the magical way, which means we’ll need to get a wagon and horses to cart the load of whatever we buy. When all is said and done, the trip could take up to a week.

But before we can do that, we need to get the barn and coop in working order. And, of course, we’ll need money to purchase that many supplies. According to Ellister, they use gold, silver, and jewels as currency here. None of which we have.

He hasn’t come straight out and said it, but he’s totally going to ransack some rich person’s house for valuables. While he’s changed a lot since meeting me, he’s still a rascal. In some ways, he’s even more dangerous than he was before. Because when it comes to me, he’ll break any law necessary to ensure my happiness.



I can tell how badly he wants to make this farm a success for me.

I keep telling him I don't mind living off the land for a while, and he happens to be an amazing hunter.

Before dinner, I got to watch him in action.

He brought me into the woods near the house, showed me the hive he found, and pointed out a couple different types of berries that are safe to eat.

Then he had me sit a good distance away against a tree while he crouched in some tall grass. Waiting. When a chicken-sized bird flew by, he created a vortex and sucked the unsuspecting creature right into his hands. Within seconds, he snapped its neck and started walking back my way with our freshly caught meal.

Efficient.

After getting the firepit going on the back patio, we roasted the bird and ate together. It was nice and quiet. Calm and peaceful. I'm looking forward to more evenings like that. Just Ellister and me and nature.

As I smooth the quilt down along the end of the mattress, my stomach growls loudly, giving away the fact that I'm still hungry.

Ellister straightens from where he's fluffing a pillow and frowns. "You didn't eat enough."

I shrug. "I just have some catching up to do. I missed a few meals."

"I starved you in that cave." His words are heavy with self-loathing.

"Not intentionally. Most of us fragile humans require breakfast, lunch, and dinner, plus snacks."

"Snacks," he parrots, looking stressed as he glances out the doorway to the kitchen cabinets. "There's nothing here, Hannah."

It's true. He searched the house from top to bottom, trying to find anything edible the previous owners might've preserved and stored, like dehydrated meats or nuts. We came across some old food in ceramic pots, but whatever it used to be, it was dried up, brown, and unrecognizable.

Ellister starts for the bedroom door. "I'll go somewhere. Perhaps some more ice berries would be nice."

He can't leave me. Not again. Not when I have sexy plans.

Aside from the fact that I want to have my way with him, I don't like how he's risking himself every time he travels.

I stop him by grabbing his wrist. "Don't go. I can't explain it, but I feel... panicked when I think about being apart from you."

His gaze softens. "There's a pond nearby. Do you like fish? You could come with me."

"I'm tired." And I really am. Although I might have more stamina than the average person, as Ellister so nicely pointed out, I'm not invincible. "Let's just go to bed."

He gives me a skeptical look with a raised eyebrow. "You mean to tell me we're going straight to sleep?"

Biting my lip, I honestly mumble, "No."

I really should practice telling the truth from now on if I'm going to eventually become fae. Plus, I don't want to lie to him. He'd know I'm full of shit anyway as soon as we lie down and I maul him.

I might be exhausted but not so much that I don't have the energy to fuck.

I want Ellister. All of him. Dirty sex. Every single way we can think of.

I don't care that we're moving too fast or that our relationship began with a ton of red flags. Being with Ellister is the most natural thing I've ever done. We've spent less than a week together, yet the deepest part of me recognizes him as mine. Our connection is ancient and solid, a bond that was predetermined over five-hundred-thousand years ago.

Ellister is the constant of my existence.

My soul mate.

The room is so quiet as he stares at me with unfiltered lust. Our pocket watches tick in unison, just like our hearts.

As I grip his wrist, I can feel how his pulse is synced up with mine. My finger is right over the puncture marks from earlier, and my gaze drops to the hickey, purple and oval shaped.

Another rumble comes from my stomach.

“You’re after my blood,” Ellister accuses in a mock-dramatic way.

I can’t even pretend to deny it. Because his assumption is correct.

Along with thoughts of sex, his blood has been on my mind all day. I’ve been craving it. Consuming him gave me a sort of high. I’ve never been so satisfied before, and I know it was the same for him.

Flirtatiously toying with the ribbon lacing up the material over my breasts, I look up at his face. “So?”

Ellister’s muscles are tense, and his breathing quickens. “You just had it this morning.”

“You said it yourself—once wouldn’t be enough. Tell me you haven’t been thinking about it.”

“It’s going to become a habit with us.” The way he says it has more acceptance than objection.

“You don’t sound surprised or opposed to it.”

He lets out a defeated sigh. “We both know it’s inevitable.”

“I’m glad you see reason. I was willing to do some convincing, but now we can just skip to the good part.”

“The good part?”

“Have I mentioned I’m a very good multitasker?”

“I’ve noticed.”

“Well, I figure this can be a two-birds-one-stone sort of deal. What would be better than drinking from each other and having sex at the same time?”

“Feeding during sex...” Ellister warns. “Combining the two... We’d be wandering into dangerous territory.”

“What kind of danger?”

“If we do it our first time, every other time after could fall short in comparison.”

“I don’t care,” I state recklessly.

This is our world. Our little slice of heaven. No one can make the rules for us here.

Stepping back, I put enough distance between us to tug at the ribbon cinching the neck of my nightgown. The bow comes undone, the fabric loosens, and it slips off my shoulders. My nipples are so stiff, it gets caught on them, hanging there and prolonging the suspense.

I wiggle, and the material falls.

When my breasts are revealed, Ellister sucks in a breath.

Although we’ve messed around and we’ve been in intimate situations, he’s never seen me topless, let alone completely naked.

Daylight spills in through the curtains, even though it’s the middle of the night. There’s something erotic about standing completely nude in a brightly lit room in front of Ellister. It’s raw and exciting. New.

When I look at him looking at me, there’s so much love and lust in his eyes as he admires my body.

He reaches for me like we’re magnetized, his arms going around me. Gripping my waist, he yanks me closer.

Dipping his head, he sniffs my neck, running his nose along my skin. His lips skim my pulse point, but he doesn’t bare his teeth.

After pressing a soft kiss to my tendon, he lets his mouth linger there. Teasing me.

I'm shaking from how badly I want him to bite me.

I lightly punch his shoulder, and I feel his lips spread with a smile because he knows exactly what he's doing to me.

Playfully walking his fingers up my back, he stops between my shoulder blades before moving back down. As he drags his nails on either side of my spine, I shiver and grab fistfuls of his shirt to keep myself from falling.

Nerve endings are igniting all over my body, lighting me up with chills and a buzzing sensation. I feel him everywhere. In my mind—it's like my brain is tingling. In my heart—I think it might burst because it's so full in my chest. In my fingers, toes, and even my eyelashes—each little part of me is vibrating.

“Do you feel that, too?” I whisper against his chest, my lips just an inch away from where his shirt is partly unbuttoned.

Deciding to do some torturing of my own, I lick his exposed skin.

Ellister shudders. “I always feel you, even when we're not touching. Just a glance from you can make my insides boil.”

Glad I'm not the only one.

When Ellister slides his hands from my back to my front, he trails over my lower stomach and traces my belly button before going up. Cupping my breasts with his warm palms, he releases a ragged exhale as he runs his thumbs over my tight nipples.

“These tits, Hannah. Such perfect tits.”

Something inside my abdomen swoops, and the heat between my legs becomes almost painful.

My pocket watch stops ticking. A few seconds later, so does his. Earlier, we'd wound them up at the same time, so I'm not surprised they gave out simultaneously.

“Do you want me to...” Ellister toys with my clock, but I shake my head before he can finish his question.

“I don’t want you to restart it. Not now. Maybe not ever again.”

He cocks his head as he gives me a scrutinizing look. “Why?”

“It’s a reminder of my old life.”

I want to let go.

Let go of my attachment to the world I used to know, to the home I still long for.

It might take weeks, months, or years for me to stop missing the Earth realm, but moments like this help. If I can look to the future with Ellister, I might forget about the farm-shaped hole in my heart.

Ellister fiddles with the watch some more. “What if we were to give it a new meaning?”

“Like what?”

“Objects of commitment.” At my confused look, he goes on to explain, “All fated pairs have them. Couples exchange important items as a token of their love, along with a very special promise. It’s like getting married in your world... but more.”

I nod. “I like the sound of that.”

“Then let’s do it.”

“Now?”

“Now.”

“Once we complete this ritual...” Realizing I could be undressing him while we talk, I start with the buttons on his shirt. “We’ll be bonded for real, right?”

Earlier, while we were scrubbing the floor in the living room, Ellister gave me a crash course on the fae. He’d explained the soul mate bond and how once a fated pair has sex, their souls are forever entwined. It’s deeper than any other worldly connection. You feel it on a physical level.

From that moment on, you sense that person as if they're a part of you. Because they are.

Ellister's voice is filled with regret when he responds, "Remember, I don't have a soul."

"Does that mean we'll never be fully connected?" Getting to his pants, I unfasten them, hook my fingers into his boxers, and drag them down until his hard cock bobs in the air.

Free and unrestrained, his erection pokes my stomach as his clothes pool around his ankles.

"I don't see how we could be. Your soul won't have anything to attach itself to." Unable to stop his hands from wandering, Ellister explores my body with whisper-soft caresses. Reverent and worshiping, like he can't believe I'm real. Like touching me too hard might make me evaporate into thin air. "I honestly don't know what it will feel like for us. It might be just as we are now. Does that disappoint you?"

I consider my answer carefully.

The truth is, I want the bond with Ellister. It sounds magical.

I want our love to transcend logic and reason.

But I also don't want to make him feel less-than for something he can't change.

"Ellister, what I do know is that I've never experienced what we have before," I state confidently as I run my finger down his abs. "Even if it never gets better than this, it'll be more than enough. *You're* enough."

Intense emotion glimmers in his pale eyes. "Hannah, you're a saint."

"I absolutely am not." I give him a naughty grin. "And I'm about to show you just how unsaintly I can be."



## CHAPTER 10

### *HANNAH*

Ellister scoops me up. Gripping my waist, he lifts me, and my legs wind around him.

My pussy, already slick, presses against the hard—and very large—erection smashed between us.

My center throbs. The emptiness is almost torturous. I'm actually in pain from the absence of him.

I want him inside me. Want the stretch. The pressure.

When we fall to the mattress, Ellister places his hand behind my head so I land gently, but that's the end of his carefulness.

His lips connect with mine hard enough to bruise.

Then he starts impatiently tugging at the chain of my pocket watch. "Get this blasted thing off and give it to me."

"Bossy much?" I quip, lifting my head so he can get remove it.

His eyes are wild and unfocused when he sends an apologetic grimace my way. "Can you feel it? The pull of the bond? How demanding it is? It's making me crazy. If I don't get my cock into your cunt right this second, I might die."

Scandalized, I gasp at the crude word. "You're not supposed to call it that."



“What?” He chuckles darkly. “Cunt?”

“Yeah. It’s... dirty.”

“We do a lot of things we’re not supposed to, darling. I think my affection for your cunt is the least of our indiscretions.”

Can’t argue with that.

I also can’t disagree with the primal urging of the bond. Ellister might not have a soul, but our connection is tangible, and it wants us to be together in every way.

The desire inside me becomes more painful.

“Just fuck me already,” I respond breathlessly, digging my ankles into his ass to press our bodies closer. “We can worry about the ceremony later.”

“No,” Ellister growls. “For once in my life, I’m going to do something right.”

He reaches for his own watch, and after he’s got both in his hands, he switches them.

Placing his chain over my head, he puts mine over his.

He swallows hard as he looks at the watch resting in the hollow of my throat, and his voice takes on a formal note as he recites, “From dawn ‘til dusk, from dusk ‘til dawn, I’ll never love another. Hannah Wildwood, these ancient words have been uttered by countless couples since the early days of my people. It means my love for you will be as constant as the rotating suns, as long-lasting as the stars and moons, and as infinite as the Endless Sea surrounding the land.”

The happiness welling in my chest makes it hard to breathe. “Do I have to say all that, too?”

Ellister smiles tenderly. “No, just the first part.”

After he repeats the promise to me again, I say it back to him.

Then it’s done.

We’re married.

We don't have time to be sentimental about it, though, because it's like the bond has a life of its own, and it knows we're getting closer to giving in.

Ellister hooks a hand under my thigh.

As he spreads me wide, his cock finds its way to my entrance without any effort.

"It's going to be a long night," he says gruffly, hiking my leg higher.

The need in his voice makes me quiver, and I want to goad him. Push him to madness. I lightly tweak his nipples, making him groan.

"Is that supposed to be a warning?" I taunt in a whisper.

"Just a fact."

He pushes forward. Hard.

My amusement is wiped away by pain and pleasure, and I cry out as his huge cock meets the resistance of a body that isn't used to someone his size.

But he doesn't let up. He increases his efforts to get inside me by gripping my hips and ramming his cock in again.

His thick head alone is enough to make me feel like I'm being split in two, and I can't help squealing and kicking once his length is buried halfway.

"You can take it, darling," he encourages roughly, spreading me inch by inch as he pulls back and pushes in a third time.

Moaning, I nod. "Don't stop. Keep going."

An animalistic impulse is taking over as I mentally will my body to let him all the way in, and I lift my knees up.

On Ellister's next thrust, I rock my hips to help the process along. When he hits my cervix, I let out a raspy shout as I toss my head back.

His pelvis is flush with mine, and my clit is pressed against the tuft of dark curls around his base.

We both freeze for a moment, just relishing in the way it feels to be locked together.

“Open your eyes,” Ellister commands. “Look at me.”

I didn't even realize my eyes had been shut until he said something, and when I do what he wants, uniting my stare with his, an emotion I can't name rolls through me.

An emotion so strong, it makes my heart stutter.

Laying a hand over the middle of my chest, Ellister feels the uneven beat. Then he takes my hand and places it in the same spot on him.

The off-kilter rhythm is the same.

I've spent almost every minute of today wanting to jump his bones. The number of times I've thought about fucking him is outrageous.

But making love is a completely different matter.

We're about to do both at the same time.

“Everything, Hannah,” Ellister rasps, hovering over me until his face is so close to mine the tips of our noses brush. “Everything.”

The corners of my mouth curl up with a smile at his way of saying I love you. I like that he shortened it to one word, and I'm also thankful he's able to articulate what it is I'm feeling.

What he and I have isn't just love.

It's everything.

Suddenly, my pussy gushes around his cock, like my body knows it's about to go on a wild ride, and it's getting ready.

Taking my hands in his, Ellister pins them on the mattress on either side of my head. Then he starts to move. Slowly at first. Undulating his hips, he runs his nose along the side of my neck, leaving light fluttery kisses along the way.

With my heels pressing into his backside, I can feel each flex of his ass when he rolls against me. He's not pulling out

very far, and he's so deep, he's massaging my G-spot over and over again.

His kisses become rougher. He licks my jaw, and I turn my head to the side, offering my neck. When his sharp fangs graze my skin, I gasp at the mental image of him biting me while his body rocks over mine.

I want that so bad it hurts.

Ellister lifts his head. Clenching his jaw, he examines my face for a second before nodding once, seeming to come to a decision. "We'll drink from each other, but you go first."

He reaches over to the nightstand and pulls out a drawer. The object he removes from it isn't what someone would expect to be brought in during sex.

Where I'm from, someone introduces a two-pronged poker in the middle of fucking, you run.

Instead, excitement flares through me because I know what it's for.

Raising an eyebrow, I accuse, "You had the audacity to act like I was crazy for wanting this, when you planned for it all along."

Smirking, he shrugs like he's both innocent and guilty.

He shows no apprehension as he brings the sharp points to the side of his neck and pricks the skin. The poker falls to the floor with a clatter while blood leaks from the shallow wounds.

Lowering his head next to mine, he demands, "Suck."

I do.

I close my lips around the bleeding area, and, oh... the bliss. My fingernails dig into Ellister's back as I drink him down, and I make sounds of complete ecstasy in between pulls.

It's satiating. It's sweet. It's what I need right now.

He starts moving again, not holding back as he pounds into me. He lets out a feral sound when he plunges his cock deep

enough to hurt, and I spread my thighs wider, encouraging him to do it again.

He doesn't disappoint. He's fucking me so hard, our bodies are slapping together.

As he speeds up, my whimpers come faster, get louder. A heatwave rushes over my skin, making me sweat.

Breaking away from his neck, I turn my head to the side and offer him mine. "Me next. Bite me."

I get no argument from Ellister. Baring his teeth, he dives for me. When his fangs pierce me, I shriek as I squirm beneath him.

Ellister's right. Exchanging blood takes sex to heights I never thought I could reach. I didn't know it was possible to feel so alive until now.

Tingles race out from the spot where he's drinking from me with loud slurping. My warm blood runs down my neck, soaking into the sheets we just cleaned. We'll have to wash them again tomorrow.

Maybe Ellister's always a messy eater. This morning in the mountain crevice, I'd assumed he was sloppy because he was paralyzed. But maybe this is just how he is when he's enthusiastic, and that turns me on even more. I like how he's so uninhibited.

A colossal orgasm is approaching.

It's building and building, and I don't just feel it in my pussy.

Every cell of my body is in on it, synchronized.

Little spasms flutter in my core, and I tell it to slow down.

I don't want to come yet, but I don't think I can control it. Pleasure is barreling toward me like a snowball down a mountain.

Apparently, Ellister's in the same boat because he rumbles out a frustrated sound against my skin before releasing the

latch he has on my neck. “I can’t—I can’t hold off. I’m not going to last long. Hannah, your little cunt is heaven.”

That dirty word.

I actually like it, and I like that I’m making him lose control.

Just to make it even harder for him, I start to move my body under his. I meet him, thrust for thrust, and I’m rewarded when he moans, “You fucking brat.”

I like it when he calls me a brat, too.

I giggle, but my laughter is cut off when he fucks me harder. My smile fades, my toes curl, and my eyes slam shut as something inside him unleashes. Something wild.

I thought he was going full throttle before. I was wrong.

He has to hook an arm under my back to keep me from moving up the mattress because he’s slamming into me with so much force.

Every time Ellister drives his cock into me, my pussy gets wetter. I’m so soaked, we can hear it. The squelching sounds in the silent room are ridiculously erotic.

He smashes his lips against mine.

When one of his fangs scrapes my tongue and he sucks on the blood leaking out, I’m done for.

The orgasm hits me, sudden and strong.

I scream into Ellister’s mouth as my inner walls contract around his thick cock. My pussy clamps down mercilessly, so strongly, he almost gets pushed from my body. He grunts at the abrupt resistance and roots himself deep.

I feel his cock jerk inside me, then I’m filled with his warmth as he gets off right along with me.

I thought I would come for five or ten seconds—the usual for me.

But the orgasm keeps going and going.

My eyes are closed. All my muscles are locked up. I can barely breathe.

Is there a record for the longest orgasm in history? Because I think I'm beating it.

As the spasms finally fade to some pleasant flutters, I swear I sense a shift in the universe. A change in the atmosphere. A rise in electricity.

Flashes dance behind my eyelids.

At first, I think I've been fucked so good I'm seeing stars, but then Ellister issues a command.

"Look, Hannah. Do you see what's happening?"

When I open my eyes, I'm shocked to see sparks in the air. Like tiny fireworks, they're exploding all around Ellister's head.

Afraid we somehow started a housefire, I squeak out a scared noise.

With a slight shake of his head, Ellister gives me a tight smile. "Do not fear. This is the mate bond solidifying."

"I thought we wouldn't have a real bond?" I ask, confused.

Ellister's grin gets wider. "Neither did I, but I think my soul is coming back to me. Somehow, some way, it's coming back."



## CHAPTER 11

### *ELLISTER*

My soul. My spirit. The very essence of my being—I feel it click into place while I’m still buried deep inside Hannah’s cunt. I’m stretching her to the limit as my cock pulses with a few aftershocks, emptying every drop of my seed into her snug channel.

I’m not sure which is better, the orgasm or the returning of my soul. Having both happen at the same time is certainly unlike anything I’ve ever felt before.

And not only is my soul back, but it’s clean and untainted. It’s as pure as it was the day I was born, before I could ever fathom telling a lie or breaking a promise.

It’s been renewed.

I’d heard finding your mate leads to soul restoration; each half of the whole comes together to make something new.

I just never considered it a possibility for me because I thought my soul was out of reach forever.

For the first time since my early years, I’m fulfilled on every level.

Body, mind, and spirit are aligned perfectly. My cock is spent, my belly is full of Hannah’s blood, and the joy I feel is indescribable.



As Hannah pants against my lips, I sense her physical satisfaction and her happiness through our tether.

We're as connected as mates should be.

Breathing hard and sweaty, I bask in the moment, placing lazy kisses on her mouth.

"Ellister," she says with wonder, touching my cheek. "I can feel you inside me. Not *inside me*, inside me. In my heart. We're-we're..."

"Bonded," I finish for her, unable to stop smiling. "Like true mates."

"But you said—"

"I know. I thought my soul was gone for good. Vaeront told me there was no way for me to ever get it from him, but he lied. That bastard... That's why he was so opposed to us being together in the Lost Land. He knew if we completed the bond, my soul would be wiped clean and returned to me. He'd no longer own me because *you* do."

"That sketchy asshole," Hannah fumes.

I grin warmly at her ire. "Doesn't matter now, darling. We've won."

Unfortunately, I don't have time to celebrate the monumental moment.

Another side effect of completing the mate bond is extremely heightened power, and a vortex starts forming before I can even think about trying to stop it.

Hannah sees the air swirling behind me and mirrors the panicked look on my face. "Ellister?"

"My power will be temporarily amplified," I explain quickly, slipping my cock out of her wet heat to grab my pants.

Wherever I'm going, I'm not doing it naked. I stab one leg in at a time, the vortex growing behind me, creating wind in the small bedroom. The curtains rustle about, and some papers on the little work desk fly to the floor.

“Amplified, like you can’t stop it?” Hannah asks, her voice high and tight as she realizes I’m going to be taken from her.

I rack my brain for knowledge about fated mate bonds, but it’s murky. Damn it. I should’ve paid more attention to this shit.

“I think it should only last for twelve hours or so,” I tell her. “But I’m afraid I’m going to be making a few jumps, whether I want to or not. Honestly, it feels similar to Glow ingestion.”

“I’m coming with you,” Hannah firmly states, swinging her legs off the mattress like she’s ready to throw herself into the vortex with me.

I won’t argue.

I don’t want to leave her. Not ever, but especially not now when our connection is so fresh.

“Your nightgown.” I glance around for her discarded clothing because I’m certainly not letting her go out nude either.

Grabbing the bloody bedsheet, she wraps it around herself.

Good enough.

The suction is getting stronger now, and I hold onto the short wooden post at the end of the bedframe to keep myself in place. Hannah comes over to grip my arm as if she can hold me back, but her efforts are futile. Soon, we’ll be flung into the abyss, and the first place—or time—I think of is where we’ll end up.

“Where will we go?” she asks.

I get an idea.

Probably a dumb one.

This burst of power might be the only opportunity I’ll ever have to give Hannah what she’s asked for over and over again—the one thing she won’t ever be a hundred percent herself without.

Closure. A final goodbye with her parents. One last look at her home.

“If I could take you to see your parents, would you be willing to risk that we might not be able to get back?” I ask the question so fast, all the words run together.

Hannah’s eyes widen with hope. “Wait. What? You’re taking me home? You can do that?”

Glancing behind me, I look at the depth and speed of the vortex. This one’s got some kick to it, and I have no doubts that it will allow me to travel through time.

At least once.

“I’m positive I can get us there, but there’s a chance I won’t be able to bring us back. I just don’t know. It would be a huge gamble, but you must decide fast.”

Squealing with joy, she flings her arms around my torso and beams up at me like I put the suns in the sky. “I trust you. Let’s do it.”

I let go of the bedframe.

Within a second, we’re falling. Tumbling. Twirling.

I think of the farm in the weeks before I abducted her, when she was oblivious to my existence and her future. I picture the sunshine, the meadow, and the cheerful sound of birds chirping in the morning.

After several long moments of being tossed this way and that, the vortex spits us out and I turn my body so I’m the one getting the impact. The wind is temporarily knocked from me when my back lands on the grass. Hannah’s weight presses down on me, but she’s unharmed, and that’s all that matters.

It takes a second for her to clear her head of the disorientation, but once she does, she gasps and looks around at the place she knows so well.

“Ellister.” She laughs, ecstatic. “You did it. You really did it. What’s the exact date?”

“Not sure. It’s June, about a month before I took you.”

She sits up, still straddling me, and she smooths her hair. “So there’s another me running around. I’ll need to be careful. If I run into myself, we’ll be in big trouble.”

She’s right. More than one type of risk is involved with this trip. Aside from the fact that we might have trouble returning to the past, Hannah must not come into contact with the other version of herself. I can’t even begin to speculate what consequences that interaction would have.

“How do you know so much about time travel?” I ask.

“Um, *Back to the Future*.” Throwing her hand out, she says it like it’s common knowledge.

“Yes, I suppose we are... back... to the future.”

She giggles. “It’s a movie, Ellister.”

“Ah.” The moving pictures. That’s one amenity of this world that I’ll always feel like I’m missing out on.

Hannah points east, toward the end of the meadow. “The sun hasn’t risen above the trees yet, so right now I’m probably feeding the chickens. We’ll hide in the woods behind the shed until I spot myself and make sure I’m busy. Then I’ll go find my parents while I’m occupied elsewhere.”

My smart, stubborn, tenacious woman. She’s prepared for this. Even though I told her it would never happen, she already has a plan formed.

When I sit up with her, I’m reminded of the day in the meadow when she died in my arms. We’d been in this exact position, not too far from this very spot. Just like she was then, she’s in a cloth wrapping with her blood on it.

But the circumstances are so different now.

Hannah’s healthy.

We have a long, hopefully prosperous, future ahead of us.

“I’ll stay out of sight,” I add to her strategy. “And I’ll wait for you to get back. Be quick and don’t spout off goodbyes. We don’t want anything about your visit with your parents to

stand out as peculiar. They must not suspect anything is about to change. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Hannah’s face turns worried, studying the air behind me. “You won’t leave without me, will you?”

“Never. The jump took quite a bit of my energy. My power is in check.”

My stores are still pretty high. I could form a large vortex if I wanted to, but it’s manageable. I’m in control.

“Thank you for this, Ellister.” Hannah plants three quick kisses on my mouth. “Thank you, thank you.”

Excited, she jumps to her feet, then tugs me up with her. Taking my hand, she runs for the woods.

We speed past the wildflowers, take refuge under the shade of the trees, and dart behind the shed.

Good feelings come over me as I glance about the familiar area.

I understand Hannah’s grief about leaving the farm. There’s something magical about this place. Perhaps it’s because of the bargain. The property was obtained by mystical means, so maybe people can sense the wonder of that.

It definitely made an impression on me.

Although the time Hannah and I had here was short, and despite it ending badly, the memories we have will last forever. Our first dance. Our first kiss. The attraction, our conversations, and the journey we took after her death.

I treasure every moment and being back to where it all happened makes me a bit sentimental.

It’s too bad we couldn’t have settled in the human realm. The short lifespan and lack of fae-ness doesn’t bother me. In fact, I think I would’ve enjoyed such a mundane existence.

But there’s no point to dwelling on what cannot be.

It doesn’t take Hannah long to spot herself.

“There.” Looking at the familiar form in jeans and a T-shirt, her face is fascinated as she watches Hannah Number Two make her way to the barn, bucket in hand. “I’ll be getting the feed, heading for the chicken yard, and then I’ll collect the eggs. That should give me a good twenty-minute window to talk to my parents.”

“Do you know where they are?” I ask.

“Having coffee in their kitchen,” she replies confidently. “Their routine is always the same.”

Since my pants are still hanging open in the front, I button them while being very aware of our state of undress. Neither of us have shoes. Sticks and twigs dig into the soles of my bare feet. If I had a shirt, I’d put it around Hannah’s shoulders, but alas, I do not.

I scan the bedsheet covering her body. “You can’t go in there wearing this.”

She glances down. “Very true. You’re pretty good about getting to indoor locations, right?”

“If I know the space well, yes.”

“You remember my bedroom?”

Visions of the day I buttoned her jeans for her come to mind. I didn’t know it then, but the pull between us was the soul mate bond. I recall how hard my cock became just from being near her.

“I’ll never forget it,” I respond honestly.

Smiling like she knows where my thoughts are at, Hannah requests, “Take me there? I’ll put on some clothes.”



## CHAPTER 12

### *HANNAH*

My parents are as predictable as can be, and I don't have any trouble locating them.

Sitting at the table with the weekly newspaper, my dad sips coffee from his favorite mug. It's oversized, and it has a picture of me at the zoo on it. I got it for him for Father's Day when I was nine.

From outside the back door, I can hear my mom humming as she moves around the kitchen. She still has on her usual PJs of loose drawstring pants and a mismatched T-shirt. Her hair is up in a messy bun, and as she walks behind my dad, she flirtatiously tickles the back of his neck.

Usually, I'd let myself right in, but it almost feels like I should knock. My life has changed so much.

*I've changed.*

Knowing if I knock it would just raise suspicions, I turn the knob and open the door. Both my parents smile at me and say good morning.

The scent of bacon lingers in the air, and I can hear the meat sizzling in the cast iron pan on the stove. The cinnamon candle my mom always burns is lit on the granite counter next to the toaster, adding to the aroma.

Yellow-and-white checkered curtains frame the window over the farmhouse sink, and the morning sun shines in on a stack of dirty baking bowls with remnants of biscuit dough clinging to the stainless steel.

Oh, to have my mom's buttermilk biscuits one more time. With honey slathered on top.

The timer above the stove reads two minutes left, and inside the oven, I can see the almost-done biscuits on the baking tray.

As she looks at me, my mom tilts her head as a concerned crease appears between her eyebrows. "What's wrong?"

Uh oh. Can she see my sadness? I'm trying really hard to keep a neutral expression.

"Wrong?" I try to sound as innocent as possible. "Why would something be wrong?"

I rapidly take stock of myself; the outfit I chose was as close to the one I saw myself wearing. My hair is down and draped over my neck, covering the fang marks and hickeys from Ellister's feeding.

Mom's gaze drops to my empty hands. "Where are the eggs?"

"Oh." I sag with a relieved breath while trying to come up with a quick explanation of why I arrived without the full bucket like I do every single morning. "I just wanted to say hi," I blurt out dumbly, wincing because *oh my God. Could I be any more obvious?*

They give me an odd look but they don't call me out on it. And because I've already made it weird and I'm on a time limit, I go over to where my dad is sitting and hug his shoulders from behind.

He chuckles as he pats my hand. "What's that for?"

"I just love you, that's all."

"And what about me?" Mom pretends to be offended while propping a hand on her hip.



Good. She's asking for a hug I was already planning on giving her, so it shouldn't be awkward.

And I do just that, following up with an I-love-you.

As the embrace comes to an end, Mom pets my hair twice like she always does.

The oven timer beeps three times, signaling that the biscuits are done.

After my mom slips on her mitts and removes the tray, my mouth waters as the smell wafts up. Before I even have to ask, she's turning to smile at me. "You want to take some of these?"

"Absolutely."

She generously places four biscuits in a little basket lined by a red-checkered cloth. In the middle, she adds a tiny sample jar of our honey, then she folds the cloth over to cover all of it to keep the warmth in.

Everything she does is executed with so much love, whether it's a hug, or a fundraiser, or a basket of biscuits.

"There you go." As she passes it to me, I loop my arm through the handle while trying not to become a sobbing mess.

I need to leave. I'll definitely cry if I stay much longer.

"Thanks," I manage, clearing my clogging throat.

Reaching for my mom's hand, I take hold of it, then I place my other palm on my dad's shoulder.

For a few seconds, I let myself soak up the moment—the last time I'll ever be with my family.

"I just... I want you guys to know that you're the best." I try to fight off the rising emotion in my too-full chest. "I was thinking about how lucky I am recently, and you deserve to hear how great you are. You've dedicated your lives to me, and that hasn't gone unnoticed. I appreciate all of it."

"Oh." Mom lays a hand over her heart like she's touched, and my dad's face gets all red the way it does whenever someone gives him a genuine compliment.

“Thanks, Hannah,” Dad says gruffly, a little choked up from my contagious emotional display. “But we’re the lucky ones.”

That’s what he’d said to me in the hospital before I died. He meant it then and he means it now.

Devastation flays me wide open when I think about what’s to come for them—within a month or so, they’ll find me dead in the meadow.

What’s tragic is, they were always going to lose me, no matter what. And just like during my illness, I take comfort in the fact that they still have each other.

“I’ll go get those eggs, okay?” I excuse myself. “Be right back.”

Stopping in the open doorway, I blink rapidly as I grin at them one more time.

Then I haul ass off the back porch. The flip-flops I stole from my own closet slap against my feet as I dash away. Holding back a sob, I head in the direction of my cabin. Back to Ellister.

A couple unstoppable tears fall down my cheeks on the way, but the closer to I get to Ellister, the better I feel. Once I’m near the cabins, I slow to a walk while keeping a look out for Jack or anyone else who might see me.

Thankfully, there’s no one around.

Walking by the side of my house, I see Ellister pacing anxiously through my bedroom window.

I stop and take a second to look at him. The longer hair on top of his head is a mess because he keeps raking his hand through it. He’s still shirtless, the puncture marks on his neck red and scabbing over.

As if he senses me, he halts and turns his head toward me. His eyes land on me like he could feel me watching him. Like he can tell that I’m near.

Of course he can.

Just as I can sense his presence.

I could always feel him before, but our connection is different now. Stronger. Tangible. Through the bond, I can actually calculate the feet between us with my eyes closed.

It's amazing to me that his soul is back. That our love is more powerful than Vaeront's magic—it's what I wanted but was too scared to hope for.

Impatient, Ellister frantically motions for me to meet him at the back door where I slipped out before.

As soon as I'm inside the house, he's right there to greet me with a tight hug.

I squeeze him back.

He inhales through his nose. "What's that amazing smell?"

"Breakfast," I reply.

I lift my arm with the basket a little, but I'm not willing to let him go yet. I hated being away from him, even if it was for just a few minutes.

"I just want to stay like this. Together. All the time." I hold him tighter. "You're not allowed to do anything without me. Going to the bathroom? Hunting? You're going to have to figure out how to do it with me plastered to you."

He chuckles. "Your desires are natural, darling."

"It's supposed to be like this?" I murmur against the skin of his bare chest, getting light-headed from the intoxicating scent of him.

"Intense?" he asks, sounding amused. "Yes. Being together will give us a constant sense of euphoria. In fact, being apart for long periods would make us ill. It could even kill us eventually."

"Is it this way for all fated couples?"

"I don't know enough about mates in general, but I think our connection is greater than average."

"Why? Because of the blood stuff?"

“In part. But also, I think we’re stronger because of what we’ve been through together. I know what it’s like to lose you, Hannah. I’ve held you while the life left your body. That’s not something I’ll ever forget, and I’ll cherish every breath you take, every heartbeat, for the rest of our existence. Every part of you belongs to me, just as all of me belongs to you.”

“Everything,” I whisper, understanding.

He nods, his chin rubbing the top of my head.  
“Everything.”



## CHAPTER 13

### *HANNAH*

It's been a day since we came back from my farm. The concerns Ellister had about not being able to travel through time again were valid, but unnecessary. His vortex still had enough oomph to get us here, but once we returned, his exhaustion put him in bed for a good fifteen hours.

*A really good* fifteen hours, if you get my drift.

For him and for me.

In between naps, we touched each other everywhere. We explored ticklish spots and pleasure zones. We fed and fucked. We slept some more, then we started over again.

I'm sore between my legs, but I like the pain. Every movement I make causes a little twinge, and I'm reminded of what he and I did.

I want a repeat, but there's so much work to be done.

"Tell me about your childhood," I request as Ellister and I work side by side on the chicken coop.

Years of neglect have caused some of the wood to rot, and we're figuring out how much needs to be replaced before we can house some animals. As luck would have it, we found some spare wooden boards in decent shape in the barn, and I think we'll be able to patch the coop up well enough.

“My childhood was so long ago, details are fuzzy,” Ellister replies, using a crowbar to pry up a splintering board. “My memory has been permanently affected by the stretch of nothingness in the Lost Land, so I’m not even sure if recalling it is possible.”

“There has to be some things you remember. You told me you grew up in a place with lots of stars.” I glance up at the constantly sunny sky. “So, it obviously wasn’t here.”

“Correct. I was born in the Night Realm.”

“Is it always dark there?”

“Yes. There’s a brief period of light during dawn and dusk.” He points to the direction I know to be east. “When the suns collide there twice a day, they’re so bright they send some light all the way to the Dream Realm.”

“Why didn’t you take us to the Night Realm? Don’t you miss it?”

“You deserve the sun. And now I’ve given you two.”

My heart warms all over again at the reminder of how much thought he put into our relocation. “But the stars are good, too. Isn’t there any place in this world where someone can have both?”

“Yes. That would be in the Dawn and Dusk Realm. It’s a strip of land between Day and Night,” he explains. “Unclaimed territory. Unpopulated and sacred. Ceremonial grounds for royal weddings and funerals are there, and it’s a refuge for the sprites. And it’s beautiful. Not too hot, not too cold. Not overly bright, but not dark either. There’s a constant peachy glow.”

“It sounds amazing. Why can’t we live there?”

“Too dangerous. It’s off-limits to regular citizens because the kingdoms have been fighting over Dawn and Dusk for countless centuries. In my young years, there was a lot of bloodshed over it. In this time period, I believe they’ve reached a temporary truce. The kingdoms agreed permission to enter the realm is only granted if someone is a member of the royal family or if there’s an important mission to carry out.”

Nodding, I switch the conversation back to him. “Did you have brothers and sisters?”

“No. My parents weren’t a fated pair. They just happened to get lucky when they conceived me.”

“Were either of them like you?”

“Like me?” he asks for clarification.

“Powerful.”

He shakes his head and thinks for a second. “No. They both had the ability to create fire—another common power in this world. My father thought there was a wizard somewhere down his family line, and my mother had a portal maker in her ancestry. They figured I ended up with a unique combination of the two.”

“See?” I smile at him. “You seem to remember quite a bit.”

“I think it helps that you’re asking specific questions. It’s digging up buried memories.”

“Then I’ll keep going. Did you always know you had the power to make vortexes?”

He grins a little, his eyes distant. “I did not. That was a surprise to me and my parents. Most fae children present their power during their toddler years, but mine didn’t appear until I was almost five. However, once it did, it hit me suddenly with full power. Usually, fae abilities need decades to develop, but mine just popped up like it had been there all along. The first time I formed a vortex, I’d been begging my mother to take me to the Dawn and Dusk Realm, and then before I knew it, I was flung into a forest I’d never seen before.”

“Ah, the forbidden territory. Of course you’d want to go there.”

“I had no idea Dawn and Dusk was basically a battlefield, and I didn’t understand trespassing was a serious crime. Luckily, the location I went to was quiet and safe. The Honeymoon Cave—it has a precious resource that can only be found there.”

“What resource?”

“Waterfall mist. There’s a sacred waterfall, and the mist collects on the leaves in the foliage around it. I had heard stories about how refreshing the beverage is. Some say Day water is just as good but being from the Night Realm, I’d never had either. Naturally, I wanted to try some for myself.”

“And the verdict?” My eyes drop to the canteen that’s almost always attached to his belt. “Is Day water comparable to waterfall mist?”

“Not even close. Don’t get me wrong, Day water is fantastic. But waterfall mist is better. I’ll get some for you sometime.”

I give him a stern look. “You’re already risking yourself every time you go into someone’s house to steal stuff. I think breaking royal laws might be pushing it.”

“Anyway,” he goes on, shrugging off my concern, “my mother had screamed as the air started moving behind me. She watched her little boy get sucked into an abyss, and she had no clue where I’d gone.”

I try to picture Ellister all tiny and throwing a fit, then disappearing in front of his poor mom. “How long did you stay in Dawn and Dusk?”

Ellister wears a mischievous smirk. “An entire day. And not because I didn’t know how to return—I knew on some instinctual level that I could get home whenever I chose. I just didn’t want to go back yet.”

I laugh. “You ornery little turd. She must’ve been worried sick.”

“She was. By the time I tumbled back into my front yard, the authorities had been called. Search parties had gone out, and the palace wizard was at my house, trying to help my parents figure out what had happened. Once everyone realized it was my own ability that made me go missing, I thought I would get punished.”

“Did you?”

“No.” His face darkens like he’s troubled by what he’s remembering. “I wasn’t reprimanded at the time. On the



contrary, I got a lot of attention. Too much attention. Right then and there, the royals made it clear they wanted to recruit me once I was old enough to leave home. They stayed at our house for many weeks to observe me. They ran a series of tests, challenging me to see how far my power could go. One time, they asked me to cross over to the human realm, and I did. But because I was so young and curious, I got distracted by the snowy forest I'd ended up in. I was only there for an hour, but when I got back, nearly two months had passed in Valora. I'd forgotten about the time difference."

"I bet your parents were upset."

"They were, but there was nothing they could do about it. I'd just been following orders from the king's council, and we were compensated well for the trouble. Over the next fifteen years, the royals gave us gifts and money. We wanted for nothing, and I was so proud to provide for my family."

"You don't sound happy about that," I observe.

"My power was both a blessing and a curse. I became cocky and wild because I knew I'd be granted leniency, no matter what crime I committed." He winces and admits, "As a teenager, I became a bit reckless. I used to trespass in different realms all the time. Even snuck into all the palaces to snoop around."

"The palaces? Did you get caught?"

"Only twice. I never got punished, though. I was a young man with amnesty, and that's dangerous." He gets quiet, and I feel his mood plummet.

"What happened next?" I'm almost afraid to ask because I know where the story is headed.

"Eldyra," he says bitterly, finally putting a name to the beautiful face I saw while I siphoned his memories. "I was twenty—less than a year away from being old enough to join the royal entourage. I had the world at my fingertips. So much potential. Eldyra had grown up in a village near my home, and we'd seen each other in passing while we were growing up. When she pursued me, I was all too willing to accept her

advances. I didn't question her motives. I was so arrogant, I wasn't even surprised by her interest. After all, I was powerful and had a bright future ahead of me."

I hate hearing about him with another woman, even if it was so long ago. But I still push on because I want to know everything about him. "And?"

"For months, we talked about a future together. We planned a life. I thought I loved her, and I believed she loved me... but she was using me. Our relationship was all a big ruse to save her sister. Somehow, her sister had gotten tangled up with Vaeront in a bargain, and Eldyra had to offer him someone more valuable. Someone irreplaceable. Me," he sighs. "She planned it from the start. One day when I was flying to Eldyra's village, I heard her calling out to me from the forest below. I found her on the side of the road, bleeding from her chest. She'd been stabbed in the heart with iron."

"That's fatal, right?"

"Yes. Once iron gets into the heart, it pumps the poison to the rest of the body. It's a horrible death. Eldyra told me she'd been attacked and that she knew a wizard in hiding who could fix her. I was so desperate to save her, I immediately took us through a vortex to Yelissa's Peak where Vaeront had a secret lair with his fellow dark fae."

From the brooding Ellister is doing now, I know the story only gets worse, and I decide to stop prodding so much while he gathers his words.

I clear some weeds away while thinking about how young he was when all of this happened. His life had barely begun before his future got taken from him.

After a minute, he continues, "I had to drink her blood, just as I had to drink yours. Vaeront instructed me on the ritual. I took it from her wrist—a place the iron poisoning hadn't reached in her body yet, where the blood was still clean. Then I had to wait for her to die. She had to pass away before Vaeront could bring her back. It took four agonizing days. Once she died, he told me he would take her soul as payment for the ritual, but I bartered with mine instead, just as he knew

I would. I thought to myself, it doesn't matter if he takes my soul. I'd love Eldyra with or without it, so I didn't need it."

He starts using the crowbar a bit more aggressively as he pries some more rotted boards off the coop, his eyes filled with simmering anger.

I feel his pain through the bond. Maybe being in the Lost Land made him forget some of his past, but I think it's possible he pushed the memories down on purpose. Who would want to relive an event so awful?

"You don't have to keep going." I gently touch his wrist.

The contact seems to snap him out of the dark place he's in, and he flips his hand to hold onto me.

"When she woke," he continues, "she laughed. She laughed at me. I was a pathetic fool who'd been tricked by her and Vaeront. What they didn't tell me before I agreed to his bargain was if he owns my soul, he owns me. In an instant, I found myself a member of a gang I never wanted to be a part of. My future, my plans to join the royal entourage and provide a comfortable life for my family, just... gone. After that, I couldn't go home. To be honest, without my soul, I didn't want to. I was too bitter and miserable to rejoin society, and Vaeront offered me something no one else could—an outlet for my hate. I could take my anger out on others without a shred of remorse. And I did. That's when I started making the bargains in the human realm."

"How long did you live with Vaeront before you were caught?"

"Only five years. As far as the royals knew, I'd been missing all that time. They thought I was dead. When they found out I was part of the dark fae, I think they felt betrayed. I had made a deal with them back when I was young, and I didn't hold up my end of the bargain." Ellister shrugs. "But without my soul to burden me, I didn't feel the negative effects of breaking the promise—another reason I'd convinced myself Vaeront did me a favor."

“At what point in time did you realize he was full of shit?” I ask wryly.

“Not nearly soon enough. Not until about twenty-some years ago, when I had my encounter with the Empath princess. When she took my hate from me, I was able to see clearly. For the first time, I could see the truth, and the truth was awful. *I* was awful.”

“Before that, had you been looking forward to collecting the bargain? Collecting me?”

“Truthfully, no. When I made the deal with Waylon, I set up the collection far in the future so that dark fae predecessors would have more humans coming in. It was strategic, scattering bargains throughout time. I never thought I’d have to collect you myself. After I got my conscience back, I was dreading it, and I put it off for as long as possible. I should have come to you sooner. You suffered for longer because of me.”

“Hey.” I pull his gaze to mine. “I thought we weren’t beating ourselves up anymore.”

Ellister affectionately pinches my chin. “Habit.”

“So what happened to Eldyra?”

“She went on with her life. Once she and her sister were released from Vaeront, they left together without even glancing back. I had served my purpose.”

“And here I thought my breakups were bad,” I crack, trying to lighten the moment.

Any lingering pain clears from Ellister’s face as he gazes lovingly at me. “In hindsight, I’m grateful for her. If none of that had happened, I wouldn’t be with you now. I would’ve lived my thirty thousand years, served the monarch, and died without finding my soul mate. I would go through all of it again if it meant being with you.”

“I wouldn’t change any of it either.” I give him a small smile. “It all worked out as it should have.”

Through our bond, I feel the weight of Ellister's remorse lift. Our conversation acted as a kind of therapy session, and he worked through some shit he'd been mentally holding onto.

Now that the clouds have cleared from his mind, something else pulses from the bond.

Lust.

I stare at him.

Breathing hard, he stares back.

I drop my hammer and throw myself at him, making him fall back on his ass.

He lets out a surprised grunt from my unexpected tackle, and he does something I've only seen once before—his wings appear, releasing from his shirtless back with a unique sound.

Embarrassed, he breathes, "Don't look."

Doing exactly the opposite, I crane my neck to see the wings better. "Why do they just bust out like that? You can't control it?"

"I can, but sometimes emotionally charged moments cause the reaction. It's a defense mechanism. Fear, dangerous situations, sexual excitement..."

"Why didn't they come out when you were on my farm?"

"They can't in the human realm." He angles the feathered structures together and down behind him, trying to keep them from my view.

"Ellister, stop."

"They're ugly."

"Let me see." When he doesn't comply, I insist, "Show me. I already saw them before."

"That was different. It was dark in the cave, and they were scrunched up. It's another matter in full light, especially if I spread them."

I frame his face with my hands and make sure we have eye contact when I say, "Don't ever forget that I love everything

about you. Everything, Ellister.”

“Fine,” he relents. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Releasing the grip my legs have on his waist, I slide off his lap and crawl around until I’m kneeling behind him in between the wings.

I don’t know what regular fae wings are supposed to look like, but I find myself massively impressed by his.

They’re much larger than I thought they would be. Where they’re attached to his back, the bases are wide, and I can tell his shoulder blade underneath is part of it. The highest point curves up like a roller coaster, reaching the height of his head, and the bottom halves are splayed out on the ground. If he were standing, the tips would reach his feet.

Gray feathers cover the expanse, but they’re still folded in on each other.

“Stretch them out,” I request, and he does as I ask.

Slowly, they raise up and spread. All the intricate bones become visible, but there isn’t one completely bald patch. The thinner spaces are covered with soft, lighter gray, downy feathers.

When I touch the areas, it sends a tremble through his wings.

I pause. “Does it hurt?”

Glancing over his shoulder, he remarks, “Feels good.”

“What kind of good? Ticklish?” I go back to exploring, running my fingers over the fuzz again.

“The kind that makes my cock hard, Hannah.”

Any reminder of his dick makes me instantly wet. My pussy, which is already aching from overuse, starts throbbing with need.

Shaking off the desire, I ask, “When was the last time you looked at your wings? Really looked at them?”

“I don’t know. Years ago.”

“And the last time you tried to fly?”

“I gave it a half-hearted effort when I got attacked by the bees. I was literally in fight or flight mode, but neither would get me away from the hive fast enough, so I didn’t try very hard. The vortex was the only way to escape them.”

“Maybe you should try again sometime. Your wings... They’re beautiful, Ellister.”

Just to reinforce my statement, I comb my fingers through the feathers. Starting near the base of both wings, I travel outward to the thickest part.

So silky.

“Yeah?” Ellister stands up.

Stretching them more, he turns as he tries to look behind himself, and he ends up facing me. When he curls the wings around his body, bringing them forward, I get up and put myself inside the cocoon he’s created.

He’s not trying to turn me on—he’s just studying his wings—but as his gorgeous feathers surround me, I can’t help adoring him even more.

If some random human saw him like this, with his brooding expression, his sharp fangs, and his gigantic wings, they’d be terrified of him. As they should be.

Not too long ago, I was, too. In that cave, I thought he was a monster.

But now that I know him, his dark side is one of my favorite things about him.

I want him to fuck me with his wings out. I want his fangs sinking into my skin as he consumes me in every way.

I want his brutality.

For most of his years, he’s been more creature than man. He might be able to prosper in the sunlight and blend in with people, but he’s an animal of the night. He was born under the stars, and he spent the rest of his existence in darkness.

“Perhaps it’s your blood,” Ellister muses, grazing the lighter gray fluff. “This is new growth, and it’s coming in fast. At this rate, my wings are going to be fuller than they’ve ever been.”

Too preoccupied with admiring his healthy feathers, he doesn’t notice the way I lick my lips or how hard my nipples are inside my thin dress. I’m not wearing a bra, and the fabric is practically see-through.

Stepping in close, I trail my fingers down his chest. “We’ve been working so hard. I think we deserve a break.”

His rapt attention snaps to me, and a smirk curls up on his lips as he presses me closer with his wings. “And where, darling Hannah, shall I have you this time?”

There isn’t a room in the house where we haven’t fucked. We’ve banged against various walls, on the kitchen table, and in the bathtub.

However, we haven’t done it outside yet.

“Right here,” I reply.

“You want to be fucked in the dirt, darling?” His tone is taunting and dark, and I can tell he likes the idea.

“Yes.” Rising on my tiptoes, I kiss the place on his neck where he’d reopened the punctures so I could drink from him again when we had sex this morning.

He favors that spot, always going back to those wounds on himself to let me feed. However, when he bites me, he prefers to choose a new location. My neck, the side of my breast, my wrist.

When I’d asked him why he keeps drinking from different places, he’d said he wants to sample every part of me.

I’m not opposed to that. There are so many more areas for him to bite into.

In the next second, he’s wrapping his arm around my waist, then he flaps his wings. It’s a powerful snap, just once, and it’s enough to get us both several feet off the ground.



Squealing with surprise, I hug his neck as we float back down.

Ellister angles our bodies so we're almost horizontal, and he spreads me out next to the chicken coop on my back.

Our project is temporarily forgotten as he hikes up my skirt. Not only did I forgo a bra, but I've also taken up the habit of going commando for easier access.

Ellister sucks in a satisfied breath when his fingers find my soaked center with nothing in the way. Bending my knees, I spread my thighs wide for him.

He growls as he stares at my pussy, his pupils expanding until the black eclipses the blue.

Much to my delight, he leaves his wings out, hovering over me and blocking out the sunlight from both orbs.

His insecurity has been wiped away, and I love seeing him so proud and unashamed.

Hungrily, his tongue swipes over one of his fangs. When he grazes my inner thigh with his fingertips, I know he wants to drink from me there.

I'm all for it, and I whimper while arching my back. "Do it."

When he dips his head, the bright glow of the suns blinds me, heightening my other senses as I close my eyes and wait to feel something.

I don't have to wait long.

Ellister bites the inside of my thigh, so close to my pussy that his rough scruff on his jaw scratches my sensitive lips. The initial sting from his fangs is quickly replaced by the tingling sensation of frenzied sucking.

I moan, partly from how good it feels, but also because the place where I need him most is being neglected.

Of course, Ellister knows this, and he thrusts two fingers into my wet channel. He curls them upward, relying on the

bond to instruct him where to go. What feels good for me also feels good for him.

With how connected we are, making love is on a completely different level. There's a certain telepathy between us now. I don't need to tell him what to do because he already knows.

I think there's a reason sex isn't this good in the human world—people would never get anything done. In their short lives, they'd never have time to complete important tasks because they'd be too busy fucking.

But we've got thousands of years ahead of us. For once, time is on our side.

As Ellister continues feeding, the rhythm of his fingers inside me speeds up. He repeatedly massages my G-spot while his thumb presses down on my clit.

I'm so close to coming already. Spearing a hand through my hair, I almost laugh at how easy it is for Ellister to get me off.

Having had his fill of my blood, he breaks away, removes his fingers from my pussy, and gives my slit a long lick.

He groans against my clit. "Your cunt tastes better than your blood."

Shockingly, he hasn't eaten me out yet. And it's not that I don't want him to. Of course, that would be fun. But I'm addicted to his cock.

"Your dick," I pant. "I want your dick."

Letting out a feral sound, he flips me over onto my stomach like I weigh nothing. After dragging me up by the hips so I'm on my hands and knees, I hear the rustling of fabric as he quickly undoes his pants.

Not more than a second later, his cock is at my entrance, and he drives forward.

When he fills my sore channel, I scream while also pushing back on him to meet his next thrust.

I don't care that it hurts. There's no such thing as too much with him.

I also don't give a shit that we're out in the open. It's uncivilized and scandalous, but who's going to see us? Who's going to care?



## CHAPTER 14

### *ELLISTER*

Hannah and I have just cleaned up and gotten our clothes back in place when I hear a noise I don't welcome—beating wings. Just one set, probably a hundred yards above us.

From the way the wind bounces off them with a sharper puff, I'm guessing the person has leathery wings, not feathered like mine.

Looking up at the sky, I search for the culprit.

I spot the figure right away. Quickly assessing the lone male, I determine he isn't nobility. His head is shaved on the sides, and the longer locks on top are woven into a nonsense braid along his scalp. His clothes are basic Day Realm attire; worn khakis and brown boots. No shirt.

It's normal for any fae man to go around topless since shirts can restrict our wings, but I don't like the thought of him being half-naked around Hannah.

I shouldn't be threatened by the dagger and large sword strapped to his belt. Most citizens of Valora carry a weapon at all times, but this guy looks like he's a little too prepared for conflict with the additional ax. I spy the wooden handle around his backside.

Thankfully, I'm ready for a spontaneous interaction in at least one way—I need to hide my teeth. Reaching into my

pocket, I fish out my caps and discreetly fit the coverings over my fangs, concealing the sharp points.

“Ellister?” Noticing our visitor, Hannah comes close to me, huddling next to my bare torso while slipping an arm around my back. “Shit,” she hisses. “Do you think he saw us?”

It’s possible.

More than likely, he heard her screams. That alone makes me want to rip his ears from his head, but at least he didn’t interrupt us mid-fuck.

If he’d gotten here just two minutes earlier, he would’ve seen me rutting Hannah like a wild beast.

As the man lands about twenty feet away, I keep my wings out—a display of being on-guard.

I’m no longer embarrassed about the appendages I used to hate. How could I be when Hannah admired them so thoroughly? Plus, they do look much better than they used to. Anyone who sees the new patches might think I simply got caught in a fire, which isn’t a rare occurrence in the Day Realm where fire power is the most common ability.

With a side glance, I look behind us at the scene of our coupling. Hannah’s handprints are visible in the dirt, and she’s covered in it. Two darker spots are soiling her yellow gown where her knees dug into the ground.

But our disheveled state could be chalked up to a day of hard work.

Our tools and spare boards are scattered about. There’s a bit of blood pooled in one spot, so I scrape my boot against the ground to kick some rocks and debris over it.

Draping a wing casually over Hannah in a show of possessiveness, I quickly take stock of her bite marks. She’s smart to keep her hair draped over her shoulder, hiding the fading one on her neck and the brand-new one just a few inches down on her shoulder.

I hadn’t planned on biting her twice when I fucked her, but I couldn’t help myself.

Ramming into her from behind, pulling her hair, and making her moan... the craving took over and I got carried away. I sank my teeth into the place where her neck and shoulder meet, and I was rewarded when her cunt clamped down on my cock with an orgasm so strong it hurt.

“Hello, friend,” the intruder greets cordially, but he doesn’t move closer.

He’s keeping his distance. Smart. Cautious.

“Hello,” I return, but I don’t offer any other information about us.

If he’s curious enough, he’ll ask.

And he does. “When did you move in?”

With my soul back, I need to be careful not to lie. Being truthful shouldn’t be difficult, but I’ve been out of the honesty habit for too long. I could slip up.

“Two days ago,” I respond.

Shielding the sun from his eyes, he scans the property. “This place has been abandoned for a long time. Went up at the auction in Olphene three times, but no one wanted it.”

“We want it.” I shrug, going for nonchalant. “We don’t care about the repairs. It’ll just take time, that’s all.”

His green eyes go to me. Studying me. Probably wondering why my hair isn’t the typical style. When his attention goes to the prong marks on my neck, I quickly try to think of an explanation.

“A few blisters and minor injuries are bound to happen,” I add, “but we’re not afraid of the work, are we, darling?” I nudge Hannah with my wing, and she nods in agreement.

“That’s right.”

The stranger’s eyes go to her briefly, but they don’t linger. Again, smart. If he’s got any brains at all, he can recognize a newly mated pair. Males in my situation tend to be incredibly violent if provoked.

“But are you sure you’re up for the task of living so far from the city?” he asks. “Most don’t like to travel for days just to go to the street market.”

He’s probing. Asking me to offer up what my power is without interrogation. Maybe wondering if I’m a wizard or a portal maker.

I’m not giving anything away. If my vortex ability is discovered, it’ll draw too much attention when all we want is anonymity.

At my silence, the man says, “I’m Rymus.”

“Ellister,” I introduce myself, purposely not telling him Hannah’s name.

Rymus seems to understand that, and he doesn’t inquire about her. “Where did you live before?”

“I used to reside in the Night Realm.” Also not a lie. “But my mate loves sunshine. There’s no shortage of that here.”

Rymus grins. “Certainly. Well, it’s good to have neighbors. There are no other farms for at least ten miles in every direction.”

I know. That’s one of the reasons I chose this place. My only concern had been the nearby estate.

He must be the Naturopath.

We’ll probably need his ability if we want any hope of making our crops thrive, so I keep it friendly and offer, “Perhaps we can trade goods once we’ve got things up and running.”

“I’d like that. Good to meet you.” With a parting wave, he takes to the sky again, heading back to his house.

It doesn’t go unnoticed by me that he didn’t dish out any information about a family, if he has one, though I wouldn’t expect him to while assessing a possible threat.

Hannah lets out a breath she seems to have been holding, and her chest rises and falls rapidly as she pins me with panicked eyes. “What was that about?”

“We just met our neighbor.” I’m trying to keep my tone light, but it doesn’t squash her concern.

“Why are you not more freaked out? That whole thing was weird, wasn’t it?”

“It was inevitable that we’d meet him at some point. Now we have, and it’s over with.”

Swallowing hard, she says, “I didn’t like him.” Her heart is beating so fast, making mine match her erratic rhythm. “He looked shifty.”

“Shifty?”

“Yeah. Like he was hiding something.”

“Welcome to being fae. We’re all that way.”

“What if he saw the bite marks?” Her hand goes to her shoulder, then she touches my neck. “I know he saw yours. He looked right at it.”

“Anything could’ve caused the wounds. Blood sharing is so rare, it would be unreasonable for him to immediately conclude that we’re feeding from each other.”

“If you say so,” she says, her trust for me coming through the bond in comforting waves.

Cupping her flushed face, I note how warm her cheek is when I caress it with my thumb. “I’ve been working you too hard.”

“Not at all. I enjoy this stuff.”

“It’s time for lunch anyway. I’ll go catch us something. Why don’t you get some water to make a broth from the carcass?”

Hannah likes being useful, and she smiles and nods at my suggestion. Bending down, I give her a kiss before we part. As she walks away from me, she keeps her hand in mine for as long as she can.

When our fingers break contact, the disconnect makes me ache, but as much as we hate being separated, sometimes divide-and-conquer is the best strategy to be efficient.



For a few seconds, I watch her as she heads for the water pump, but I'm eager to complete my task. I want to get back sooner rather than later, so I start for the forest.

Just as I've made it to the shade of the trees on the outskirts of the yard, I hear a disconcerting thump behind me.

I turn my head, and fear bolts through my system when I see Hannah on the ground. Her body is a crumpled lump. She's on her side, her legs twisted in an uncomfortable way, like she had no warning before she lost consciousness.

Running for her, I use my wings to propel me faster, and I drop to my knees. I skid to a stop next to her body, disturbing a cloud of dust from the dry dirt.

"Hannah. Hannah." I shake her shoulder, jostling her unmoving body. "Hannah, answer me."

She doesn't make a sound.

She's as still as death. She's not even breathing.

Rolling her to her back, I examine her.

She's pale, yet her forehead is burning up when I touch it with my knuckles.

Suddenly, her chest starts rising and falling with erratic gasps. I press my fingers to her neck, dread pooling in my stomach while I feel her fluttery pulse.

In the short time we've been bonded, I've gotten used to our hearts syncing up, but they're not matching now. Her heartbeat is twice as fast as mine.

Which means what's happening to her isn't natural. An affliction coming from the outside.

The bargain.

It got to her after all.

"Oh, darling, no. Please, no." Bowing my head, I place my forehead on her chest and close my stinging eyes.

Her skin is so hot. Regardless of how she brushed off my concern, I know it's not from the weather or working too hard.

She has a raging fever.

If I thought praying to the suns or the stars would help, I'd do it, but even if there were a powerful deity watching over me, they wouldn't grant my request. I've already tried that, and my begging has always gone unanswered.

Maybe I don't deserve a blessing. In fact, I'm certain I don't.

But Hannah shouldn't be punished for my sins.

Placing my hand under hers, I link my trembling fingers with her limp ones, wishing more than anything that she could squeeze me back.

She doesn't.

She remains unconscious, her lungs spasming as they struggle to get some air.

Immediately, I scoop Hannah into my arms and carry her inside to make her more comfortable.

I can get a cold rag for her head. I could even go steal some amazing food for her to eat. But dread fills my chest because I know there's nothing I can do to fix this.

The sickness wasn't supposed to be able to get to Hannah here, but it did.

It has.



## CHAPTER 15

### *HANNAH*

I wake to the most beautiful face in the world. Ellister's face.

The ceiling of our bedroom is his backdrop as he leans over me, and I realize I'm lying on the bed. Groggy, I glance around while trying to recall how I got here. We were talking to a stranger, and then... and then...

"I passed out?" I ask as I picture the eerily similar way my mother found me the morning my first symptoms hit.

Nodding, Ellister looks devastated and pissed. His eyes are shimmering with pain, and that wrinkle on his nose is back.

I'd missed that little crease. He's been so happy lately, I haven't seen it in a while.

I reach out to smooth it, but he backs away from me. "We can't touch."

"What?"

He starts pacing, and his voice cracks when he states, "You're sick. Don't even try to tell me you're not."

"You've taken a lot of blood from me recently," I suggest optimistically. "Maybe it was too much."

"That wouldn't cause a fever. Besides, you drank just as much from me. My blood should replenish you."

“It could be heat stroke,” I try again. “Weak humans are prone to that.”

“Hannah, stop. Denying this is senseless,” he growls as he rakes a hand through his hair. “I thought I’d changed your fate, but I was wrong.”

Deep inside, I know he’s speaking the truth. I woke up feeling off today. This illness has a way of ringing internal alarm bells. When it claims you, you sense your own doom.

I’d shrugged off the notion earlier, dismissing it as PMS or something. Just like Ellister said, I was supposed to be safe here.

“Is it because we visited the future?” I ask, wondering if my stubborn desire to see my parents one more time will be my downfall.

“No,” Ellister dismisses the idea. “The illness takes longer than a day to start causing trouble.”

“Then how is this happening?”

“I’m such an imbecile,” he goes on with his self-loathing. “It’s me. The bargain is attached to *me*. I’m the one causing you to die. I may have altered the future, but I didn’t change your outcome.”

“What can we do?” I sit up and reach for him again.

He recoils from me, and the action is like a physical slap. When I flinch, he notices, and his eyes are pools of pain. “No more physical contact, Hannah.”

“At all?”

“At all.”

“You’re not serious.” The thought of being separated now, after we’ve just completed the soul mate bond, is unfathomable.

“For days, we’ve been touching constantly. Do you understand what that means? All that physical contact has been speeding up the process. There’s no way you’re going to survive for weeks this time.”

I rub at my aching chest. “But the mate bond—”

“I know. It hurts.”

“You can’t stay away from me, Ellister. You just can’t. If I understand our connection correctly, I’ll be hurting from being apart. On top of that, I’ll feel like shit because of the illness. So it will be double bad for me. Am I right?”

“It will be just as awful for me.”

“Can you feel my symptoms?” I study his cheeks for the flush of a fever, but he’s paler than usual.

“No. The bargain is bypassing the bond. That’s probably why I couldn’t predict your blackout.”

“Then I highly doubt your suffering will be equal to mine,” I quip, salty about his determination to keep his distance.

“It’ll be worse. After you die, I’ll have to live with myself, live with the pain of knowing I killed my own wife while I go insane from mate separation.”

I hadn’t thought of that. As a fated pair, my death means his, too. Only his won’t be quick.

A tear streaks down his cheek, but he swipes it away quickly as his anger surges, replacing the devastation.

“There’s no reality where you and I could be together—nowhere you and I could coexist and not succumb to this fate. Why?” He suddenly punches the wall, cracking the plaster. “Why would fate do this to you? Why would destiny bring us together only to tear us apart?”

I cross my arms and let my sarcasm come through heavily when I say, “It’s nice to know you’ve already written me off for dead. Yeah, let’s just give up. Sounds like a great plan.”

“What would you have me do?”

“Well, feeling sorry for yourself isn’t going to help, and it’s not *you* who’s doing this to me,” I reason. “Yeah, the bargain might be tied to you, but ultimately, it’s the bargain causing my illness. I think your presence is just a catalyst. Obviously, we know changing the bargain didn’t work the way

it was supposed to, and I definitely don't want to never exist at all, but—”

Ellister abruptly turns toward me, and I can practically see the lightbulb of an idea pop up next to his head, his eyes wide, his jaw slack.

“What?” I prompt. “What are you thinking?”

“I'm just remembering the words Ellister Number Two said to me—in his universe, there is no Hannah because the bargain wasn't for a life. In theory, the illness affecting you doesn't exist there because *you* don't exist there.” He presses his lips into a thin line. “Obviously, Number Two didn't mean to do it, but when he changed the deal, he created a place where we can escape this.”

“Good.” Perking up, I blow out a relieved breath. “That's good. Let's go there, then.”

His face falls again. “We can't. I would need to go to the future, and I can't do that without Glow.”

“Couldn't we go to that universe in the past?” I make a swirly motion with my hand. “Just hop from this time to whatever time it is there?”

“That's called a lateral move, and no, we can't because that universe hasn't been created yet. I went too far back in time here. If my calculations are correct, it's 1913 in the human realm. The bargain doesn't happen for another fifteen years. Do you understand what I'm saying? The alternate universe doesn't split until the moment the bargain is changed. We can't travel to a plane that doesn't exist.”

“Well, shit. So, what we really need is Glow. How is it produced? Maybe we could make some.”

Ellister's hard eyes clash with mine, and he snorts at my can-do attitude. “I wouldn't know where to start. Everything I've learned about the process is secondhand knowledge from Vaeront. And even he hasn't seen a Glow distiller in person. Merina drew him an instruction manual on how to build the machine, but it looked like a three-year-old tried to draw a house with smoke coming out of the chimney. Remember—

she's blind. And I suspect even if she wasn't, the sketch would've been terrible. She has many talents, but an artist, she is not, and paying attention to detail isn't her strong suit."

"Describe it to me," I say, determined. "What's the machine made of?"

"Metal and fire. There's a large vat on the bottom where the water boils, and on top it tapers off like an upside-down funnel. From there, the steam goes into a tube where it condenses." He shrugs. "That's the gist of it."

"That's not too far off from the way maple syrup is made," I comment thoughtfully. "Essentially, we'd just be boiling a substance down until it becomes a concentrated form. How long does it take to make the amount you need to time travel?"

"Merina said anywhere from a few days to a week. The most laborious part is probably collecting the water; producing one gulp of Glow could require a hundred gallons of Day water."

"Okay. Let's assume we can make a successful machine. Factor in trial and error, let's go with the longer estimation. A week. I'm not going to keel over in seven days."

At least, I hope I won't. Like Ellister said, we've had a lot of physical contact lately, and I don't know how that's going to affect the progression of the illness.

Ellister looks at me with a mix of disbelief and hope. "Do you really think you could do it? If I get you the right materials, could you build a distiller?"

"I have to try. *We* have to try. You're not in this alone, and neither am I. If it's our only chance, we'll take it."

Perching on the side of the bed, he sits just a foot away from me, and his nearness gives me pain-suppressing euphoria.

"I trust you, Hannah, just as you trust me. If anyone can do it, it's you."

"If we succeed, does that mean we'll be moving to the human realm? I'll get to go home? Be with my parents again?"

“Remember, your parents won’t know who you are in that universe.” Sympathy comes through the bond, and he reaches out like he wants to touch me. Then he makes a fist, sets it in his lap, and keeps his hand to himself. “Number Two said your parents are there, but they have a different child. Would it be too painful for you to see them, knowing they don’t know you? Because we could settle somewhere else.”

I consider the scenario for several seconds. The maple farm is my identity. It represents security and stability. Growing up, I took pride in the fact that the business had been in our family for so long, and I always knew I wanted to live my life there.

And I still can.

“I want to go. Being there as a stranger would be better than not being there at all.”

“All right, darling. Then that’s what we’ll aim for.” Sadness comes back to his face as he moves away from me. “I’m serious about the distance we need to have from each other in the meantime. I must stay as far away from you as possible.”

With that, he walks from the room, leaving me alone and aching.





## CHAPTER 16

### *HANNAH*

I wake up from what feels like my fifth nap of the day to find dinner sitting on the bedside table.

The plate holds a different kind of meat than what I'm used to. This juicy hunk of beef is thick, marbled with fat, and seared to perfection. Next to that, there's a heap of what appears to be mashed potatoes and a bowl of orange fruit with whipped cream on top. Then there's a separate little saucer with a tiny vanilla frosted cake.

I sigh, both happy about the dessert and disappointed in Ellister's constant absence.

I haven't seen him since yesterday. After he vortexed himself to a bunch of places to collect scrap metal, he allowed me to be in the barn with him while he built the distiller because he needed my guidance.

Somehow, he found a steel barrel, and that's our base. He said it's small, but that just means he'll have to refill it with fresh water more often. Constructing the funnel on top was a bit more difficult. Honestly, we need a welder to melt the metal and seal the pieces shut, but without tools and without someone with fire power, we had to get creative. Ellister went to Dawn and Dusk to scrape some bark from the trees there. The pulp from the inner layers of the trunks is sap-like, and it acts like a pasty glue that'll work in the short term.

Neither of us are engineers, but I think we made a pretty solid machine.

Against my better judgement, I tried to seduce him after we were done.

I thought once we made some progress on the distiller, he might relax a little with the no-touching rule. But nope.

Even after some begging and fondling myself in front of him, he sent me to bed. He walked me to the bedroom—keeping a good distance between us—and tucked me in snugly under the covers like I was a naughty kid staying up past my bedtime. And he managed to do it without touching me once.

He's been avoiding me ever since. When he's not walking to the pond to collect water, he's sneaking food into my room. He only comes in when I'm asleep to drop off my meals, which are becoming more extravagant each time.

Obviously, he's trying to strengthen me—and cheer me up—with food, but I'd rather have him.

I look at my appetizing spread.

Even though I'm nauseous, I get to work on my food. I'm just about finished when a windy gust rattles the shutters outside the window.

Ellister must've returned from his latest trip. When I push up on an elbow and look out the window, I catch a glimpse of his backside as he carries a long metal hose into the barn.

The tubing at the top is the last step. That means he collected enough Day water to fill the tank. Next, we'll need to get the fire going, and my spirits lift a bit because my input is needed.

Motivated by the thought of being near Ellister again—even if it's just for a brief time—I wiggle my toes and stretch my legs to test my symptoms.

I know how this illness goes, the order of things. Headaches, dizzy spells, and fevers. Organ failure. Tingling numbness and blurred vision. Hair loss.

The first three are happening now, but the rest are blessedly absent.

Combing my fingers through my hair, I pull my hand away to observe the damage. Only a couple strands are loose. Totally normal on any given day.

After a trip to the chamber pot, I pause to inspect my urine. Remembering my mom's pee interrogation, I determine it's a little yellow, but that's probably because I've been sleeping so much that I haven't had time to drink a ton of water.

I need to hydrate, so I go over to the pitcher Ellister left for me on the kitchen counter. After I pour myself a glass, I take a sip.

The liquid on my tongue is surprisingly cold and refreshing, and as it goes down my throat, it settles into my stomach, still icy.

Instantly, I feel like my fever is reduced. My sweat dries up, and the hot flush on my cheeks cools.

I look into the pitcher, half expecting to see some sort of glittering coming from inside because whatever I just drank is magic.

What kind of water is this?

I need more.

I down the entire glass within seconds, then I refill my cup.

I'm about to gulp it down, too, but Ellister comes through the front door.

He notices my excessive drinking and smiles a bit. "Waterfall mist. I'm hoping it will help you. Just like Day water, it has healing properties."

"You went to Dawn and Dusk again."

"Was it worth it?"

I take another drink and admit, "Yeah. Totally worth it. It's amazing."

And so is he.

In his sweaty, dirty ruggedness, he's more attractive than I've ever seen him. Shirtless, with messy hair. Mud smeared on his skin. An ax is hanging from his belt. He hasn't shaved since we got here, and the dark hair growing on his face makes him look like a woodsy guy. A hot lumberjack.

The prong marks on his neck are scabbed over and healing, and I lick my lips when I think about reopening the wounds with my own teeth.

"Stop looking at me like that, Hannah," Ellister says sternly, going over to the sink basin to splash water on his face. With wet drops dripping from his face, he attempts a half-assed sneer as he forms his adorable nose wrinkle. "We need at least ten feet between us."

"Ten feet?" I parrot with disbelief. His rules are getting more and more ridiculous, and he's just making them up as we go along.

"That's right," he says, stoic. "Back up."

He does a shooing motion with his hand, and my feelings are actually hurt from his harshness. With his gruff voice and his cold mask of indifference, he mimics the Ellister I met in my almost-memories. So unfeeling.

He's got a great poker face. If I didn't know better, I'd think he doesn't have any affection for me at all.

But I do know better.

I know him, and I can sense his sadness through the bond.

Nostalgia sweeps through me when I think about our first couple days here on the farm. We'd been so happy. For a very short time, we had it all. We were free to touch each other as much as we wanted. We thought our biggest obstacle was fixing a damn chicken coop.

My soul misses Ellister's, and my heartbeat stutters, giving a few erratic thumps while a pain shoots through my chest.

That's the mate bond, not the illness. On some instinctual level, I can tell the difference between the various pains I'm

having.

Taking two steps back, I lean my hip on the counter. “You’re breaking my heart, you know.”

Ellister huffs, frustrated. “I’m aware.”

“What if we fucked just one more time?” I tempt.

“Can’t risk it.” Putting his back to me, Ellister dries his face and pats his torso with a small towel.

“We could make it a super quickie.”

“No.”

I deflate with disappointment. I realize I’m walking myself right into the rejection, but every single denial from him feels like a physical blow.

I walk forward, breaking the ten-foot standard, and softly ask, “What if one more time is all we have?”

Meaning, what if this Glow thing doesn’t work? This whole project is a gamble based on a blind witch’s sketch that Ellister tried to recreate in the dirt with a stick outside. I don’t have a lot of facts to go on.

Turning around, Ellister glares at me. “Don’t. Don’t you dare give in to the hopelessness already. That’s just part of the illness—it’s supposed to make you feel like you’re doomed, but you’re not.”

“I’m just being realistic. Even if I can make the Glow correctly—and that’s a big *if*—it will take days to produce it. I can’t go that long without touching you. Every second I’m away from you is worse than dying. Existing without you... it’s nothing. I have nothing.”

“I’m still here, Hannah.”

“My soul doesn’t care if the difference is ten feet or a thousand miles. All I know is that I’m in pain, and you can make it better. Don’t make me suffer more than I have to.”

Deciding to try nudity again, I tug on the ribbon over my chest. When the knot cinching the neckline of my nightgown

comes undone, the cream fabric slides off my shoulders, exposing my breasts.

Ellister's eye twitches as he gazes at my body with unabashed hunger, and his tongue darts out to wet his lips when his focus pauses on the mark where he bit me on the outer part of my left breast. My own pulse speeds up, syncing with his increasing rhythm.

He's cracking.

Nice to know he still finds me attractive. I haven't started deteriorating on the outside yet, but when I do, my self-esteem will take a massive hit.

I can imagine the horror that will play out on Ellister's face when my hair starts coming out in chunks. When he slowly watches my skin take on a grayish tint and my bones protrude from my emaciated body.

Maybe that's what he's remembering, too. Maybe the memory of what happened to me is what's keeping him so strong and focused.

In that case, I see his point.

If our roles were reversed, I'd do anything to save him, even if it meant depriving us both of the affection we crave.

The distance we keep between us now might buy us the time we need to fix me, and when I spy a slight sheen of conflicted tears in his eyes, I decide to stop torturing him.

I pull up my gown and cover myself.

Determined to stay optimistic for us both, I say, "It's going to work. It has to. Now show me what you've got so far."



## CHAPTER 17

### *HANNAH*

As I toss a couple more logs into the fire beneath the distiller, the heat wafts up to my face.

“Don’t get so close.” Ellister comes into the barn with an armful of freshly chopped wood and bends over to dump it on the growing pile beside the door. “Let me stoke the fire. It’s going to spike your fever.”

“I’m actually okay right now. The waterfall mist really helped.”

I back away from the distiller, rubbing my stomach where I’m being cooled from within because of that wonderful drink. Between the weather and my elevated temperature, I’ve been sweating constantly, but I’m completely content for now.

Ellister looks pleased and relieved at the same time. “Then you should drink it all.”

Sheepish over my greedy chugging, I shrug. “I already did.”

“I’ll get you more. I’ll get as much as you want.”

“While you do that, I’ll stay and keep things going.” I motion to the mounting flames.

“You will not. Get back to bed and let the fire work.”

I shake my head. “I can’t lie down anymore. It makes me antsy.”

“Well, you shouldn’t be in here.” Ellister glances at the smoke filling the space. With the holes in the roof, it’s escaping, but the air still isn’t the safest for me to breathe.

Torn, I look at the distiller. “I just want to be here to make sure it’s operating right.”

I can hear the bubbling inside the metal drum. The water is already boiling, and the steam seems to be contained as intended inside the funnel and pipe. With how many scraps we fitted together, I was worried about leaking, but the tree paste we put on the seams is doing its job.

The very top narrows to a tiny opening at the peak, and that’s where Ellister attached the metal tubing. From there, the pipe is angled down toward a ceramic pitcher on the dirt floor.

An empty pitcher, dry as a bone.

“Shouldn’t we be seeing results by now?” It’s a rhetorical question because Ellister doesn’t have the answer to it any more than I do.

Bending down, I squint at the small amount of steam slowly coming from the open end of the pipe. It’s just evaporating as soon as it hits the air.

Not good.

Unnerving silence stretches on as I cross my arms and wait for a drop of liquid to collect. Just one. That’s all I’m asking for right now.

But it doesn’t happen.

“I think this angle is wrong.” I point at the downward pipe.

“How so?” Ellister sidles up to me, just a couple feet away.

I don’t know if he realizes how close he is, but my body reacts. The hairs on my arm raise, like they’re reaching for him.

After slipping on the oven mitt for handling the hot metal, I lift the pipe until it’s horizontal. Holding it above my head, I



manipulate it so it's level with an old shelf on the wall.

"We should elevate the pitcher, and we'll need an extra part here on the end. Something with a ninety-degree angle that we can point down. That way, it'll give the steam a place to collect." I draw an invisible upside-down L-shape where the corner will be.

Without questioning me, Ellister starts sorting through a pile of excess parts he picked up during his travels. "Like this?"

The piece in his hand is exactly what I was referring to.

"Yes," I respond excitedly. "Where did you get all this?"

Guiltily scratching his jaw, he mumbles, "The Night Realm palace's indoor plumbing system."

"You did not!" I practically shout at him, but he just nods and shrugs.

"Shit, Ellister." That's probably where my dinner came from. The freaking palace. "You've been risking yourself far too much lately. What if you get arrested?"

Aside from dying, my biggest fear is Ellister getting caught. He won't be any good to either of us if he's in jail.

"Yes, going to the palace is dangerous," he agrees before stating his defense, "but I won't have to go back. I got everything I needed."

"And all other places you're going? Houses and such?"

"The cities don't have law enforcement. The townspeople are pretty much left to govern themselves and handle their own minor disputes. Stealing isn't a serious offense. The only time someone would be arrested is if they commit a high crime, like murder. In that case, they'd be apprehended by a mob and brought to the palace for a trial and punishment."

"A mob? Like, with literal pitchforks?"

Ellister tips his head thoughtfully from side to side. "I suppose they could use any number of tools. Many common folks don't have fancy weaponry." In the way he always does

when he wants to avoid a conversation, he directs the topic to the task at hand. “Now, how about you show me what to do with this thing?”

After following my instructions with the new piece, Ellister rests the pipe on the rim of the pitcher in its new place on the shelf. The steam isn’t coming out anymore, which is what I’d hoped for. Because of the vertical pipe, the steam is being forced to rise inside the metal tubing.

A second later, I hear hissing from inside the pipe. A new sound. Getting closer, I put my ear next to it to listen.

“Careful. Don’t burn yourself.” Without thinking, Ellister grabs my arm to pull me away.

As soon as he touches me, we both freeze from the jolt of sudden full-body pleasure.

The promising sizzle I’d heard is temporarily forgotten as I soak up the relief Ellister’s touch gives me. The headache that had been plaguing me disappears, and the bond flares with satisfaction.

We both sigh.

Half-heartedly, Ellister tries to let me go, but now that he’s made contact, it’s difficult to separate. Laying my hand over his, I keep his grip on my forearm in place.

“Hannah—”

“Stop,” I whisper the plea. “Just stop for a second, okay?”

Giving in to my request, he rubs his thumb along the inside of my wrist and—smartly—tries bribery to get me back into bed. “If I hold your hand all the way to the house, will you lie down? The less you’re in here the better. It’s not just the bad air that could affect you. Glow production is dangerous. The substance is combustible.”

“Combustible? You mean to tell me this thing could be a bomb?”

“We’re probably fine,” Ellister backtracks, not wanting to feed my fear. “An explosion only happens if Glow comes into contact with stardust.”

“Stardust?”

“From the Dream Realm. It’s mined from the mountains there. A sparkly substance. When stardust is mixed with regular Day water, it creates light. In the Night Realm, they use the concoction to make lanterns that last for years. However, when the dust comes into contact with Glow—”

“That light turns into a blast?” I finish for him.

“Precisely. Fortunately for us, in this time period, the realms are still very much separate lands. They only fraternize to trade the most needed resources. Since it’s always light here, stardust would be very low on the list of necessities, but that doesn’t mean it’s impossible for stardust traces to be around. Wizards and witches, for example, use it for spells.”

“Like Astrid did? Is that what she sprinkled into the bowl?”

“Yes.” Ellister’s concerned attention goes to the noise coming from the pipe. It’s gone from a quiet hissing to louder pops. “That’s making me nervous.”

Instead of accepting his proposition to hold hands for a fifty-foot walk, I counter with, “How about you hold me for a few minutes while we wait to see what happens? That way, if it blows up, you’ll be right here to shield me?”

I’m not above manipulation, and I’ll use Ellister’s desire to keep me safe to my advantage. Moving toward him, I press my front against his and rest my head on his chest.

I listen as his heart syncs up with mine, and the bond pulses between us with more ecstatic vigor. We’ve been apart too much lately. It’s unnatural for us to have so much distance, and our souls are singing at the contact.

“This is nice.” I hum. “Isn’t this nice?”

“Yes,” Ellister admits with a grunt.

His tense muscles relax once he gives in a little, and he wraps his arms around me, tentatively, like he might change his mind at any second.

Wanting to hold onto him for as long as possible, I hug him back, my fingers lightly scratching the area where his wings are hidden. The fabric of his shirt is in the way, but that doesn't make it less pleasurable for him.

I feel a tremor go through his body, and his cock lengthens along his thigh inside his pants.

I can't help rubbing against it. Just a little. I press our bodies together, and his thickness puts pressure on my center.

"Hannah," Ellister scolds lightly.

"Shh. Don't ruin it. If I only get to have you for a few minutes, I'm going to make the most of it."

As horny as I am, this embrace isn't even about sex.

It's about comfort and our connection. The love we have.

It's so overwhelming, and I start to get emotional.

I sniffle as my eyes sting.

"Hannah." The way Ellister says my name is different this time. It's soft and affectionate. Completely defeated. A truce.

Surrendering, Ellister rubs my back, kisses the top of my head, and holds me close without any hint of reservation.

It's the best.

"Everything," I rasp, squeezing him tighter. "Everything, everything, everything."

"Everything," he returns roughly, his fingers curling into the fabric of my nightgown.

We stand like that for a good minute, but I sense it when he gathers enough self-control to put a stop to this.

However, before he can separate from me, we hear the sound we've been waiting for.

*Plink.*

We both look at the pitcher. Our surprised gazes crash together before we rush over to the container. Fighting for space, our shoulders are bumping and battling it out as we try to see inside.

Dark shadows hide the bottom, and Ellister lights a match. When he holds it above the opening, the flame shows us what we need.

A solitary wet drop is at the bottom of the pitcher.

It's not enough. Not even close. But it's something.

Another growing drop is dangling from the opening of the tube, getting heavier as the moisture builds.

"Is it Glow?" I ask, my voice breathless with excitement. "Did we do it right?"

"There's only one way to find out." Ellister leans forward and licks the droplet before it can fall.

He makes a sound like he's hurt.

"What's the matter?" I sure as hell hope we didn't accidentally make some poison or something.

After smacking his lips, Ellister answers. "It's hot. I think I burned my tongue."

"Oh." I deflate with relief. "Well? Do you feel anything? How long will it take before you know? Does it taste like we did it right?" I scrutinize the air behind him while I ask, "And if it's Glow, is it going to send you swirling?"

My impatient interrogation makes him smile a little. "Give it some time to kick in. Sometimes it takes a minute. And no. That little amount might charge my power a bit, but I won't be out of control. I'd need at least an ounce or two for that."

I hold my breath as I wait. I'm wringing my hands, nibbling my lip, and hopping on the balls of my feet.

In the seconds that pass, I watch another drop gather, and I mentally calculate how long it will take to accumulate enough Glow for Ellister to travel to the future.

To be on the safe side, we should probably plan to produce double his original estimate. It'd be a good idea to have three or four ounces at our disposal, just in case he needs to time travel more than once.

“What happens if we don’t make enough?” I ask. “Would we get stuck in a vortex?”

Ellister chuckles like my concern is silly. “No. We’d just get dumped wherever and whenever my energy runs out.”

“Would that be okay?”

“As long as we make it past the time the universe splits, yes. However, living very far from your own era on Earth isn’t advisable. The human realm is extremely sensitive to magical shifts. I suspect we would severely disrupt many outcomes if we show up in the past, previous to your original birth date.”

“When you say ‘severely disrupt outcomes,’ do you mean you think if we interfered with the past, there’s a good chance certain people might not even be born?” It’s easy to conclude because of all the time travel movies I’ve seen. “People like my parents.”

“I’m almost certain of it. The reason our presence in Valora isn’t detrimental to this world is because this is where my magic originated. It belongs here. There’s order in the chaos of my power. As long as you and I don’t come into contact with very influential people, we won’t disturb the future. But know this, Hannah.” His eyes get dark, his voice low and serious. “I’ll do what I must to save you. If that means altering the future, in your world or in mine, then so be it.”

In a blink, I picture a world without my mom and dad. Without Jack. Without Cody or Cathy or so many of the customers I’ve come to know.

I think about the barn packed full at my fundraiser, and I can’t imagine one face missing—not even Faith’s.

Another plink comes as the new drop is added to the pitcher, and my excitement inflates.

At approximately one drop a minute... while fighting against possible evaporation in this heat... It’s going to take 48-72 hours, but we already assumed that.

The important thing is that it’s happening.

At least, I hope it is. I'm still waiting on Ellister's confirmation.

When he grins triumphantly at me, I squeak out a happy noise.

"We did it?" I clasp my hands together. "We made Glow?"

"*You* did it, Hannah. You fucking did it!" Ellister lunges for me.

Forgetting about the rules he set, he picks me up, swings me around, and plants excessive kisses on my face.

Beyond happy, I laugh against his mouth. "We're going home. We're going to get to go home."

"Paradise," Ellister says. "Our paradise."

This is another shift in our plans. A huge shift. It's nothing like the life Ellister mapped out for us here, with magic, isolation, and seemingly endless years.

Instead, Ellister will become human. His magic will fade over time. He'll be giving up twenty-five thousand years in exchange for maybe sixty or seventy.

"Are you sure?" I ask him, pulling back. "Are you positive living in the human realm is what you want?"

"A normal life with you, Hannah..." Ellister responds, full of passion. "It's beyond my wildest dreams. There's nothing I want more."

I kiss him, pressing my mouth to his firmly.

It's all going to work out.

If we go to the farm in search of employment, we'll get hired. We'll go in the way of Jack, acting as drifters in need of a place to belong. We can move into one of the cabins. Work hard. Raise a family. Grow old together and die after a life well lived.



## CHAPTER 18

### *ELLISTER*

More Glow pings inside the pitcher while hissing continues from the pipe. The distiller is working consistently, and I almost can't believe it.

Once again, Hannah and I are going to cheat death. We've found our new solution.

Waves of extreme happiness travel through the bond from Hannah to me, multiplying as her emotions soak into my soul. In turn, mine reflect back at her like a boomerang.

It makes me incredibly aroused.

I could send Hannah back to bed alone while I stand out here and watch each drop collect...

Or.

We could celebrate properly.

As Hannah clings to me and licks my bottom lip between kisses, I know I can't stay away from her any longer.

My willpower only goes so far, and it's currently depleted.

One more time. I can have her just once more before we leave here.

Hannah makes a noise of surprise when I meld my mouth with hers again, this time slowly. Intentionally.



She melts in my arms when my tongue sweeps past her lips, and I kiss her with all the love inside my soul.

When I lift her up, hiking her legs around my waist, she's confused by my quick change of mind.

"Ellister?" she whispers, keeping her fingers firmly linked behind my neck, unwilling to let me go.

Wordlessly, I communicate my desires by rotating us toward the open barn door, walking out, and kicking it shut behind me.

I carry Hannah to the house, bestowing her with feather-light kisses along the way.

As we cross the threshold, some conflicted emotions blast at me through our tether.

She's happy and grateful for my affection, but she's also terrified to lose it again.

"I'll give you today," I promise, knowing we both need this. "For the rest of the day, I'm yours to do with as you please. Any way you want me. Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it."

"Really?" She blinks at me as I take us to the bedroom.

"Really."

Over the next few hours, I'm going to worship her body in the way she deserves. I'm going to touch her like it might be the last time. Not one second will be taken for granted.

"Sit on the bed," she orders without hesitation, like she's been fantasizing about this scenario.

Still holding her in my arms, I get onto the mattress sideways. With her straddling my lap, I scoot until my back is against the wall and wait for her next command.

"Take off your shirt."

I do. I unbutton it quickly, wanting to rid myself of anything coming between us. After I've tossed it aside, Hannah's ready with her next order.

“Get your wings out.”

Even though I haven't used my wings since yesterday, I can tell they're fuller. I can feel the bulk of the fast-growing feathers inside my flesh.

Proudly, I release the appendages, finding new appreciation for them as Hannah's breathing quickens at their appearance.

Since my backside is pressed against the wall, I spread my them out on either side of me. I stretch them, unfolding all the intricate bones so every part of them is visible.

Looking impressed, Hannah lovingly combs through my feathers. She leans forward, and her mouth ends up by my neck as she showers my wings with attention.

Her breath tickles my healing wounds, making them throb with the desire to have her sucking the blood from me again.

My cock is so hard it hurts. I'm painfully confined beneath the fabric of my pants, and Hannah senses what I need before I can voice it.

She runs her hands down my bare chest before unfastening the material over my crotch. When she gets my erection out, she wraps her fingers around the girth, pumping a few times before squeezing the head.

I groan huskily, my head falling back as my eyes shut. “It's ridiculous how amazing your hand feels on my cock.”

“You think that's good? Watch this. Watch me while I ride your dick.”

There's a naughty twinkle in her eye as she hikes up the bottom of her nightgown. No undergarments are in the way, and she rises on her knees, positions my tip at her slick entrance, and sinks down.

A rough sound comes from my throat as I'm halfway sheathed in her wet heat. As usual, it takes some effort to get my cock into her snug channel, but she's determined to make it happen.

Using her weight, Hannah bears down on me until she's fully impaled, until our pelvises are flush.

I love the way her nostrils flare at the stretch. Whenever she first takes me in, she gets these little creases around her eyes from the intensity of being filled. Then her face relaxes as her body adjusts to my size.

She unties the ribbon over her chest. The cinched material loosens and falls, exposing her shoulders first, then her perfect tits.

"Play with my nipples." Arching her back, she offers the stiffened peaks.

Cupping one breast in my hand, I bring my mouth to the other. Her flesh is a bit salty from sweat, and I find the taste tantalizing. I suck on the bud between my teeth while rolling her other nipple with my thumb and forefinger.

Unable to resist, she starts to move. Rocking, she bites her lip, her enlarged pupils peering at me with unfiltered lust.

She's so beautiful like this. Confident. Strong.

For now, she isn't in any pain from her symptoms. I don't know how badly her illness is going to be affected by having sex, but I don't want to think about the consequences.

Her cunt flutters around my hardness.

"We've barely begun." I chuckle darkly against her tit. "So close already?"

"No," she moans out her protest. "I won't do it. I won't come."

I start circling her clit with my middle finger. "I'd like to see you try and stop it."

"I'm serious, Ellister." She pushes my hand away. "I don't want it to be over yet."

Just because she comes, doesn't mean we have to stop. We've both learned that. We have yet to find a limit to how many times we can have back-to-back sex. We can fuck, finish, and fuck again, all within the span of ten minutes.

Sometimes I get off when she does; the bond pushes me to it.

But I can always go again.

Enjoying the way her pussy quivers as she tries to hold off the orgasm, I lick the two-day-old bite mark on her breast, tempting her with my tongue. I won't reopen the holes. Drinking from her isn't a good idea with her condition, but I can't still tease her a little.

She tsks and wags her finger at me. "Your mouth is trouble."

"So?" I grin at her.

"Lie back," she says, pressing on my shoulders as she urges me to rotate toward the pillow. "And put your hands behind your head."

My smile falls. "But—"

"You said however I want it." She lifts an eyebrow, challenging me. "I need your hands and your tongue away from me if I want to let it build for at least an hour—"

"An hour?" I bark incredulously.

We've never resisted completion for that long.

Hannah seems determined to defy the odds, though, and I have a feeling she's going to make this almost torturous for me.

She's stopped the undulation of her hips, just straddling me with my cock wedged inside her. Gathering the fabric around her waist, she lifts the gown up and over her head like she's settling in for a lengthy stay right where she is.

Shit.

I made a mistake in forgetting how tenacious this woman is. I gave her an inch and she's taking a hundred fucking miles.

Like the angel she is, the sunlight kisses her creamy skin, almost making it look like she's glowing. Every bite mark from the past several days is on display; on her inner thigh, the side of her neck, her shoulder, her breast, and her wrist.

It shouldn't turn me on to be reminded of how I made a meal of her, but it does. And from the way her gaze pauses on my marks, I know it does the same for her.

We're a unique pair. Some might say we're fucked-up, but no one could deny we're so unbelievably right for each other.

"Hands. Behind. Head," she insists, punctuating each word.

"Fuck," I huff out as I obey.

She grins at my reluctant compliance, and she boops me on the nose like I'm a cute puppy. Gritting my teeth, I narrow my eyes, only making her smile wider.

"Stop trying to look so annoyed, Ellister. You're going to enjoy this."

I have no doubt about that.

Now that I'm lying with my head on the pillow, my wings are flattened out under me, spread wide across the bed. Hannah begins her teasing by caressing them both.

Every place she touches sends glorious sensations to the bases of my wings, down my spine, and into my cock.

As my shaft jerks inside her cunt, she smiles at the effect she has on me.

Her amusement dies when she notices a feather has fallen out, and she picks it up. "You lost one. Is that normal?"

"With so many new feathers growing in, yes."

The tenseness in her shoulders lessens, and I understand her relief. She's worried about my health, just as I'm concerned about hers.

I wish I could feel her pain.

If she must suffer, so should I.

Either way, her fate will be mine.

We'll survive this together. Or we won't. Those are the only outcomes.

Suicide after one's mate dies is common, and it's not the first time I've fantasized about my own death. If Hannah leaves this world, I'll be right behind her.

Now that my soul once again belongs to me, my fate is no longer in someone else's hands. My life is mine to do with what I wish, and if I want to end it, no one can stop me.

"Hey," Hannah says softly but firmly, as if she knows where my thoughts are at. "Eyes on me."

Taking the gray feather, she runs it down her own chest, trailing between her breasts.

I gasp a little because I feel it as if she's doing it to me. When she circles her nipples, one by one, I involuntarily thrust my hips, just trying to get some friction on my cock. Her pussy is warm, wet, and tight, but I crave movement and rhythm.

"Ah, ah." She shakes her head at me.

Frustrated, I grunt as the feather finds its way to my neck. Hannah grazes the prong marks with the silky tip.

Tingles ripple over my body, and I clench my fists and tug at my hair to keep my hands where they are.

Giving me just a sliver of what I need, Hannah rocks her body, lifting up then coming back down. She does it again and again, and she starts the rhythm like a slow dance.

Her juices drip down my cock as she fucks me languidly.

Inevitably, she gets worked up. Moans and whimpers escape her as her body bucks faster.

It hasn't been anywhere close to an hour like Hannah claimed it would be, but I'm anticipating the orgasm heading our way.

The pressure is building inside me—inside her, inside *us*—and...

She just stops all movement.

My eyebrows furrow. "What—"

“Shh.” She cuts off my complaint.

More feather play.

She gets going again.

Repeat.

It just goes on and on. Whenever she gets close to coming, she pauses and teases the fuck out of me until she’s regained control of her body.

Her stubborn streak is one to be admired. Honestly, I’m proud of my mate. Proud because she tamed someone like me. She’s the center of my benevolence, my motivation to embrace goodness, the reason I know true love.

And, by the stars, she’s a sight to behold, her eyes closed, fingers threaded through her hair, cheeks flushed, and jaw slack as she loses herself in the ecstasy we’re so close to.

She doesn’t realize how much she’s testing me. Pushing me to my feral side. Somewhere inside me, there’s a monster. A monster who doesn’t play by someone else’s rules. A monster who wants to fill her with my seed.

I’m not tied down. My hands are still behind my head where she wants them, but I could move anytime.

I could grab her, spin us until she’s pinned beneath me, and fuck her hard and fast. She’d love it, and it’s tempting.

But I know she needs this.

She didn’t consent to the sudden turn her life took, and this is her way of snatching the reins back.

As she starts another round of teasing, I get all warm and fuzzy, entering a euphoric, trance-like state.

Our sexual connection becomes deeper.

Soul to soul.

I’m slightly aware that I’m sweating, shaking, and my balls ache from the need for release.

My heart’s beating so fast.

I’ve lost track of time.

Is it even still the same day, or have we been going at it all night?

Some concern for Hannah filters through.

She could be exerting herself too much.

I hate to ruin her fun. I'm thinking I might have to tell her this game has to end, but thankfully, it doesn't come to that.

Hannah lets out a few high-pitched breaths as her rhythm gets faster. She bounces up and down on my cock several times before grasping my shoulder to keep herself from collapsing. Digging her fingernails into my skin, she tilts her hips so her clit rubs on my lower stomach.

“Touch me,” she gasps. “Ellister—”

Before she can finish the request, I comply. My palms itch to feel her, and I grope both breasts. Squeezing the globes, I rub her nipples with my thumbs.

She releases a hoarse shout as her top half falls down, her chest pressing against mine, her hips still rotating as her cunt strangles my cock.

With a scream, she comes apart, and I explode inside her so powerfully, I lose my breath. My cock spurts, filling her up so much I feel my seed leaking out onto my balls.

Grabbing her by the hips, I move her up and down on my cock, making sure to bury myself to the hilt as more hot jets shoot inside her.

A thought enters my mind—just a brief imagination—and I picture what Hannah would look like if she were pregnant with my child.

I come even harder when I think about seeing her belly swell.

It's unlikely to happen. With her body in such poor health, it's not a habitable place for a baby, but that doesn't stop me from wanting it.

Someday.

Someday, we'll have children.



I don't even like kids. Never have. But I'll love mine.

Our house will be filled with noise. Footsteps. Bickering and bedtime stories. Laughter and singing. We'll go crazy from the chaos.

My heart and Hannah's thunder simultaneously as we both calm from the vigorous love making.

I hold her to me, tracing her spine while idly combing my fingers through her hair. My cock is still inside her, and as it softens, it slips out.

The disconnection is jarring after having sex for so long, and I feel her satiated mood shift and plummet.

Hannah grasps my shoulders and curls her fingers, her nails digging into my skin as she holds onto me. Then she lets out a sob.

"Darling? Are you hurt?"

"No."

"Then what is it?"

I move my head to the side to look at her face, and I see a tear dripping from her eye. It falls over the bridge of her nose and lands on my chest. That tiny drop might as well be a spike to my heart. I hate it when she cries.

Gently wiping the wetness from her face, I ask, "Why are you so sad?"

Instead of forming an answer with words, she just breaks down. Closing her eyes, she clings to me as she continues decorating my skin with her tears.

I look out the window. The shadow the house is casting on the lawn is long and dark, meaning the suns are merging in the east.

It's dusk.

Hannah doesn't need to explain her emotional outburst. I told her I'd give her today, but the day is almost done.

After this, we'll part once again.

I'm about to tell her how sorry I am. Maybe throw in a few promises I'm not sure I can keep. Anything to get her to stop crying.

Unfortunately, a loud sound startles us both.

*Thud, thud, thud.*

The noise is so unexpected, so out of place, it takes me a second to realize someone is knocking.

Someone's at our door.



## CHAPTER 19

### *ELLISTER*

“Why would anyone be here?” Hannah’s question is sluggish and slurred.

She wore herself out, and now she’s struggling to stay awake.

“No worries, darling,” I assure her, even though I’m certain there are many worries to be had. I just don’t want to cause her panic, especially when she needs sleep so badly. “I’ll take care of everything.”

Deliberately keeping my facial expression light, I slip her nightgown over her head, manipulating her arms through the sleeve holes.

Her eyes are still red and puffy from crying, but they’re closed before I’ve guided her head to the pillow. Her features relax and her breathing evens out.

The knocking comes again.

The loud pounding doesn’t make Hannah stir, but each thud goes straight to my temper.

I’m so angry at the intrusion, I can’t even process the fact that we shouldn’t be having visitors when only one person knows we’re here.

I can assume it’s Rymus, but I’m smart enough to know assumptions are dangerous in this world.

After grabbing my own clothes, I hastily put on my pants before stabbing my feet into my boots. I don't bother with the laces and I forego a shirt, keeping my wings out as a sign of aggression.

Taking my time, I retrieve a pitcher of water from the kitchen and pour a glass for Hannah. She'll be thirsty when she wakes from her nap, and I set the drink on the nightstand next to the bed.

When I finally answer the door, there's no one there. I step out onto the front stoop, glance to my left, and see Rymus approaching the barn.

He's several feet from the double doors, hesitating to enter the dilapidated structure. Smoke is seeping through the roof's peppered holes, and he shields his eyes as he looks up to study it.

What a nosy bastard.

I move toward him with quick strides.

"Do you always snoop on your neighbor's property without permission?" My barking tone startles him, and he turns toward my hostile glare. "Perhaps that's why the last people left."

Squaring his shoulders, he keeps a cool mask in place as he gestures to the building. "I saw the smoke from my house. I thought you had a fire."

Internally berating myself for literally giving off smoke signals, I observe the gray trails floating in the sky, wondering how many others will see it on the off-chance anyone is flying overhead.

There are trees in the Day Realm that don't put off smoke when they're on fire, but I didn't want to spend days trying to find them. I've just been working with what's here because of the time constraints.

Now I feel like I should've taken the extra step.

"I was coming to help," Rymus adds, trying to disarm me.

He doesn't show signs of dishonesty. No tensing. No tick on his face as he tries to hide the pain.

Maybe he truly is a good man and a concerned citizen, but that doesn't make him any less of a danger to us.

If he figures out what we're doing, he'll report us.

"As you can see, there is no burning building," I say vaguely. "You can go."

"Are you smoking meats?" he persists, his nose in the air as if he's trying to detect the scent.

"It's a distiller," I answer, purposely not telling him of the substance we're producing.

His eyes light with interest, but there's skepticism in his gaze. "Liquor?"

He's not going to stop until he gets an answer. Obviously, he's onto us. Maybe he doesn't know what we're up to, but he definitely suspects we're breaking the law.

If I were the old me, I'd kill him without hesitation, but since regaining my soul, the thought of mortally maiming someone leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

Good stars, I've gone soft.

I still might have to hurt Rymus.

I could send him away. If I wanted to, I could dump him in the human realm. It's doubtful he has a portal to get back. Unless he knows a Seeker who could locate him, he'd never be found. His disappearance would be mysterious, and he'd be stuck, forced to live out the rest of his days as a human.

The notion is too cruel to consider. He might have a mate. Or children.

I need a more temporary way to detain him.

"Let's go for a walk, shall we? My mate is sleeping, and I don't want to wake her. We can chat in the forest." I take off for the woods, knowing he'll follow me.

He's intrigued about what I'm going to say, and I'm using that to my advantage.

Once we're under the shade of the thick leaves overhead, we walk in silence for a couple minutes. We're both keeping about fifteen feet of distance between us, trees often separating us as we traipse through the forest.

Rymus glances over at me, like he's expecting me to spill.

I stay silent.

I'm letting the tension build on purpose. I want him to be the one to speak first. As long as I keep information to myself, I'll hold control over the conversation.

Just as I knew he would, Rymus breaks his cool façade. "I know you're harboring a human."

Well, he skipped the pleasantries.

His statement holds a hint of disdain. Not surprising. It's no secret how fraternizing with humans is frowned upon, and I have a feeling his curiosity about a potential fire is just an excuse to come poking around.

"She's none of your concern," I say firmly.

"Anything that goes on in my area is my concern," he shoots back. "Did you steal her?"

Rattled from the question, I respond, "No."

I double over from sudden pain as I stumble to a temporary stop. Technically, I did steal Hannah, and the lie is like a knife in my gut, causing a rift on my soul—a dark mark I'll never be able to erase.

Rymus narrows his eyes at my obvious dishonesty. "You lie."

"Hannah is my fated mate," I inform him. "And that's all you need to know."

"Hannah." He scoffs. "Such a human name. And your fated mate? That's preposterous."

"It's true. In fact, it's more common than you'd think."

If the fae weren't so proud and snobbish about diluting their gene pool, they might actually find a great reward in their open-mindedness. Maybe that's why mate bonds are so uncommon in this world—we're simply not casting a wide enough net to find our other half.

“Regardless of fate, kidnapping humans is illegal,” Rymus recites the law haughtily. “Not to mention, difficult to do. It requires magic.”

His words are as close to an accusation as you can get without coming right out and saying it. He suspects my power is great. He's probably assuming I can create my own portals.

Portal makers are highly sought after.

In this moment, I realize Hannah and I never had a chance at being anonymous here. I wanted Valora to be our safe haven, but as long as I have my power, someone will always seek to use it.

If Rymus really wants to, he can have me arrested for kidnapping. He could propagate any number of excuses to bring me before the royals.

As if to prove my point, he continues listing my offenses, “I also know you're taking up residence on a property that isn't yours. In Olphene, the records for this place say it still belongs to the Day Realm council.”

A roundtrip to Olphene would've taken him at least a full day, so he must've left as soon as he met us to go check up on our story.

“We'll leave soon,” I assure him. “Our presence isn't hurting anyone in the meantime.”

“I have obligations, Ellister.”

“Obligations to do what? What do you want from me?”

“I'd like for you and your companion to accompany me to see the king.”

I was right. He's trying to make a citizen's arrest, and he'll probably be rewarded handsomely for it, too.

Creating a scandal is the last thing I need to be doing. Yes, the world of Valora is tolerant of magical interference, but only to a certain degree. Getting discovered and ending up on royal radar could change the course of history. I don't want that. Every event must play out just as it has—just as it will in the future.

“Then what?” I ask. “What will that accomplish?”

He shrugs. “The king will know what to do. He's fair.”

A fair king? That's about as rare as my vortex power. “And if I refuse?”

“Your willingness would be ideal, but it's not required.”

Hannah and I won't be leaving.

Neither will Rymus, unfortunately for him.

He doesn't know it, but I've been leading him somewhere specific. I keep walking, almost lazily, and he stays at my pace while maintaining the safe distance between us.

When I get to the location I want, I come to a stop. So does he.

He's right where I want him.

About fifteen feet behind him, I spot the hive in the tree, just a large sack hanging from a branch.

Right now, the bees are oblivious to us, unbothered by our presence.

They're about to be very bothered.

I open a vortex, and Rymus' eyes narrow as he studies the motion of the air behind me. “Is that supposed to scare me?”

Confused by his unsurprised reaction, I lift an eyebrow.

Funny, he almost sounds... bored. Most people just about shit their pants when they see a vortex for the first time.

Instead of responding with words, I don't hesitate to let the force grow stronger. Much stronger. That drop of Glow I ingested earlier is still lingering in my system, and my suction has more kick than usual.



Rymus feels the pull. Bending his knees, he lowers his center of gravity, digging his boots into the dirt while trying to stand his ground.

Good.

I need him to stay right there for just a little longer...

The hive feels the disturbance in the air, and the bees start to buzz around, alert and ready to take on any danger.

Focusing on the oval-shape, I increase the spinning. The hive rocks a few times before detaching from the branch.

Unbeknownst to Rymus, it flies straight for him. When it hits him in the back of the head, it explodes with a swarm of very angry bees.

He screams as the first stings pierce the skin on his face and neck.

Immediately, I fall backward into the vortex, letting it shut behind me as I picture the front yard of the house.

I get spit out onto the weed-infested lawn, and I can hear Rymus' agony echoing from the forest. It's so loud, it's scaring off all the birds. They take to the sky, scattering with panic over the gut-wrenching sounds.

Standing, I brush myself off.

I don't feel as bad as I thought I would. In fact, I don't regret my actions at all.

The stings will keep Rymus quiet for the next few days. Maybe even a week.

If I use my experience with the bees to gauge his... I received a little more than a dozen stings, and that put me out of commission for two days. Rymus is probably getting hundreds.

It won't kill him. Eventually, the pain and paralysis will wear off, and he'll be able to go on with his life.

By that time, Hannah and I will have disappeared, and no long-term harm will have been done.

His screams begin breaking up as his vocal cords lose function.

The front door of the house swings open, and Hannah sticks her head out.

Her fearful expression turns to relief when she sees I'm not the one making the awful sounds, but she frowns disapprovingly. "What's happening, Ellister?"

"You're supposed to be taking a nap."

"I was, but I woke up with all that noise." She puts a hand on her hip. "What did you do?"

"What was necessary," I reply.

Stalking toward her, I pause on the threshold, take her face in my hands, and place a gentle kiss on her lips.

Manipulation at its finest.

When she melts at my touch, I keep going. I sweep my tongue past her lips and taste her. So fucking sweet.

Her body arches, her nipples rubbing against my front.

Fuck.

I'd just wanted to distract her from her line of questioning, but she's making it extremely difficult for me to stop.

The bond pulses inside me. Like a physical force, it reels us in closer. Hannah's soul is my vortex, and I'll always get sucked in.

Rymus is no longer making a ruckus. The paralysis has set in. I'm betting the bees are satisfied with the damage they did, and I hope they've stopped stinging. Even if Rymus is my enemy, I don't wish him more suffering than required.

Hannah's hands start wandering. They always do. Greedy little fiend.

While slipping under my shirt to toy with one of my nipples, she fumbles with the buttons on my pants.

I could fuck her against the door frame right now. Just hike up her skirt and drive my cock into her wet heat.

But I won't.

Mustering all the self-control I can, I rip my lips away from Hannah's. Still framing her face with my hands, I look upon her beauty.

Her big maple-syrup eyes stare up at me, pleading me not to stop. But the dark circles underneath are motivation to put distance between us.

A few days of suffering from mate withdrawal is a small price to pay for a long life together.

Planting one last kiss on her forehead, I head inside to encourage her to drink more water and try to ignore the pang of disappointment that travels through the bond from her heart to mine.



## CHAPTER 20

### *HANNAH*

“You should stay away from this area. The bees could return.” Ellister’s tone is bossy as he paces restlessly in front of me where I’m kneeling next to Rymus’ unrecognizable face.

Tossing him an annoyed look, I yank another stinger from Rymus’ head with my gloved fingers.

“They won’t. They’ve abandoned the hive.” I motion to the destroyed sack on the ground. “There’s no reason for them to stay, and I bet they’re busy making their new home somewhere else.”

Ellister peers into the hive with a happy expression. “At least we’ve got all this honey to ourselves.”

Well, not completely to ourselves. I have a bowl of it next to me, reserved to treat Rymus’ welts.

I’m going to have to slather it all over his entire top half because without a shirt, he had no armor against the bees. His skin doesn’t even look like skin anymore. It’s red and raised, looking like he got doused with boiling water. Some of the blisters are oozing. I haven’t looked at his legs yet, but there are a few stingers sticking out of the fabric covering his right thigh.

Ellister growls. “I don’t like you touching another man.”

“You should’ve thought about that before you did this.” Huffing, I go back to meticulously removing each barb embedded on this poor guy.

In response, Ellister doubles down. “It was the best choice, and I’d do it again, given the chance.”

I try to sense his emotions through the bond. Honestly, I’m searching for a hint of remorse over what he did to Rymus, but I’m reading mostly stubborn determination.

I sigh, accepting his ruthless side as part of him. A part of him that I love, regardless of how brutal it may be.

“Where are we going to keep him?” I ask.

“Keep him?” Ellister sounds confused, like he hadn’t even considered giving Rymus any shelter.

“Yeah. We can’t just leave him out in the woods. He could get eaten by a bear or something.”

“Well, he’s not staying in our house.”

“Where else is there? The barn is occupied by—”

Ellister cuts me off with a slashing motion of his hand. “Rymus might be paralyzed, but he’s awake and aware. He can hear everything, so be careful how much you say.”

Moving to Rymus’ shoulder, I suggest, “How about the chicken coop? He can recover in there.”

It’s not the best accommodation. We never got to finish repairing it the other day. Some boards are still missing, and it’s small. Still, it’s better than leaving someone out in the open.

“Fine,” Ellister bites out, obviously in a foul mood.

“Did you know if you help me, this’ll go twice as fast?”

“I’ve been trying to keep my distance from you. Ten feet, Hannah. Ten!”

I laugh so obnoxiously it’s a cackle. “You weren’t saying that an hour ago.”

My mate just grunts.

You'd think he'd be happier after the awesome, mind-blowing sex. I'm actually a little offended he's not more chipper.

"I didn't think it was possible for you to get grumpier," I remark. "But you've proved me wrong. What crawled up your butt?"

"I did," he bursts out. "I crawled up my own butt." He declares it so seriously, I have to bite my lip to stop myself from laughing, but my smile fades when he says, "I was too weak to stay away from you. And now you're cleaning up my mess when you should be in bed, but if I tell you to go, you'll argue with me. You insist on being so damn strong all the time, but you're not. I can see how bad you feel."

It's then that I understand where his stress is coming from. When he looks at me, he sees me fading. Dying. If I had to watch him deteriorate and there was nothing I could do to make it better, I'd be pretty prickly, too.

Plus, I know he's right. My power nap did nothing for me. Despite how much sleep I've gotten in the past couple days, I'm so drained.

I remove the garden gloves and place them on the ground next to the bowl. "Okay. Maybe it's time I let your strength be enough for both of us."

Dropping to my level, Ellister kneels on the other side of Rymus and searches my body with his sharp gaze. "You're actually conceding?"

"Yeah." I hate admitting defeat, but the hammering inside my skull makes me want to wave the white flag for now.

Ellister's jaw clenches so hard I hear his teeth grind, and he looks more concerned than ever now that I'm giving in. "How bad is it?"

"It's not good."

"It's only been two days since the onset of your symptoms."

"I know."

“Have you lost sensation in your limbs yet?”

“No. Look, if you promise to finish up with Rymus—and I mean *thoroughly*. Don’t forget below his pants and in the crevices—”

“Crevices?”

“Yes. Crevices. Every stinger needs to be removed and every welt coated with honey. Do that and make sure he’s stored somewhere safe... and I’ll go back to sleep.”

Nodding, Ellister stands. “I’ll escort you back to the house.”

“I can still walk on my own.”

“I realize that. I want to be there in case you lose consciousness on your way.”

I accept his offer, even though I know when he says ‘escort,’ he’s not talking about carrying me or holding my hand. Or touching me at all. He means walking ten feet behind me.



## CHAPTER 21

### *HANNAH*

The metal tub in the bathroom is small, and the water is cold. Usually, the cool baths are great for the heat, but my fever is making me shiver.

I'm very much looking forward to having hot showers again, which should be soon if Ellister is right about how much Glow he'll need to get us away from here.

Since hiding Rymus' body in the coop yesterday—God, I never thought I'd think that so casually, but here we are—Ellister's been working nonstop.

While I slept last night, he spent hours chopping wood and stoking the fire. A plate of pastries was sitting next to the bed when I woke up this morning, so I know he left in search of food at some point. He also made another trip to Dawn and Dusk because a fresh pitcher of waterfall mist is waiting for me on the kitchen counter.

Now that I've eaten breakfast and I'm clean, I'm looking forward to going out to the barn. I want to see Ellister, and I'm on the edge of my seat when it comes to finding out how fast we can get out of here. The sooner the better, because then I can stop feeling like shit and Ellister and I can start touching again.

I stand from the water, wrap the towel around my body, and step out.



As soon as I touch down on the rope rug, I feel a familiar tingling that isn't welcome at all.

The pins and needles. They've started in my right foot, from the tips of my toes to my heel.

I wince at the unwelcome pain.

"No," I whisper to myself, my stomach dropping.

It's happening too fast. When the illness hit me before—in my almost-memories—my leg didn't stop functioning until nearly two and a half weeks in, and even then, it began subtly.

What I'm experiencing now is not subtle. It's like I'm stepping on a board with a thousand tiny nails sticking through it.

Leaning against the door frame, I shift most of my weight to my other foot. With the decrease in pressure, my discomfort eases a bit, but I know this is bad.

Soon, the numbness will spread. It'll travel up my calf, and I might not be able to walk without assistance.

A sudden wave of vertigo comes over me. I struggle and fight to stay upright, spots blooming in my vision as the room spins. I can't pass out. Not just because I don't want to face-plant on the floor, but also because I don't want Ellister to find me like that again.

He already feels bad enough, and I'd like to keep the quick progression of my illness to myself for a little bit longer.

If we're lucky, we could be gone by tomorrow and I'll get better anyway, and Ellister will never have to know how severe it got.

Fortunately, the dizzy spell recedes after a minute, and I manage to stay conscious.

I make my way out into the living room while trying not to walk with a limp, but I grind my teeth with every step.

I let out a grateful sigh when I realize Ellister left some clothes out for me.

A clean dress is draped over one of the rocking chairs, and I shimmy the pink silky fabric over my head.

Next, I stop in the kitchen to get a drink. The waterfall mist is wonderfully cold as I guzzle the entire glass down.

One isn't enough, and I end up drinking straight from the jug. Tucking the big container in the crook of my elbow, I decide to take my water with me for my visit to the barn.

Gathering my wet hair over one shoulder, I consider my choice of shoes. Ellister did end up grabbing some boys' boots for me somewhere, but I won't be doing any hard labor today. Plus, all the laces look like a hassle.

I fit my feet into the dainty slippers and go outside.

As I skirt around the chicken coop, I stare it, grimacing when I think about Rymus just lying in there, still as death. I imagine it's quite stuffy with it all boarded up. Just as Ellister promised, he made sure the shelter is adequate, and he finished fixing the coop.

I really can't blame him for what he did. While I was horrified to see the condition Rymus was in, I know it was Ellister's way of showing mercy. He could've done much worse to the guy.

Our predicament is too time-sensitive for any hiccups, and it wouldn't take much to ruin our plans. We can't let one nosy neighbor derail everything.

When I get into the barn, Ellister is peering into the pitcher.

He senses my approach, and he looks over at me with happiness sparkling in his eyes. "It's coming out, slow and steady. At this rate, we might be able to leave tonight. I'll keep stoking the fire today and see what we've got by the end of the day."

"That's great news." I can't help grinning, and Ellister smiles back.

Pressing his lips together, he carefully pours what's in the pitcher into the flask.

After closing up the cap, he shakes the metal container next to his ear to gauge what he's got.

"It's not enough yet." He sounds cautious, but optimistic. "But soon, Hannah. Soon."

Setting the pipe back into the pitcher, he tosses a few more logs on the fire to keep the water boiling as hot as possible.

It's all coming together so quickly.

It's been almost... easy.

Too easy.

Really, I should count my blessings and just enjoy our success, but the pessimistic nature of the illness whispers doubts at me.

Rolling my ankle, I note the difficulty with the movement.

Shit. In just the small time since I left the bathroom, the tingling has traveled.

Still trying to conceal the new development, I casually rest my back against the rough wooden door frame as I clutch the cold jug to the feverishly hot skin on my chest.

A twinge of pain suddenly shoots up my spine, and I grab the back of my skull because it feels like it's splitting in two. It hurts so bad it makes me dizzy, and I start to lose my balance as my vision goes spotty.

Ellister quickly closes the distance between us to catch me. He steadies me by the shoulder, and he takes the jug of water from me before I can drop it. After setting it on the dirt floor, he wraps his arms around me.

The relief is immediate. My pain dissipates, and I no longer feel like I might pass out.

"What are you doing?" Half-heartedly, I try to push him away. I don't want him to stop holding me, but I know I can't lean into his comfort. "We shouldn't touch."

"Seeing you in pain makes me want to die," Ellister states roughly, his hands rubbing up and down my back, his fingers

getting tangled in my damp hair. “Especially when I know it’s because of me.”

I glance up at his pinched face, and my lips feel hot from how badly I want him to kiss me.

Then he does.

He bends down slowly, closing the distance between us, and presses his lips gently to mine. It’s the softest of kisses, but it sears me to my soul.

Abruptly, he pulls back. At first, I think he probably realized he got carried away and he’s going to tell me to get back to bed.

But his eyebrows furrow, and his head tilts to the side as if he’s listening to something.

Snarling like the animal he is, he pushes me behind him and sways out the doorway to look at the end of the lane leading up to the house. Peeking around him, I follow his line of sight, and my heart does a panicked flip when I see clouds of dust.

Tiny dark figures emerge in the distance—the outline of people on horses. I count at least five, and they’re coming fast.

I suspect there’s only one reason that many people would charge up here like that.

We’re in trouble.

Ellister confirms it when he mutters, “Military men.”

Maybe all of Ellister’s stealing is going to catch up with him after all.

“What should we do?” I ask with urgency. “Vortex out of here?”

Torn, he looks at the distiller, our lifeline. “We can’t leave this behind or let it be discovered. They’ll destroy it or take it for themselves.” Shoving the flask into his pocket, he makes a noise of distress. “Starting over isn’t an option because it would take days to find a new property and rebuild the distiller. We don’t have that much time.”

He's right. And we can't rely on the Glow we've already produced because it's not enough. We could end up decades short of our goal.

"Got any more beehives to utilize around here?" I joke.

"I'll take them through a vortex," Ellister decides. "To the Dream Realm. I'll strand them somewhere in the mountains, and it'll take them at least a week to get back here. Even if they were to send a messenger sprite to their superiors, we'll still have today."

"Good plan."

"You should stay out of sight for now."

Nodding, I let him guide me behind the door. He closes it but leaves it slightly ajar. Cloaked in shadows, I put one of my eyes by the rusted hinge to peer through the thin crack where my view of the yard is unobstructed.

Ellister walks out to the lane to greet our visitors. His stance is lazy and relaxed, and I don't understand how he can seem so cool when he's freaking out inside.

My heart hammers away as I watch the horses get closer, and I feel a cough building in my lungs from the smoky air in here. I need to be silent as possible, so I lift my skirt to my face, breathing through the filter of the gauzy fabric.

Sweat drips down my temple when the men approach the yard and slow to a stop.

As I study them, I remember what Ellister told me about local law enforcement—how there really isn't any. This group doesn't look like a mob of poorly equipped villagers, and I think he's right about them being from the military.

These men are well-armed, with swords strapped to their backs and belts, knives sticking out of their boots, and axes and ropes attached to the saddles. They're wearing dark-blue, silky sleeveless shirts with official-looking logos on them. Over the left breast pocket, there's a symbol of two suns overlapping.

Ellister backs up a few paces, keeping his distance, and smoothly asks, “To what do I owe this honor, gentlemen?”

“State your name.” The order comes from the man at the front, and I automatically assume he’s the leader.

With his head shaved on the sides and his longer blond hair on top braided against his scalp, he looks like an actor straight out of a Viking show. All of them seem like hardened warriors. They’re all wearing leather gloves and bulky boots, and the black eyeliner gives them a more brutal appearance.

“Ellister.” The response is simple, and he doesn’t elaborate further.

“We’re looking for a member of our clan. He lives nearby, but he isn’t at his house. Perhaps you know him. Goes by the name of Rymus.”

A bolt of stress pings from Ellister to me, but he doesn’t show it outwardly. “I have met him a couple times.”

One of the men tips his head in my direction. “What’s in the barn?”

“Rymus had spoken of smoking meats,” Ellister replies carefully. “It sounded like a fine suggestion.”

It’s amazing how he can avoid a lie with the right wording. Unfortunately, every faerie is an expert at manipulating the truth, and I have a feeling he’s not getting away with it that easily.

“Do you know Rymus’ whereabouts?” the leader asks, direct.

“I do,” Ellister answers, and my pulse pounds faster.

“Well?” the guy prompts impatiently. “Tell us where he is.”

“It would probably be better for me to show you.” When Ellister turns toward the chicken coop and gestures for them to follow him, I realize what he’s doing—he’s trying to get them to dismount their horses so they can be taken through the vortex.

Staying cautious, the leader motions to the three men behind him, signaling they should go with Ellister, but he remains where he is.

Ellister's inner turmoil travels through our tether as he considers reformulating his plan, and I understand his upset. He's going to have to take his enemies in different stages if they remain in separate areas.

The man who had been at the back of the formation moves his horse forward to sidle up next to the leader as the other guys are brought closer to the coop.

When Ellister points inside and they look at their friend, they gasp at the gruesome sight. One recoils and goes a little gray as he covers his mouth.

"Poor Rymus had a very unfortunate incident with a beehive while he was trespassing yesterday," Ellister states flatly. "After I soothed his stings with honey, I made sure he had shelter where he could recover."

"Why didn't you take him to his house?" one of the men asks angrily.

"Rymus isn't a friend to me," Ellister defends. "He's barely an acquaintance. He came here uninvited, and he's lucky I gave him a safe place to recover."

"Zetipher!" the guy who looks like he might puke calls to the leader. "You need to come see this."

This is what Ellister wanted. That's why he decided to go ahead and show them where Rymus is. Shock value. Get them to be so flustered they forget their own plan, wrangle them to one area, and vortex out of here.

Unfortunately, this Zetipher dude isn't falling for it. He slides off his horse, but he stays close to the animal. "Bring Rymus to me."

Two of the guys bend down, reaching into the coop to drag their friend's body out.

The other keeps his eye on Ellister. He's the biggest dude of the bunch; at least half a foot taller than Ellister. Broad,

muscular shoulders. A meaty hand that's resting on the hilt of his sword, like he's ready to swing it at any moment.

The suspicion is so thick it's palpable, making the air seem heavier. Or maybe that's just the building smoke in here.

Lowering myself to my knees, I crouch in my hiding spot where it's a little easier to breathe.

As I continue to watch the scene unfold, I anxiously twist my hands in my lap. I look back at the distiller, noticing how fast the wood is burning underneath it. As quietly as I can, I grab a couple logs, scoot over to the fire, and shove them into the flames.

Leaving tonight is the only option.

Even if these guys believe Ellister's story about how Rymus got injured, they won't forget we're here. Whether we like it or not, we're on their radar.

I go back to my spying spot, my gaze glued to Ellister. He's still trying to appear as non-threatening as possible, his hands in his pockets.

But once Rymus is carted over to Zetipher, that changes.

Suddenly, Ellister staggers, swaying on his feet.

Blinking sleepily, he loses his balance. Reaching out to the coop, he braces himself as he tries not to go down. Much to my horror, he falls anyway.

His legs buckle, and he lands on his knees in the dirt while a look of shock plays out on his face.

What did they do to him? I study him, searching for evidence of a spell, poison, or injury, but I see nothing out of the ordinary.

I don't think they've even gotten close enough to touch him. They've all been keeping their distance.

Seeming unsurprised by Ellister's collapse—almost like he expected it—the big guy comes over and hooks his hand under Ellister's arm to yank him up.

Then I feel the familiar suction of a vortex.



Only, Ellister isn't the one doing it.

The unnatural breeze blows past me, ruffling my hair and sucking some smoke out of the barn.

It goes straight toward Zetipher.

The air is swirling behind him as he backs away from his horse with Rymus slung over his shoulder. Once he's a good distance away from the animal, the pair fly backward and disappear into the abyss.

My jaw couldn't drop any lower.

Zetipher just traveled through a vortex.

Before I can even think about reacting, he's back, alone this time. He tumbles onto the ground in a rough landing I know all too well.

His limbs are shaky as he pushes himself up.

Huffing out a laugh, he looks to Ellister. "What a rush. I'm truly impressed. I've never experienced such power before."

"You're an Extractor." Ellister spits out a few swear words under his breath.

I don't have to ask what an Extractor is because I remember.

This colossal twist means one thing—we're fucked.

So totally fucked.

Ellister's advantage just became his greatest weakness.

We never considered the possibility of encountering someone who can mimic his power. But that's what Zetipher just did, and it drained them both.

Maybe that was partly Zetipher's intention, because Ellister can't fight back now.

I wish the mate bond allowed for telepathy, because I want to tell Ellister to just go ahead and drink the damn Glow. Take enough to get him far away from here. He can come back for me later.

But apparently, the men aren't taking any chances with him. Weakening him wasn't enough for them because the biggest guy whips out some handcuffs. Metal clinks as they're slapped on Ellister's wrists, binding his hands in front of him.

A burn comes through the bond. On top of the pain from the sickness, I feel the iron searing Ellister's skin as it sizzles under the shackles.

Biting my lip so I don't make a sound, I rub at my wrists. Then I press my skin to the cool outside of the pitcher of waterfall mist. I'm hoping to give Ellister some semblance of relief through our connection, but it does little to quell my own pain, so it's probably not helping him either.

And the situation just keeps getting worse.

Going for overkill, the last man still on a horse swings something around in the air before tossing it at Ellister.

As the ball flies, it opens and spreads.

A net.

Ellister lets out a pained shout as the iron encases him from head to toe with fiery crisscrosses.

I barely manage to hold in my whimper when he topples to the ground.

I've never been lit on fire, but I think it would feel something like this. The pain is crippling. Smacking my hand over my mouth, I swallow as I try not to vomit.

Tears spring to my eyes, not just because of how much it hurts me, but if what I'm experiencing is just an echo of Ellister's agony, I can't imagine how awful it is for him.

He's snarling and grumbling a string of swear words that would make the most raunchy person blush.

As he issues a few warnings about how he'll make them pay for what they've done, a new sound joins his wishful thinking.

Rumbling. Like wooden wheels bumping over the dry ground.

Leaning forward, I angle my eyeball through the crack until I can see the end of the lane. A larger shadow is coming this way. A wagon. A big one, led by two horses.

With horrifying realization comes to me—this was a capture mission all along.

That's why the men are wearing leather gloves. They knew this would end with iron. Maybe the men really were looking for Rymus, but they came prepared to take a prisoner.

The good news is, they haven't glanced at the barn more than twice. They don't seem concerned with whatever's going on in here, which means they must not know about the Glow.

The big guy and another roughened henchman heft Ellister up by his shoulders and feet. Inside the cocoon of iron, he glares at Zetipher while he's carried to the approaching wagon.

Through clenched teeth, he growls, "Does Rymus really live at the neighboring farm, or was he your scout?"

"Both," Zetipher answers, walking alongside him. "But it was you who gave yourself away."

"What do you mean?"

"I sensed your power when you used it." Zetipher's tone is dreamy and reminiscent as if he's recalling a mystical event. "It was such a unique experience."

"I take it you live with Rymus, then?" Ellister questions curiously, trying to figure this guy out. "You would've had to be close by to be affected by my vortexes. Or did you feel it when I traveled elsewhere? And you followed me here?"

Zetipher doesn't oblige with answers. "You'll find out soon enough."

After an order is barked to load Ellister into the back of the wagon, my mate tries to reason with Zetipher. "Whatever it is you're wanting to do with me, you should reconsider. It isn't just your own life you should be worried about. The fate of Valora is hanging in the balance."

It's more than a warning—it's a promise.

It makes Zetipher pause, and for a second, I think Ellister's gotten through to him.

Then he waves off any concern, not comprehending the seriousness of Ellister's statement.

"I'm just following orders," Zetipher drawls. "If anyone is going to direct fate, it'll be the king."



## CHAPTER 22

### *ELLISTER*

Hannah's presence is still undiscovered as the wagon door is shut and locked. And I'm glad.

I'm hoping some distance between us might lessen the effects of the bond. When the iron hit my skin, I sensed her misery. Maybe if I'm very far away, the burn won't be so bad for her.

She can stay here, continue to stoke the fire and produce Glow. In the meantime, I'll figure out how to get back once I arrive in Hailene.

I'm not looking forward to the trip. By horse and foot, it'll take at least a couple days to travel to the royal city, and that's only if we don't stop for breaks.

Hannah might not have that long, and two days will feel like weeks if I'm kept in these torturous conditions.

Honestly, the net is unnecessary and cruel, and their decision to use it on me tells me these men are not the merciful kind.

I try not to cry out as the network embeds in the flesh of my face, sinking deeper in my cheeks and cutting into my muscles. I wish my clothing offered some protection like it does with bees, but it doesn't. Every inch of my skin is on fire, except for my ankles and feet, which are covered by the thick leather of my boots.

At least the wagon is somewhat clean.

As I lie on my side, I observe my unstained surroundings and note the lack of smell. In my experience, the prison carts tend to be disgusting, often soiled with blood and other bodily excrements. Once urine soaks into the wood, there's only so much scrubbing that can be done. Maybe I got lucky with a newer model.

Zetipher's face appears in the barred window on the side, and he peers down at me with a salacious grin.

He's probably a right-hand man to the royals, and he wants to add me to his entourage. Extractors like to surround themselves with others who possess valuable powers they can borrow on a whim, and I'm a prize to him.

Jovial laughter comes from outside as the men take their sweet precious time getting a move on.

Hannah's still in the barn. I'm concerned about how much smoke she's inhaling.

If there's one thing I know about my woman, it's that she's tough. She can endure hardships that would make most people crumble, but she's still human. And she's unwell.

"Let's get going, assholes," I demand through gritted teeth, knowing they won't kill me, no matter what I say. I'm too important. "The king must be waiting impatiently for my arrival."

Someone whistles outside, and the clop of horse hooves starts up as we begin our journey. The ride isn't smooth. With how uneven the overgrown driveway is, I'm being jostled around with every bump. Each movement is excruciating as the iron rubs on my skin.

We're almost to the end of the lane when I hear a high-pitched, "Wait!" in the distance.

"Fuck," I whisper to myself, closing my eyes.

The wagon comes to a jerky halt, and muttered confusion ripples through the men as they realize a witness went undetected.

Zetipher is the most vocal about this. Of course he is. As an Extractor, he relies on his own power to sense others around him. But if someone doesn't have a power—like Hannah—he'd have no way to tell if she's lurking.

From their cluelessness, I can assume Zetipher and Rymus haven't had any communication this week. Perhaps they don't live together after all. Surely, Rymus would've let his cohorts know about my companion.

That fact only adds more confusion to the situation.

I'm trying to figure out how their system works, but it's not making sense. Any royal council in active pursuit of a target would be communicating constantly. They utilize sprites, paying the little buggers handsomely to deliver messages.

"Don't leave without me." Hannah sounds winded as she gets closer, and she whimpers from pain when she finally comes to a stop.

With the burning of the iron and her illness, she must be absolutely miserable right now.

Thanks to my good hearing, I catch a few whispers among the men about her disheveled appearance and, in their words, homely looks.

I growl loud enough for them to know I'm angry at their comments.

Hannah's beautiful. By fae standards, she might be considered plain, but I've seen enough humans to know she's far above average for her kind.

"Who might you be?" Zetipher asks.

"Hannah. I'm Ellister's fated mate."

A few chortles and scoffs follow. "Are you being facetious?"

"I'm telling the truth."

"Well, well. What a surprise. Can you believe it?" Zetipher's tone is mocking as he speaks to his men. "Ellister

found himself a little human and brought her to our world. What am I to do now?"

His question is rhetorical, but Hannah answers for him anyway. "Take me with you."

Silence.

He might refuse. I hope he does. He doesn't need a sickly person in tow. Humans are needier, more difficult to care for. Most importantly, easily killed. If he takes her with us, he'll be responsible for keeping her alive.

Unfortunately, Hannah's persistence prevails. "Listen, Ellister will be more likely to comply if I'm with him."

A chill runs through me at her correct implication. She didn't come right out and say it, but she basically offered herself as a bargaining chip. They could use her against me, and they will.

With a sigh, Zetipher agrees and orders the men to load her up into the wagon.

The bolt unlocks, and the door opens, letting in the daylight and revealing the sight of my wonderful mate. There are tears in her eyes when she sees me lying bound and wounded on the floor.

"In," someone orders, and Hannah winces as she struggles to hoist herself onto the platform.

Another one pipes up, "Should we shackle her?"

"What would be the point? She's harmless."

"She does look quite frail, but what if she attacks us? She could be stronger than she looks."

"Quit your bickering," Zetipher interferes with his men. "Look at her. She can barely make it into the wagon on her own. She's too weak to do any real damage."

I almost laugh at his statement. No, Hannah couldn't overpower any of these men in the physical sense, but she's smart.



Well, she's smart most of the time. This little default in judgement is unlike her, and I glare angrily as she crawls in next to me.

"Why?" I demand. "Silly woman. You should've stayed hidden."

She doesn't respond. Maybe she doesn't have a good answer. Her mind could be clouded by the illness, the secondary iron burning, and the stress of recent events.

Lying down, she puts her face just inches from mine. By her tight expression, I can tell she's hurting worse than she ever has before.

"Touch me," I cave, wanting to give her any relief I can.

Poking a finger through the iron mesh, she hooks a finger with mine. She closes her eyes and sighs.

I feel better immediately. I still burn all over, but Hannah's love and gratefulness shine through our bond like a soothing balm.

And I'm suddenly glad she's here. Although there would've been benefits to her staying behind—namely, her safety from these men and the whims of the king—being together is better for me.

As the wagon lurches forward, it rocks us both.

"I'm sorry," Hannah apologizes, her eyes glittering with wetness as she keeps our fingers connected. "I couldn't let them drive away with you. I just kept thinking... What if today is the last time I see you? What if we're never together again?"

"I wouldn't let that happen."

"How are you going to prevent it?"

"I'll think of something."

At some point, someone's going to let their guard down around me, and as soon as they do, we'll be gone.

Folding one arm underneath her head, Hannah tries to get more comfortable. Her eyes drop to my pants pocket as she

considers the magical substance in my possession.

With the net around my body, my arms are plastered to my sides. I can't move, and I can't get to the flask in my pocket.

Not that it would matter if I could. Thanks to some experimenting with Vaeront, I know the smallest touch of iron will suppress my power, even under the influence of Glow. Drinking it during iron exposure would be a waste.

"If you were to drink some Glow, would it make a difference?" Hannah asks, her thoughts in tune with mine.

"Not at all," I deliver the bad news softly. "It's likely it would leave my system before they take the iron off, and it would be gone."

"Damn. There goes that idea." She studies the net. "What if I could get the iron off you?"

"Don't even try it. Do you see the barbed wire at the bottom? You'd cut yourself to a bloody pulp before you could peel it up to my knees. And unless you're an expert at picking locks, these shackles aren't going anywhere."

"There has to be something we can do."

"Play along," I answer. "For now, we need to see how the events unfold. My ultimate hope is on the king. If we complete the trip all the way to Hailene, I'll be brought before him for questioning. And once I explain the situation, he might agree that you and I should return to our rightful time. Otherwise, my interference could impact his future children, grandchildren, and so on. If there's one thing a king isn't willing to risk, it's his lineage."

"Do you know what king is ruling right now?"

"Yes. I saw flags in one of the towns while I was getting you food. King Zoren's face and name was stamped on it."

"Do you remember anything about him from history? Is he a good person or is he mean?" Hannah's questions are so basic and innocent. So... human-like.

*Mean* doesn't begin to describe most of the kings and queens I've heard of. Sure, every now and then we get a

selfless ruler who puts the interest of the citizens above their own, but they're the exception.

"I know nothing of King Zoren. After emerging from the Lost Land, I didn't have access to books. What I can tell you for certain is that a position of power tends to bring out the worst in the fae, so don't expect him to be gracious. Like I said, I'll be relying on his own self-interest to get free."

"And if he's not smart enough to listen to your warning?"

"You might see the worst in me. I'll be ruthless if I must. I'll kill. Even if my actions alter the future of this world, I'll do it to save you."

Surprisingly, Hannah doesn't try to talk me out of it or give me false reassurances. She just squeezes my finger and says, "I know."

"Since you insisted on coming with, I'm going to burden you with a task."

"Yes?" Hannah perks up at the prospect of being useful.

"The second the net is off, get the flask from me. Hide it in the pocket of your dress. They're less likely to search us for weapons, and if they do, they'll probably assume you're just keeping drinking water on your person because of how weak you are."

She scowls. "Hey. How many times am I going to be insulted today?"

Despite the shitty circumstances, my face splits with a grin because I'm teasing her.

She realizes this a second later, and her lips tremble with a smile. "I guess I could play up the weak human thing. It won't be very hard with how bad I feel."

Glancing down, I look at our linked fingers, knowing I'm harming her while giving her comfort. "What symptoms are you suffering? And don't lie to me."

"The tingling has started," she reluctantly admits. "This morning it was on the bottom of my foot, but it's up to my ankle now."

“Shit.” That’s basically stage four in a five-stage process.

Complete organ failure will be next.

Then, death.

Panic spreads through me, overpowering the burn of the iron until I barely feel it.



## CHAPTER 23

### *HANNAH*

“Hannah.” Ellister wakes me from my light sleep, and I rub my tired eyes.

During this bumpy ride, coupled with the constant pain, it’s been impossible to get some deep rest.

“Huh?” Groggy, I look at Ellister’s burned face.

The net is rolled down, bunched around his neck. At our last stop, Zetipher allowed the netting to be lowered so Ellister could eat, but the red lines on his skin are a reminder of how cruel these people are.

At least I can kiss him without hurting him more, and I do just that.

Brushing our mouths together, I try not to rub against him where the iron is searing his bare neck and arms, but the wagon rocks, and I bump into him anyway.

We both hiss from the increased pain, and I quickly apologize while scooting away to put some distance between us.

Ellister frowns at me, his unsatisfied nose wrinkle firmly in place. “I’m sorry I had to wake you, but something’s wrong.”

Understatement. This whole trip is as fucked up as it gets. “Wrong, like the beans they fed us for dinner? Or wrong in the

sense that I've only gotten one potty break the whole day? Or the iron—”

“The location,” he cuts off my rant as his eyes go to the barred window. “We shouldn't be here.”

“And where are we, exactly?” I sit up to get a better look, but my head pounds from the sudden movement, and I close my eyes while pressing my fingers to my temple. “I can't see anything but the sky, so I have no idea how you can tell.”

“The smell—dirt, baking rock, crisp air. We're by the mountains.”

“Yelissa's Peak? You think we're back there?”

“I know it, and it's the opposite of where we should be if we're heading to the palace. It's completely out of the way for a trip to Hailene, and we made it here in a fraction of the time, which lines up with the distance.”

“What do you think is going on?”

“No clue.”

“Any guesses?”

“Not good ones.”

I purse my lips at him. “Don't withhold information. If you suspect something, I want to hear it.”

“All I can come up with is that these guys aren't who they said they are.”

“Wouldn't it have been obvious if they were lying? Wouldn't it hurt them?”

“If the soul is damaged to a certain point, they could be used to the pain. Being dishonest would be a discomfort, but they might be able to hide it.”

“Well, shit. If they're not the king's men, then who are they?”

We don't have to wait long to find out.

Before Ellister can answer, the wagon comes to a stop and there's chatter among the guys. I still don't know most of their

names.

The big brutish one with dark hair is Braham. I'm not sure what his power is, but he's strong, and they have him doing all the grunt work when it comes to moving Ellister and me around.

At least one of them has fire power. Although I didn't see him light the campfire where our dinner was cooked, I watched him put it out afterward. He simply let his hand hover above the flames, and they disappeared without even leaving a smoke trail.

To their credit, they don't seem to enjoy seeing me suffer, especially Braham. He's apologized several times for the way I'm being affected by Ellister's confinement, and his words sound sincere. To appease his guilt for treating a lady this way, he's been offering blankets whenever he's checked on us, and I've accepted every single one, hoping the group would run out. They can sleep on the hard ground for all I care.

If only they all knew what it feels like to have a cursed sickness *and* secondary, full-body iron burns. I'm not being a wimpy human with my shivering and sluggishness. I'd like to see them in my shoes and act like everything's okay.

The wagon door swings open, letting in blinding light from the merging suns.

A shadowed figure blocks the orbs, then I'm being motioned out by Braham.

I don't make a move toward the brute, tighten my grip on Ellister's finger, and firmly tell him, "We stay together."

"We're not trying to separate you." Braham's wide shoulders rise with a sigh, like I'm being unreasonably difficult. "It would mean the death of you both, and we want you very much alive."

"Could've fooled me." I gesture to all the iron. "This net is ridiculous."

"He'll be healed soon." With no gentleness whatsoever, he grabs Ellister's ankle with his leather-gloved hand and yanks him out.

My mate grunts a pained noise as the net digs into his backside, and the burning on my own skin increases.

Wanting to stay near him, I crawl to the end of the wagon, dragging my right foot behind me. The tingle is up to mid-calf now. When I swing my legs over the edge and touch down on the ground, I try to put weight on it.

The needles poke and stab deep, feeling like they're reaching into my bone. There's no way I can walk without an obvious limp. It hurts so much my vision goes spotty for a second.

I blink as I struggle to stay conscious, and I keep my focus on Ellister, who's staring back at me with open concern.

"Hannah?" His voice sounds far away and echoey. "Darling? Answer me."

"What's wrong with her?" Braham asks warily.

"I'm fine," I lie. Hey, I'm still very much human, and I can be as dishonest as I want without consequences. It might be the only advantage I have. "We just need to get this iron off as soon as possible. Can't you remove it for a few seconds? Let us recover a little bit."

After taking the question to Zetipher, Braham gets permission to lower the net even more. He rolls it down to Ellister's mid-torso and he loosens the other end, too.

It gives Ellister enough leeway to walk. He sort of resembles a penguin with his arms flattened and the waddle he's managing as he comes closer to me.

Grunting, he pulls his shackled hands up and out from the net, breathing out a hiss as some skin gets torn away from his knuckles.

Now's my chance to get the flask. I'll still have to dig under the net, but I think I can do it if I disguise my action with a hug.

Ellister reaches for me, and I hold onto him, reveling in the euphoria his touch gives me.



We've been constantly touching for the entirety of the trip, and although I know the contact is detrimental to my health, I can't help it.

Discreetly sliding my hand into his pocket, I glance at the pallet of blankets and see a good amount of my hair on the dark blue fabric. Chunks of it. No wonder the guys are showing concern. I probably look like a mangy animal to them.

Clenching my teeth, my fingertips graze the little round cap of the flask. I drag it upward and...

Got it.

With a shaky hand, I drop it into my own pocket before anyone can see what Ellister and I are up to.

"Braham," Zetipher barks. "Take the wagon and the horses to the valley." He glances around at the men impatiently. "Where's the portal?"

A blond-haired guy with elegant features steps forward with a little wooden box. When he opens it, presenting it to Zetipher like it's a precious object, I see a pearlescent, quarter-sized shape inside.

Zetipher picks it up and immediately drops it to the ground. As soon as it hits the grass, a dark oval appears in the air, creating a doorway with a watery-looking film.

So this is a portal. It's a lot different from what Ellister can do. Stagnant and stable. Less hectic.

When I squint at the shadowed place inside, I recognize the texture and color of the rock walls.

The caves.

Now that we're at our destination, I scan the familiar mountain in the distance. We're quite a way back, stopped at a clearing in the forest. The tall peaks rise above the trees, and clouds are floating around the highest mountaintop. Sun rays cast little rainbows in the mist.

Ellister doesn't have to say it, but I can gather from what I've learned that these guys are probably a group of wizards or

other powerful fae in hiding.

I'm just not sure if that's good or bad for us.

We won't be at the mercy of King Zoren, but we'll be answering to someone. Someone who obviously doesn't abide by laws or play by socially acceptable rules.



## CHAPTER 24

### *ELLISTER*

Flanked by Zetipher in the front and his men behind us, Hannah and I are led through a tunnel. With the net restricting me, I can't go very fast, but that might be a lucky thing. Because Hannah's having trouble keeping up. Every time she steps with her right foot, her gait is uneven, and her hand tightens around my arm where she's holding onto me for support.

Worried, I give her a side glance. She's lost weight today. The pink dress that had been well-fitted around her bust is looser than it was when she put it on this morning.

I want to ask her if she's all right, but the less we say—the less information we give away—the better.

I just wish this damn tunnel would come to an end. It's lit by torches, and I've counted at least twenty by now. Every five feet or so, the sconces are drilled into the walls, telling me this place is lived in. This is someone's home.

A permanent hideout.

When I first brought Hannah to Yelissa's Peak, I searched for signs of life. I even hopped around to a few different caves to make sure they were empty. I never would've come to the mountain if I'd known it was occupied, but I couldn't find evidence of anyone.

Probably because this area is new.

While the dank smell inside the cavern is familiar, I don't recognize the tunnels we're walking through.

Back when I lived with Vaeront and his gang, the hollowed-out spaces were simpler than this winding passage. Over time, I guess the wizards have had to get craftier, making mazes that would confuse anyone hunting them.

At this point, I can guess Zetipher found me because I came here and used my vortexes. When I traveled, he must've sensed it. And if he has a Seeker at his disposal, it would've been easy for him to locate me using the tattered blanket Hannah and I left behind.

Up ahead, I see a colorful drape hanging over a doorway. A carpet runner. Good quality. Red, blue, and gold symmetrical designs are woven on the rectangle, and the edges are intentionally frayed.

Zetipher stops right outside it and gives me a serious glare. "You will be respectful. Speak only when spoken to."

Then he dramatically bows and sweeps the drape to the side. "Your Majesty, I present to you, Ellister and his fated mate, Hannah."

Your Majesty?

In the round room illuminated by more torches and surrounded by armed soldiers at the perimeter, there's a man sitting on a throne of rock.

And he isn't the Day Realm king.

His long brown hair is tied back, and a gold crown—most likely stolen—sits on his head. With a rounded face and smaller facial features, he's obviously not the regal picture I saw posted in the cities.

Not this shit again.

I'm so tired of power-hungry men. They're all the same. Entitled and pompous.

I sneer at the person in the seat chiseled out in the stone. "Where's King Zoren?"

Now I'm just being cheeky.

The moment we stepped out of the wagon, I knew we weren't going to see real royalty, but I enjoy the way this faker's nostrils flare at the dig.

Green eyes flash with anger. "Do not utter that blasphemous name in my presence."

A boot lands on my back, making me drop to my knees. The iron netting digs into my flesh, burning me through the barrier of my pants. With a whimper, Hannah grabs my shoulder before lowering herself next to me without argument. More than likely, she's not kneeling to bow down to anyone—she's probably having trouble staying upright.

"Show some respect, minion," Zetipher orders. "Pay homage to the one true king. Hail King Envy."

All the soldiers in the room repeat the chant like the brainwashed men they are.

The false king raises his chin haughtily. "I am Acealenvyos the Fifty-fourth, rightful king of the Day Realm. My title is quite the mouthful, so you may call me King Envy for short."

"Fifty-fourth?" I parrot, wondering if I heard him correctly.

"Yes. Every firstborn child in my family line has been named after Acealenvyos the First, naturally."

"Naturally," Hannah quietly deadpans, and I nudge her with my elbow.

I don't mind getting kicked around a bit for a disrespectful remark, but I'd lose it if they start beating on my woman.

"So, King Envy," I go along with his delusion. "What have I done to earn the honor of your attention?"

Appeased by my compliance, he relaxes on his throne of rock and steeples his hands. "You are Ellister, Gatekeeper of the Night Realm, born under King Zerberos, are you not?"

Curious and a bit shocked, my eyebrows draw together.

He knows my entire title; the name I was granted by my parents and the royals of my time. I thought that knowledge would've been long forgotten by now.

“What if I am?” I inquire apprehensively.

“Then it is me who is honored. Let's make you more comfortable, yes?” One flick of Envy's hand loosens the iron net, and I let out a sigh of relief when it falls away.

Next, the shackles on my wrists drop. All the iron slinks away as if it has a life of its own.

Telekinesis? Rare and impressive. The ability is usually linked to wizardry and sometimes it's accompanied by other magical talents.

Although my body is damaged from the iron, I feel my power coming back.

My chance to get away is here.

I need a minute to recover, then I can vortex us away.

Unfortunately, a second later, a gold necklace floats across the room. Hannah gasps with surprise as the chain makes its way around my neck and clasps in the back.

The suppression of my power is instantaneous.

A Valonite necklace.

I touch the warm metal. “How did you get this?”

King Envy just smiles secretively.

It's Vaeront's design. A bunch of rectangular gold plates hang from a chain, getting larger toward the middle. Inside the biggest plate, there's a little shard of Valonite. The gold acts as a conduit, allowing the gem to suppress my power without hurting me.

Some might say this is the humane way to hinder a fae, but I've worn one of these too many times for my liking. Although it might look expensive and luxurious, it's a collar meant to keep me in line. If it's like the necklaces I know, the only way to get it off is with a tiny key.

Until then, I'll be useless.

But how does Envy have one of these? The collars weren't invented until much farther in the future, after Merina freed us from the Lost Land and got Vaeront the resources he needed to create them.

"Stand," Envy orders, and when he beckons me with his fingers, an unseen force makes me and Hannah rise. Then he holds his palm toward me and closes his eyes. "You and your mate will be healed."

And I am. Within seconds, the marks marring my skin are gone, and the burn subsides completely.

I flex my hands. Blood is still on my skin, but all my wounds are closed.

Hannah lets out a small sigh of alleviation, and she sags against me.

Fitting my knuckles under her chin, I silently convey a wordless question with my eyes.

*Are you completely healed?*

She gives a slight shake of her head, and disappointment presses down on me. It would've been too much to hope that this man could override Vaeront's magic. If he had been able to, I would've collapsed at his feet and worshipped him for real.

Still, I'm glad Hannah isn't in any more pain than she has to be, and I'm feeling much better myself.

"Thank you," I say to the wizard, then I tack on, "King Envy."

He waves me off like it's not a big deal, but he's preening from the fact that he has two new subjects he can impress with his multiple abilities.

I wonder what other powers he possesses. They must be good to have such a following as the one in this room.

Shifting my gaze, I do a quick count of the men standing at attention with spears and axes in hand. I estimate at least three

dozen. They're all ready to defend their leader with any means necessary.

"Is it a legend or is it a myth?" Envy asks cryptically.

Thinking he's talking about the mysterious Valonite, I reply with what I know about the gem. "Valonite is said to be a myth, but it's not. It's real. Some of the royals might have a secret stockpile, but accessing it is impossible. Acquiring some on your own is even more unlikely, since the only source is on an island in the Endless Sea. It's an unsurvivable trip." My hand goes to the necklace again. "You can imagine I'm quite curious about how you got some."

"Thank you for the lesson, but I was asking about you."

"Me?" My eyebrows go up. "Legend or myth?"

"Yes. You're a bit of both to my people."

My eyes scan the men. "I'm not important. I'm not a myth or a legend or anything special."

"It's so sad." Envy tuts. "You actually believe that nonsense. If you didn't, surely you'd be crippled from the lie. You're a newly mated pair, so I can assume your soul is clean?"

I nod. "If I were dishonest, it would be obvious. And to tell you the truth, I have no idea what you're talking about. How do you even know who I am?"

Instead of answering, Envy commands, "Search him."

Braham bends to start with my ankles.

Right away, he finds the dagger and confiscates it. He pats his way up my thighs and stomach, coming up empty.

When he goes for my pocket watch, I cover it with my hand and tip my head toward Hannah's matching one. "Objects of commitment."

Translation: off-limits.

The lackey glances at the false king for direction. Envy waves him off, giving permission for us to keep our valuables.



Next, Braham moves toward Hannah and leans down like he's going to feel her up, too.

Without hesitation, I shove him.

He staggers backward, and his leathery wings bust out, preventing him from toppling to the floor. Glaring at me, he growls, and the sound of swords being unsheathed comes from all around us.

“You will not touch my mate.” My voice is flat and dangerous.

“Stand down.” The order comes from Envy, and he looks to me.

“Is your mate carrying any object that could cause harm to me or my people? Is she wearing anything, other than her clothing and her object of commitment?”

“She has a flask,” I admit, trying to conceal the reluctance in my voice.

“Show me.”

Looking to Hannah, I give her a nod, and she produces the metal container. It wouldn't be suspicious at all, except for the white-knuckled grip she has on it. I don't think she realizes she's holding onto it so tightly.

Envy is intrigued. “What's in it? Liquor?”

“Water.” It's not a lie.

Envy motions for Braham to take it and check.

After Braham removes the cap and sniffs the contents inside, he sends a shrug to his king. “It is as they say.”

Nodding, Envy says, “Leave the girl be.” After a pause, he reconsiders, “But take the flask. The water could be enchanted.”

Dread swirls in my gut as I watch Braham shove our one way out of here into his own pocket, but I try not to show any reaction on my face.

Envy's attention swings my way again. "Don't worry. You and your mate will want for nothing while you're with us. We'll provide refreshments."

"With all due respect, I'm not interested in serving you," I state. "We'd like to be on our way."

Scandalized whispers break out among the crowd, and Hannah inches closer.

Obviously, refusing this man's demands isn't a regular occurrence.

"Silence," Envy drawls, sounding bored and unsurprised. Placing his hands on his knees, he leans forward and stares at me with narrowed eyes. "If you're in a hurry to leave, let me get straight to the point, then. Very long ago, the position of king was stolen from one of my ancestors during a challenge for the crown."

"Stolen? The challenges are public, under great scrutiny to be made fair." Royal tournaments always have a large audience. With so many witnesses, it's impossible to cheat.

He scoffs. "Fair? Don't be so naïve. Before the challenge, in private, a bargain was made—a bargain that never should've happened. My ancestor was tricked. If it weren't for this shitty deal, I would be ruling the Day Realm. Not this..." Wrinkling his nose, he stabs a finger in the direction of Hailene and finishes, "imposter."

I'm actually getting nervous because I can see where this conversation is headed.

Somehow, he knows I can time travel. Otherwise, he wouldn't be talking about history as if it could be changed.

Maybe his ancestor really was cheated, but I have zero sympathy for Envy's plight.

He's not king for a reason. If he were powerful enough to take the position by force, he would. He could easily walk into Hailene and demand a challenge for the throne. The current king would have no choice but to fight him, and the best opponent would win.

Perhaps Envy feels like he shouldn't have to enter such a dangerous match, that the throne should automatically be his.

But it doesn't work that way in Valora. Never has, never will.

"What do you expect me to do about it?" I ask.

"Yorenzo," Envy calls. "Come forward."

An older fae man steps out from the shadows. His long white hair frames his wrinkled shaven face, and he's holding a large object. It looks like a box until he comes closer, and I see stacks of pages smashed between two ends made of worn brown leather.

A book. A huge book—at least two feet wide and six inches thick.

"I consider myself somewhat of a historian," Yorenzo states with a tight smile, petting the book's cover like it's a treasure. "This was passed down to me from my great great grandfather, and it was given to him from his grandfather, and so on. I've held onto it for all my years, hoping I'd have the chance to use my knowledge someday."

"Okay." I wait for him to elaborate.

Excitedly opening the book, he flips through some pages. "When Zetipher told us of the new power he sensed several days ago, I knew I had only read about a man possessing this ability once before."

Yorenzo stares at me expectantly, but I remain silent.

When I don't confirm or deny my identity, he asks, "Was it you? Are you that man?"

"I'm not as informed about history as you are," I say carefully. "So I couldn't say for sure."

And it's true. Maybe there was another person like me during all the years I was away. While I've been told I'm the only Gatekeeper to have ever lived, it's possible someone else had the same power, but unlike me, were smart enough to keep it hidden.

Turning the book around and holding it out to me, Yorenzo presents the page with a life-like sketch. On the brittle paper, stained from years of aging, there I am. My hair was longer then. My shiny dark locks are wild from being tossed in the wind, and a large swirl is behind me. My eyes are devoid of any compassion, and the artist accurately captured my sneer of general displeasure.

Hannah sways forward to study the drawing, and awe comes through the bond as she looks upon the younger version of myself.

The next page is a simple log of names and roles. No fanfare. No drawings. Nothing special. But memories come back to me as I read the familiar list. I knew these men once. Men from Vaeront's society. Just like Envy's group, we had a historian among us who'd documented certain events and kept records of our people.

I had assumed this book would've been destroyed long ago, but someone saved it with the hopes of giving information to future generations.

Staggering realization hits me.

These moronic bastards are modeling their group after the one I belonged to. The dark fae.

"This book is a warning, not an instruction manual," I announce to the room. "If you follow in Vaeront's footsteps, you'll find nothing but doom and despair."

"Doom and despair?" Yorenzo parrots with disbelief. "How can you say that when such a miracle has occurred?"

"And what miracle is that?"

"For one, you're here. When Vaeront's kingdom was banished, many speculated that you were able to escape the punishment. Some said you saved Vaeront. That you took him with you to another time and started a new society. And here you are." He points at me while a joyful laugh bursts from him. "Proof that you're able to travel through time. I'd call that a miracle, indeed."

“Of course, if you’re hiding Vaeront,” Envy adds, “he’ll have to be eliminated. That is, unless he’s willing to bow down to me and acknowledge that I am his king. Do you have a problem with that? I don’t care about your opinion, but I’d like to know where your loyalty lies. It would behoove you to swear your fealty to me.”

When his eyes briefly flick to Hannah, the threat is subtle and clear at the same time.

Using mates against each other is the surest way to get someone to do your bidding, and that’s one of the reasons it’s highly illegal. Harming or killing someone’s mate is punishable by death, but men like Envy don’t care about the law.

He thinks he *is* the law.

The fact that he’s worried about Vaeront running free tells me he doesn’t know as much as he thinks he does.

He’s relying on theories and rumors. Impossibly optimistic ones, at that.

“You have it wrong,” I tell them. “I didn’t avoid the imprisonment, and neither did Vaeront. He and I spent countless centuries in the universe where we were sent, and Vaeront is still there as we speak. All of us were wiped from this world, just as was intended. We were a stain to be erased. My story is a cautionary tale for you all. Give up this way of life, or the consequences will be catastrophic.”

Envy leans forward. “If that’s all true, then how did you get out?”

There’s no way to dodge the truth. If I don’t give them exactly what they want, they’ll hurt me, and they’d probably go for Hannah first.

Just the thought of her being tortured is enough to convince me to tell them everything.

So I do.

I spill every detail of the dark fae banishment, beginning with the terror of living in the Lost Land, ending with

Merina's arrival five-hundred thousand years later. I speak of her assistance, the corralling of the Valonite, and how the haze in our minds eventually cleared.

At that part, Yorenzo interrupts me as he sifts through another one of his books. "Ellister, how did they send you there?"

"An Extractor tapped into my power and a coven of witches bound the Valonite with an enchantment spell. I don't remember the event much. The Extractor completely drained me, and I lost consciousness before it was done. I imagine it was very difficult for them to achieve the feat of opening a vortex big enough to transport the hundreds of us, plus tons of the gem, but somehow, they managed."

"Yes, yes," Yorenzo mutters absentmindedly, turning more pages. "Saint Onassis."

"Who?"

"The story of Saint Onassis—the Extractor. So much time has passed that no one knows for sure if it's true, but a statue of the man was erected in the city of Sterling in Dawn and Dusk. A tribute for giving his life when he used his power to such an extent, he perished from it."

"He died?" I ask, my voice tinged with disbelief. "Fae can't die from overuse of power. They'll just pass out before that happens."

"Unfortunately, that's not the case for Extractors. If their system is stressed too much..." He shrugs.

That's news to me, but I shouldn't be surprised by it. Extractors are invasive, constantly taking what doesn't belong to them. I suppose there must be a limit, and the consequence is death.

After scribbling some notes in the margin, Yorenzo gives me his attention. "Please continue your story."

Next, I go over my first experience with Glow after our reemergence—though, I'm vague about this part, and I simply call it an 'amplifier.' I leave out the bit about the princess who tricked me, and I don't explain how the substance is made. I

simply say it's a concoction only myself and Hannah know how to produce, and that's how I'm breaking such impossible barriers.

Envy gazes at me with open admiration as I regale him with the tale of my first accidental time travel.

A king has looked at me that way before. Like I hold more magic than anyone who's ever existed. Like he wants to keep me as his own personal pet.

"The flask," he murmurs. "The water is, in fact, enchanted."

"Not enchanted," I contradict. "It's more scientific than anything."

Zetipher butts in with a triumphant, "Aha! That's what you were doing in the barn. Your Majesty, we might not even need this man. If *I* can consume this substance—"

"Don't even think about borrowing my power with the amplifier," I warn him. "It doesn't work that way. Merina tried it."

The man sniffs. "Well, maybe I'm more powerful than her."

"If that's true, then you'd probably end up killing half the men in this room unintentionally when your ability goes berserk. After what Yorenzo has told me about Extractors, you might even end up dead yourself. In fact, it's a probability."

Zetipher looks adequately chastised and frightened, as he should be.

"This drink..." Envy's features are alight with curiosity. "Does it enhance *any* power?"

Of course he'd think to use it for himself. Everyone would. That's the danger of Glow.

"It's a hazard, no matter who uses it."

Envy motions at me. "Back to your tale. Finish it."

Getting to the part that really matters, I talk about the bargain with Hannah's great grandfather, and how it

reactivated once I was no longer trapped in the Lost Land. How Hannah died in my arms. How I realized she was my soul mate and decided to escape Vaeront for good.

By the time I'm done telling everyone how I went back in time to save Hannah, she's swaying on her feet from exhaustion.

Tightening my arm around her waist, I keep her from falling over. "My mate is unwell again. I thought bringing her to the past would be enough to dodge the consequences of the bargain, but I was wrong."

"The sickness follows her?" Envy dramatically leans away in his chair, his spine flattened against the back of his throne as he wears an expression of disgust.

"No, it follows *me*," I clarify.

"Perhaps she's fading so quickly because you've been drinking her blood. Or because she's been taking yours."

I'm taken aback once again. Because it's been days since we fed, and the marks faded. Even before Envy healed us, they were barely noticeable.

"Did you sense the wounds when you fixed our injuries?" I ask, wondering just how powerful his healing ability is.

"No."

"Then how do you know we've been exchanging?"

One by one, he pulls tooth-colored caps off his incisors, showing off his sharpened fangs. He grins proudly.

Suddenly, I notice how many of the guys are wearing leather bracelets. As far as fashion goes, it's not uncommon for warriors to wear them, but the wide band is also very good at concealing bites.

It would make sense for them to share blood. They'd need sustenance, which is difficult to come by when hiding in a mountain for weeks or months at a time. Plus, if they're trying to live like the original dark fae, this is one more way to do it.



“I told them of your habits.” A deep voice comes from my left.

When I glance that way, Rymus emerges from behind a few men.

All his stings are gone, his perfect skin showing no hint of the damage from the bees. Envy must’ve healed him, too.

“You’re a spy,” I state without question.

“You could say that.”

“Do you really live at the neighboring property or was that a lie?”

“We have houses all over Valora,” he replies vaguely, “most of which are in remote locations. I happen to be one of the few of us that’s not wanted by the law, so I can roam about freely without risking arrest. I was tasked with watching you, learning what I can about you. Yorenzo was very curious about whether you’re who he thinks you are, and Zetipher wanted me to record how often you’re able to travel.”

“See?” Hannah croaks. “Shifty as fuck. I knew there was something wrong with him.”

“Hey.” Rymus is offended. “I was following orders of the king.”

“The rainstorm,” she accuses harshly, and it’s surprising how menacing she can sound in her condition. “That day Ellister was collecting honey. You did it on purpose so he would get stung.”

Rymus shrugs. “I needed to witness how quickly he could harness his power, and the bees were the perfect motivation.”

“I’m not even sorry you got attacked by the same hive. And to think I actually felt bad for you. I wish we could go back in time just so I could tell myself to leave you in the forest to rot.” She’s dripping with ire, but I can tell it’s taking every last bit of energy she has to ream Rymus.

“Enough bickering,” Envy interjects. “We have more important things to discuss.”

“Hannah really needs to rest.” My arms are the only reason she’s not on the floor. “Do you have a more comfortable place for us to talk about this?”

With a simple lift of his finger, Envy uses his power to roll a tree stump over to us. It’s not a chair but it’s better than nothing.

After I sweep a barely conscious Hannah into my arms, I lower myself to the log with her slung across my lap.

It doesn’t go unnoticed by me that no one is stepping forward to help. Quite the opposite, actually. Everyone’s keeping their distance.

These hardened men, with their spears and axes, are terrified that Hannah and I are contagious.

Well, I hadn’t been trying to repel them with fear, but that’ll work just fine. If they’re scared of us, maybe they’ll keep their dirty paws to themselves.

Even Yorenzo has backed up, standing by Envy’s throne as he flips through some pages of his book.

“Hold on a minute,” the historian pushes on. “If I’m reading this correctly, what ails this woman isn’t catching. The illness Vaeront inflicts acts more like a curse, only affecting the target of the bargain.”

“But can you be certain?” I plant more doubt in place of his reassurance.

“Not for certain, no. You have firsthand experience with this. Shouldn’t you know how the magic works?”

“I’ll tell you what I do know for sure—if we don’t leave here, Hannah will die.”

“Won’t she die regardless?” Envy asks. “It sounds like the pair of you are headed for inevitable death.”

“And it sounds like you need me to be alive long enough to help you,” I shoot back.

“Yes,” he drawls begrudgingly. “Are you agreeing to do what I ask, then?”

“You haven’t asked for anything yet,” I point out, “aside from my agreement to join your society, which I already declined to do, and now you understand why.”

Sighing heavily, like it’s a great burden for him to speak his request, he says, “Will you travel to the past so you can right the wrongs done to my family?”

I look down at Hannah’s beautiful face. She’s sleeping peacefully, with a small smile on her face as she dreams about something good.

The physical contact with me is giving her a false reprieve from her illness, but I can feel the bargain working. Her lifeforce is weakening so fast.

If she were awake, she’d probably advise me not to make any promises, but I’ll do anything for her, even make a deal with a man like Envy.

Like it or not, we’re at his mercy. Braham has my flask, and the Valonite collar isn’t coming off unless Envy wants it to.

“Under two conditions,” I reply, coming precariously close to binding myself to a bargain. “First, we complete this mission as soon as possible. Second, once I’ve done my duty, Hannah and I are free to leave.”

“Where will you go? If you’re both going to perish, why does it matter where you are?”

“The solution to Hannah’s illness is directly linked to an interrupted bargain, and that leads me to my next warning.” Speaking more to Yorenzo than anyone else—because he seems to be the one with the brains—I go on to explain how magical deals cause a weak spot in the plane, and that when the terms are changed, the realities split. “That’s how alternate universes are made, and I need to take Hannah to the one running parallel to hers. I would’ve done it days ago, but by the time we realized she was suffering symptoms, I had already used the last of the amplifier, and that’s why we’ve been making more.”

Envy is quiet and thoughtful for several moments. “So you’re saying if you stop my ancestor from making the bargain in the first place, a new universe will be created?”

“Yes, but it wouldn’t be right if I didn’t at least try to get you to reconsider.”

Envy’s face pinches with distaste. “Why would I reconsider what I’ve been planning my entire life?”

“Because derailing the bargain won’t affect *this* reality. In this universe, you’ll still be a king in hiding, and King Zoren will occupy the palace just as he does now.”

“So, I need to live in the new universe,” he concludes confidently.

Perhaps I didn’t give him enough credit in the smarts department because he seems to be following along just fine. “I suppose that would be a solution.”

He smiles, and his tone turns wistful. “I kind of like the sound of that... my own universe. I’ll need to come with you, then.”

My advice for caution wasn’t an invitation, but he’s not wrong. He could travel with us and live out his days in the past after the bargain splits.

“You don’t know what this other world looks like,” I say seriously. “It might be worse than this one.”

“Impossible. I will be king. Anywhere I’m ruling, all will be as it should.”

“No, your ancestor will be king,” I correct. “If Ackealenvyos the First wins the tournament, as you say he will, the crown will be his.”

Despite the off-putting fact, Envy still grins. “You let me worry about that. Just get me there, and I’ll take care of the rest.”

I tip my head toward Braham. “I’ll need my flask back.”

“We’re going now?” Excited, the fake king stands so fast his ill-fitting crown starts to fall off his head.

“No,” I respond, causing him to deflate. “First, I need to return to the farm to continue production. It’ll take three or four times what I have now to make your jump and my own.”

“How long will it take you to produce this much amplifier?”

“Working around the clock... two days, maybe. Believe me, I’m going to get it done in record time. Hannah’s life depends on it.”

“Excellent.” Happy to have gotten his way, Envy claps his hands. “So it’s a deal, yes?”

“Yes.” My gritted answer solidifies the promise, and it settles in my chest before wrapping around my new soul.



## CHAPTER 25

### *HANNAH*

“I don’t like how they’re looking at me,” I whisper to Ellister as we stand by the distiller.

He glances over his shoulder to glare at the men guarding the doorway to the barn.

Even though Yorenzo claimed my illness wouldn’t spread, he and Braham have been keeping a healthy distance from me since we got back to the farm yesterday.

“They’re scared of you,” Ellister explains.

“Exactly. I feel like a leper.”

“Don’t. Fear equals respect in this world.”

He tosses a few more logs on the fire.

With no one here to stoke the flames during our trip, the water stopped boiling. Any Glow that had collected in the pitcher evaporated, but we’re back in business, and with assistance this time.

It’s nice to have the help, even if we are under duress.

Braham is currently chopping wood, while Yorenzo studies his books. The old man has been tirelessly flipping pages as he reads, and he’s taking notes. He’s studying everything he can about the time we’re traveling to, and every fact he soaks up is knowledge on our side.

About every hour, Ellister pours what we've produced into the flask while Braham keeps a tight grasp on it. Then it goes back into the brute's pocket.

Although Ellister told them the Valonite collar would prevent him from using his power no matter what, they haven't taken their eyes off him or the distiller for even a second. If one of them needs to take a break, the other stays.

Obviously, they don't trust us. We don't trust them. Tension is high, and it's a very uncomfortable situation for everyone.

Speaking of uncomfortable, the pins and needles in my leg are creeping up and spreading fast. When I woke up this morning and tried to get out of bed, I couldn't put weight on my foot at all. The excruciating sensation has traveled up my thigh, and I need a cane to walk.

Ellister found a sturdy stick for me in the forest, but it doesn't offer the best support. While it's thick and can handle my weight, it's not straight. The twisty, knobby wood doesn't give me the balance I need.

I lean heavily on it while I watch Ellister check the pipe for frequent dripping.

I can't remember the last time he slept, and he's not looking so great. He's pale, his eyes are bloodshot from exhaustion, and he's moving sluggishly.

Regardless of his claims of being damn near immortal, I'm worried about him.

I have an increasing feeling of despair, and I'm not sure if it's coming from the illness or Ellister. His spirits are down. No matter how hard he tries to be upbeat for me, I can tell he's affected by the constant hurdles we've had to face. Every solution we've come up with has gone awry.

Valora is an unpredictable place, and I want to go home, where the days are the same. Where the sun rises and sets on a schedule. Where Ellister and I can be together without wizards or spies breathing down our necks.

Nervously chewing my lip, I ask, “How much longer until we’ve got enough?”

“The flask is almost full.” He wipes some sweat from his forehead, then he stokes the flames some more.

“That’s great news. Why don’t you come rest with me for a while?”

“Can’t.” So stubborn and determined.

“You’ve been busting your ass nonstop.”

“And it’s working out in our favor. Someone has to keep the water boiling.”

“Braham can do it,” I loudly volunteer the man, earning a frown from him, but Ellister shakes his head and comes over to me.

He places his hand on the side of my neck, his long fingers spanning up to my scalp as his thumb runs along my jaw. My eyes flutter at the way my body responds so positively to him. My leg is still numb, but the pain is gone.

Under the guise of a loving exchange of sweet nothings between mates, Ellister whispers secrets in my ear. “Braham needs to be watched closely. Yorenzo, too. You have no idea how tempting and addictive this stuff is.”

I give our guards the side-eye. “You think they’d drink it, even after their leader told them not to?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I’m starting to think Envy chose them to accompany us for a reason.”

“What reason?”

“Obviously, they’re loyal, so there’s that. But also, it’s possible they don’t have useful powers. Maybe they don’t have any abilities at all. I haven’t seen them display any magic. If that’s the case, Glow wouldn’t affect them. Still, I don’t want to risk it.”

“They’ve seen our machine, though. It’s not a complicated design. They could easily replicate it after we’re gone.”

“They probably will.”



“Then what?”

“Chaos,” Ellister responds without doubt, his eyes intense as he rests his forehead against mine. “And not my problem. Not yours, either. If we’re successful in interfering with the bargain Envy is so intent on preventing, his world will be of his own making.”

“That sounds like it has the potential to turn out pretty shitty.”

“Aptly put, darling, but you will be safe. This I promise.”

Rising up on my tiptoes, I tug on his neck until his lips meet me halfway for a kiss. His tongue is warm when it strokes mine because he’s overheated from standing next to the fire for so long.

A throat clears, interrupting our PDA, and I break way from Ellister’s mouth to see Yorenzo peering at us over another one of his massive books. One of his eyebrows is lifted like he’s a school librarian who caught us making out in the stacks.

We should fuck right here, out in the open.

That’d really get his goat.

We won’t, though. Even if we’re basically being held hostage, I can’t help having a little bit of respect for Yorenzo.

Apparently, he’s somewhat of an expert at foraging. Yesterday, when I mentioned my love for sweet tea, he trotted off to the woods for a good hour. He came back with a bunch of little purple flowers and told me to steep them in hot water. The petals have a flavor close to the black tea I’m used to, and there’s a natural sweetness in the stems. It was such a nice thing for him to do. Although I didn’t have any ice to make the drink cold, sipping it was extremely enjoyable.

With Ellister hindered, he can’t jump around to places to get me my treats, and we’ve had to rely on hunting and gathering for our meals. If it weren’t for Yorenzo’s knowledge about leafy greens and root vegetables and Braham’s skill with a bow, we wouldn’t have had the tasty stew we’ve been eating.

Honestly, Braham and Yorenzo aren't bad guys. The old me would be too busy being petty to feel sorry for the enemy, but I don't want anything tragic to happen to them.

They're just misguided. I realize they're adults who can assess the risk of their situation and make their own decisions, but even intelligent people can get wrangled into a cult.

That's what Envy's group is. They can call it a kingdom or whatever, but when I look at them, I see men who are too scared to be ordinary. They want to feel special, and I guess serving Envy does that for them.

As I limp past Braham and Yorenzo, they not-so-discreetly back away, giving me a wide berth. My lips spread with a wide grin when I imagine speedily waddling toward them and watching them scatter like frightened chickens.

Both men mistake my loony smile for kindness, and they return with friendly sentiments.

"I hope you're doing well today, Miss Hannah." Braham bows slightly. "Can I get you anything? A blanket?"

Braham and his blankets. The only thing he brought along on this trip was a drawstring bag full of them. I haven't seen him use them so I'm pretty sure he brought them for me.

Sigh.

See?

That pulls at my heart a bit, and I politely decline, "I appreciate it, but I've got what I need in the house."

"Let me know if you'd like me to show you an edible weed I discovered along the fence," Yorenzo offers pleasantly. "Perhaps we could make another tea and sit out on the back patio. It's great weather for it."

Yeah, the weather is good, thanks to Rymus. I keep forgetting about the fifth wheel to our party. The spy has been sleeping at the neighboring house—probably the safest decision for him since Ellister is still pissed about being deceived—but he's been keeping it blessedly cooler than usual.

Every few hours, he trades the guarding shifts with the guys. It's almost his turn to switch with Braham, and he's sitting under the shade of a tree on the outskirts of the yard while he waits.

Unlike Braham and Yorenzo, Rymus appears to have zero warm feelings for me, and he acts like he's too cool to do actual labor.

He's totally useless on the working front. He won't chop wood, and he refuses to participate in any hunting or group eating. He probably thinks he's hot shit because Envy entrusted him with the portal we need to get back to Yelissa's Peak.

Rymus crosses his arms and glares at me as I make it to the front stoop.

What a sourpuss.

Even if he did lower the heat by ten degrees, I send him the stink eye as I drag my leg along with me.

I don't think I imagine the way his eyes twinkle with cruelty or the amused lift of his lips as he watches me struggle to get up the small step.

He's enjoying my suffering.

Okay. So maybe I'm all right with some of Envy's people getting the day they deserve.



## CHAPTER 26

### *ELLISTER*

Hannah and I are back in front of Envy's throne.

Pardon me. *King Envy*.

He's already had to correct me twice, and we're not even five minutes into our conversation.

"What era will I be traveling to?" I ask, all business. "I'll need specific dates, times, and coordinates."

"Yorenzo will provide you with all the information you need. We're going to the beginning of King Mihkyle's rule."

"Mihkyle," I mutter quietly, trying to place the name, but it doesn't trigger any memories.

"This would pre-date the dark fae era," Yorenzo pipes up. "Long before you were born, Ellister. So long, in fact, it wouldn't have been taught in school."

"So we're going way back. Great," I deadpan, Hannah's sarcasm rubbing off on me.

It's a good thing I filled the flask to the brim. I'm going to need at least half of it for a trip like this. I'm counting on the other half to get Hannah and me to our permanent home. We're going to be cutting it close.

"You're sure I can't convince you to stay on with us?" Envy's narrowed gaze is stuck on the luggage in my hold.

I found an old, very small suitcase in the bedroom closet at the farm. It's currently stuffed with Hannah's Earthly belongings and the human outfit I arrived with, even if they're worse for the wear and a bit dirty. Regardless of the tattered condition the clothes are in, we'll need to change once we get back to the human realm. Under my other arm, I have the rolled up sleeping bag because Hannah wanted to bring it with us for sentimental reasons.

She's been quiet. Too quiet. And I don't like that my hands are too full to catch her if she goes down. She's clinging to my arm while keeping herself upright with her makeshift cane.

I'd hoped the nap she took earlier this afternoon would help her a bit. The sleep and the distance from me should've done some good, but she's struggling.

Even feeling as bad as she does, she put in the effort to look her best. She wants to fit in with the attendees of the tournament. The cream-colored gown she chose is the fanciest of her selection, and it will help her blend with all the nobles we're bound to see at the challenge. It was imperative that we cover her ears, so she had me help her braid some of the front pieces and clip them over her rounded human ears. The style also serves to cover some of her bald patches.

I'm very much out of practice when it comes to braiding, so the result was far from perfect, but my effort made Hannah smile.

"Hear me out," Envy continues. "If we're going to create a new universe when the bargain is changed, shouldn't your mate be able to escape her illness there? My world should cure her, yes?"

"Theoretically," I agree slowly but graciously add, "As tempting as the offer is, we've made up our minds about where we want to live."

He sighs. "What a waste."

I'm glad he seems accepting of our choice, but I still don't trust him. I won't breathe easily until I get this damn collar off and have the Glow back in my possession.

I direct my attention to Yorenzo, staying on topic. “What are we walking into? What’s the environment?”

“Hostile. I’d like to say we’re going to a time of peace, but that’s not the case. The king is being challenged by two wizards. One is Mihkyle. The other is King Envy’s ancestor, Acealenvyos the First. To kick off the tournament, Mihkyle and Acealenvyos will fight each other. Without interference, Mihkyle would be the victor and he’d take on the king next. And he’d win, making Mihkyle the new ruler.”

“Describe the bargain to me. What are the terms?”

He opens another book, this one scribbled with stories in the Old Fae language. “The morning of the challenge, Princess Vetta told Mihkyle she would marry him if he promised to win. He accepted, and they exchanged vows, along with objects of commitment—two rings. An hour later, she did the same with Acealenvyos, but with necklaces instead.”

“She married them both?”

“Unbeknownst to the men, yes.”

“How would it benefit her to marry two people on the same day?” I ask, confused. “Wouldn’t it have damaged her soul to make the second promise, since it would cancel out the first?”

Yorenzo nods. “Exactly right. For whatever reason, Princess Vetta felt the trick was necessary enough to inflict self-harm. It’s written that she had affection for Mihkyle, and she wanted him to win, but he was the less powerful of the pair. That’s where the objects of commitment come into play. The ring she gave to Mihkyle held a simple ruby, while the necklace she fastened around Acealenvyos’ neck was tainted with Valonite.”

He turns the book around so I can see the drawing of the necklace. It’s just like the one I’m wearing—exactly the same as the design Vaeront took credit for.

Vaeront stole the idea.

I should’ve known that unoriginal bastard wouldn’t have had the vision to come up with such a creation.

“The first Valonite necklace,” I murmur quietly. “Princess Vetta made it?”

“Yes. Quite cleverly, too. She completely disarmed Acealenvyos.” Yorenzo’s tone has a whimsical note, as if he’s impressed by her cutthroat intentions. “And with the marriages, she secured her position as queen, no matter the outcome of the tournament. Whoever won, she’d be married to the victor and maintain her right to the crown. And if they both died? Well, she would be a widow, but still married in the eyes of the law, and she could rule alone.”

“How very ruthless.”

“Do you see now?” Envy asks, seething from hearing the tale again. “My legacy was stolen that day. Can you imagine the humiliation for my ancestor? Everyone in that arena expected him to use the magic he was known for, but as minutes passed, he was defenseless against Mihkyle’s brutality. Acealenvyos was pummeled by lightning, paralyzing him and burning his skin over and over again. Mihkyle wasn’t merciful or quick. It was torture, what he did.”

Surprisingly, I find myself sympathizing with Acealenvyos the First. The story of Princess Vetta’s deceit is a little too similar to my own experience with Eldyra’s betrayal, and I can see why Envy is angry over the unfairness of it all.

“We’ll succeed,” I tell him. “We’ll go back to that day, and once your relative is convinced not to agree to the bargain, all will be set right for you.”

“How will I know if I succeeded?” Envy asks me, his green eyes hard. “Will the new universe begin as soon as the deal is off? Or will you have to deliver me to it?”

“I don’t know,” I answer.

His face is appalled. “But you’ve done this before.”

“Another version of me did this,” I say, frustrated. “What he experienced, I have not. I’m the product of my original universe, therefore this is just as new for me as it is for you.”

Just then, Hannah trembles. Before she can collapse, I drop the luggage and catch her right before she slams to the floor. As I scoop her up, her head lolls to the side and she starts convulsing. The seizure only lasts for a few seconds, but then she goes completely limp.

“We must go,” I bark. “Now. Braham, can you grab my things?”

“Get ready, everyone,” Envy says as he stands. “Braham, you may carry Ellister’s belongings. Yorenzo, don’t forget your books. To the rest of you, don’t worry about extra possessions. You are all I require, and you’ll get the riches I’ve sworn to you.”

The false king sheds his robe, revealing inconspicuous every-day attire underneath. He balls up the material and sets his crown on top before handing the bundle to a man I don’t know by name.

“Hang on a second.” I stop Envy and scan the crowd of men inching closer to me. “What do you mean, *everyone*? I thought I was just taking you and a few others.”

I’d assumed he’d bring his most revered guys, the ones he relies on the most. Zetipher for sure. Yorenzo, most definitely. Braham seems to be a favorite, too.

I don’t know why it didn’t occur to me that he’d want every single man along for the ride. I just figured he’d be so happy to have a position of leadership, he’d be okay with starting anew.

“I won’t leave my people behind,” Envy says, aghast. “If the universe is going to split and I’m staying in the world I created, I’ll need my loyal subjects more than ever.”

“It’s not easy to bring this many people through a vortex.”

“But you have this.” Envy produces the flask.

“It’s not that I *can’t*,” I specify. “If there are too many bodies in the vortex, injuries will happen. It’s not safe.”

Envy shrugs, like a few broken bones or cracked skulls don’t matter in the grand scheme of things. And I suppose for



him, it doesn't.

Well, there's no point in arguing with a man who thinks he's a king.

"We need to make a chain," I instruct everyone. "I'll carry my mate. King Envy will hold onto my arm. Yorenzo holds onto him, and so on. And sheath all blades. No spears allowed. Exposed sharp objects are too dangerous."

"What happens if we become disconnected from one another once we're in the vortex?" Zetipher asks, finally showing some common-sense concern.

He should've been asking that before he borrowed my power. What an imbecilic thing for him to do, using my vortex when he didn't even understand it.

"It'll be a rough ride," I reply to the worried faces around me. "But you won't be lost. You'll get brought to the time and place along with everyone else."

They're so used to only taking orders from Envy, they look to him for confirmation that what I say is true.

Even though he has no idea if I'm right, Envy nods. "Yes, yes. Whatever he says. This man is our savior."

Oh, I'm a savior now? I can hear Hannah's sarcastic quips in my head as if she's conscious and speaking.

We've been taken against our will, shackled, and treated like prisoners. They might as well be holding an iron spike to my heart, because I have no choice in the matter.

Impatient to get going, Envy holds the flask to my lips. "Drink."

He hasn't taken the collar off yet, which means he doesn't trust me not to leave without him. As he should. Because I would if I got the chance.

I take four gulps of the Glow. Then I guzzle a few more for good measure. With how far I have to travel through time and with this many passengers, I'll need the extra help.

Immediately, the substance lights up my system, sharpening my senses and invigorating my veins.

As soon as Envy has a strong grasp on my arm and the other men are in line behind him, he removes the Valonite collar with his telekinesis. It floats into his own pocket along with my flask.

Wind whips through the cavern as a deep vortex forms effortlessly behind me. It's spinning at such a high speed, it causes a haunting howl through the cavern.

Fearful expressions are displayed as the men brace themselves for an experience I don't think they're ready for.



## CHAPTER 27

### *HANNAH*

It's raining men.

Literally.

I just woke up to Ellister shielding my body with his on the ground while bodies tumbled all around us.

And they continue to fall.

I hear the thuds and grunts as Envy's entire cult experiences the crash landing of a vortex for the first time. Some of them groan, voicing complaints of injuries as they roll around and try to get their bearings.

Envy gripes back at them, telling them to, "Toughen up and be grateful for the kingdom they're about to receive."

Such a prick.

Glancing at our surroundings, I realize we're on the outskirts of a forest. The grass feels warm and a little damp beneath my backside, and the air is stiflingly hot.

Raising his head, Ellister gazes down at me, our faces so close our noses are touching. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." Despite the blackout episode I had, I don't feel too bad with his body pressed along every inch of mine. "How long was I out?"

"A while."

In Ellister speak, combined with the nose wrinkle, that means too long.

He's worried.

So am I.

When he runs a finger gently through my hair, I feel the strands come loose. Ellister's eyes are full of stress when he looks at the chunk in his hand. He lets it fall to the ground, then he helps me to my feet and presses my wooden stick to my palm.

After brushing himself off, Envy lays out his plan to his men, telling them they'll all reconvene here after the tournament is over. Then he orders everyone except for Ellister and me to the arena.

I glance in the direction he's referring to.

In the distance, there's a marvelous castle. It looks small since it's so far away, but I know it must be tall because clouds are hovering around the highest spires. The marble exterior is shining in the sunlight, and there are stained-glass windows with beautiful colors. Surrounding the palace, there are gardens and a sprawling green lawn that seems to go on for miles.

Closer to us, I see tons of people flocking to an area on the grass. There's a slight mound, but there's no arena in sight.

Confused, I tilt my head because their silhouettes appear to be dropping into the ground. "Where is everyone going?"

"It's a sunken amphitheater," Ellister says, putting his arm around my waist to support me.

"Interesting." In my mind, I'd been picturing a stone Colosseum. Something grand. But I have to admit, there's something ominous about a fight to the death in the underground.

"And with a swarming arrival like that," Ellister adds, "the tournament hasn't started yet. We made it to the correct time."

He sounds a bit shocked that he aimed the vortex without mistake, but I didn't doubt him for one second. My trust in

Ellister is so solid. I've never had a connection like this, and it's not just because of our bond or our souls.

This man has been relentless in his pursuit to save me, and I can only hope someday I get the opportunity to return his efforts in kind.

With curiosity, I watch the long line of people disappearing into the arena.

Surprisingly, the fashion during this time period is relatively similar to the future we came from. Many of the men are shirtless or wearing tank tops, and most have on light-colored pants. The women are elegantly dressed in the long gowns with fabric so thin I can see right through it. They carry parasols to shade themselves from the merging suns.

Ellister suddenly sways a bit, and I move with him since he's the main thing keeping me up. As he blinks, I can tell he's having trouble standing.

"Are you okay?" I ask him. "You look so tired."

He nods. "Don't worry about me, darling. The jump took it out of me. Nothing a little time can't fix."

Braham comes over with our luggage, and Ellister takes the suitcase and sleeping bag from him.

"You better hurry," Yorenzo advises Envy as he starts the trek to the arena with all the other men. "The princess is probably making her deal with Mihkyle as we speak. Ackealenvyos is next." His gaze swings to Ellister and me, and there's a softness in his grandfatherly eyes. "If I don't see you two again, it was a pleasure to meet you. It's truly extraordinary what you've done for us. I won't forget it."

Ellister doesn't say 'you're welcome' but he does nod in acknowledgment.

If only Envy was so thankful.

"Come on," the impatient man snaps, motioning to Ellister and me as he gets a portal out of his pocket.

"Where's my flask?" Ellister sneers, giving him an expectant lift of his eyebrows.

“You think I’m going to let you leave before I’ve been sure of my success?” Envy shakes his head. “You’ll get it back after we’ve interrupted the bargain, *and* once I’m relocated to the new universe you promised me.”

“I felt my end of the bargain lift from my soul,” Ellister states, thumping his chest. “I’m guessing that means my presence is no longer required.”

“I’m not going to bet my future on a *guess*.”

My mate growls, low and menacing, but I just squeeze his hand.

Arguing will only waste precious minutes. We need to get to this Acealenvyos guy before the princess does.

Envy drops the portal to the ground, and through the window, there’s stone and shadows. He walks through it. We follow.

Once we’re on the other side, we find ourselves in a tunnel. The perfectly chiseled stones arch over us, and there’s light at a far opening. Cheers and the commotion of a lot of people talking at once echo from the arena.

We’re underneath it.

“This way to the challenger holding cells.” Envy strolls in the opposite direction, further into the ground.

I’m trying to keep up, but my right leg isn’t really functioning anymore. Ellister can’t carry me because he has all my stuff.

“Want me to leave the suitcase behind?” he asks, like he can tell where my thoughts are at.

“No,” I reply stubbornly. “I can’t go back in this dress.”

While Ellister can get by in his pants and sleeveless shirt, a see-through faerie gown would definitely raise some flags.

“We could just raid the thrift shop,” Ellister suggests.

“What thrift shop?”

“The one in the town close to your farm. I went there before I met you. I forget the name of the store, but it was in a brick building. After I got changed, I stole the car not far from there.”

The mystery of his strange outfit is completely solved now. “Sporty hipster pirate.”

“What?”

“Nothing.” I snicker.

It feels good to laugh, but we’re outside of a wooden door, and Envy is flapping his hand at us to be quiet.

Instead of knocking, he pulls another portal out and creates his own way into the room.

I’m a bit shocked at the luxury of the holding cell, as Envy called it.

It’s not a prison like in the gladiator movies. The windowless room has white stone walls with a pearlescent glaze, gold candle sconces, and a table covered with all kinds of food. The red silk tablecloth is shiny. Trays of fresh fruit, meat, and desserts are spread out.

Obviously, challengers are respected and treated well. I guess that’s the least anyone could do for them, considering these matches are usually to-the-death.

Ackealenvyos the First doesn’t seem rattled by our sudden appearance. He’s half-lying on a white chaise lounge lazily popping grapes into his mouth as he studies Envy, Ellister, and myself.

He’s wearing a white robe with an iridescent sheen to it. I’m not sure what it’s made of, but probably some kind of mystical silk that’s very expensive.

He wipes his fingers on the fur collar, obviously not caring if he gets it dirty. “Why didn’t you just knock?” Ackealenvyos frowns at the open portal. “Seems like a waste of magic.”

“Magic is never a waste,” Envy says pompously. “Not when I have so much of it to spare.”

“If you’re here to sabotage me, I’d seriously reconsider.”

“On the contrary.” Envy steps forward. “We’re friends. We’ve traveled a very far distance to ensure your success.”

“And you are...?”

“You may call me Envy, and you need no introduction.”

Ackealenvyos grins. “You’ve heard of me, eh?”

“Of course. Ackealenvyos is such a long name. Is there something shorter I can use?”

“Ackealenvyos was given to me at the time of my birth, and every syllable is mine,” he replies snootily. “You will say my entire name when you refer to me.”

Holy shit.

These two really are related. That sense of grandeur runs deep in their genes.

They even look alike. Both have brown hair, rounder faces, and they’re about the same height.

“Who are they?” Ackealenvyos tips his head toward us.

“Pay no mind to them. They’re simply here to do my bidding.”

“Why does she look so awful?” Ackealenvyos studies me with wariness before curling his lip at our old luggage. “And what is all that stuff they have with them? They look like paupers.”

“Again, they are not your concern. Simple servants.”

My eyebrows go up, and I meet Ellister’s gaze to silently convey my displeasure at the insults being slung my way. He slips his fingers around mine, raises my hand to his mouth, and kisses my knuckles.

A ripple goes through me from the brief contact of his lips.

Envy turns to Ellister. “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Convince him,” Envy says, hushed.



“Oh, no.” Ellister shakes his head. “This is all you.”

“Me?” Envy grimaces, like the thought of doing any of the leg work himself is below him. “What will I say?”

“You’ve been preparing your entire life for this,” Ellister throws Envy’s own words back at him. “You’d know better than I would.”

Even though the guys are talking in whispers, Ackealenvyos can hear every word. That fae hearing is something else, and as he remains sprawled out, his eyes bounce back and forth from man to man while he wears an arrogant smirk.

Realizing they’re being eavesdropped on, Ellister beckons to Envy, motioning for him to lean in close.

Then he opens a vortex. A small one, about the size of a basketball, behind us.

They resume their huddle.

That’s when I realize what Ellister is doing. The vortex isn’t for travel. It’s sucking the sound away. Even though his mouth is just a foot away from me, his words are somewhat muted.

“Tell him the truth,” Ellister replies. “Or not. I don’t care. I’d prefer if you don’t tell him we’re from the future because that’ll raise questions we don’t want to answer, but it wouldn’t be a lie to say you’re a powerful wizard. Just let him know you’re positive he shouldn’t agree to any deal. You’re a king. Laying down the law is in your blood.”

It’s fascinating to watch Ellister play this man’s ego like a talented musician. Envy is bolstered by the compliments, and he nods. “Yes. Yes, you’re right.”

Ackealenvyos is suspicious and on-guard now that Ellister has displayed an unknown power. His grapes are forgotten on the chair, and his robe has fallen away. He stands in battle attire with his fists at his sides. A metal shield is strapped to his torso with the Day Realm emblem on it. His pants are brown leather, with boots to match.

“What was that?” he demands, squinting at Ellister like he’s an alien.

Dude, I get it. I’ve done the same thing, just for different reasons.

Envy joins his ancestor by the chaise lounge. “All will be revealed to you in time. But for now, your immediate concern is the princess.”

Ackealenvyos flattens his lips with skepticism. “Vetta?”

Well, if he’s on a first-name basis with royalty, it’s safe to say they have a close relationship going already, which might make it more difficult to convince him of any deceit.

I think of what Ellister went through with Eldyra.

Would he have believed anyone if they’d tried to warn him about her?

Even though it happened in the past—er, I guess at the point in time where we’re at, it would be the future—I’m still bitter on his behalf. Sure, her betrayal eventually sent him to me, but I’d still slap the bitch if I had the chance.

When I look at Ellister’s face, I see him gazing back at me with nothing but love.

In a moment like this, you’d think he’d be triggered by his own trauma, but he’s not. He’s only focused on me.

“I guarantee it,” Envy states firmly, drawing my attention back to the pair. “If you can resist the princess and refuse the promise she’ll present to you, you’ll win.”

“She’ll be very angry if I reject her request for marriage.” Acealenvyos is hesitant to agree.

“Then don’t make her feel slighted. Say you’d rather have a public wedding. One that will display your love to the kingdom.” When Envy can see that his ancestor isn’t totally on board, he presses, “Do you honestly think she would deny a proposal from you after you win? And if you ask in front of an audience as the new victor? Think of the entertainment you’ll provide. Everyone is expecting a battle, but to give them an engagement as well... you’ll be so loved by your people.”

“Well.” There’s a pause and then a calculating grin almost identical to Envy’s spreads over Ackealenvyos’ face. “When you put it that way, of course she wouldn’t turn me down. It’d be impossible for her to refuse.”

“There you have it. There’s no reason to bargain with her when you already have her right where you need her to be.” Envy turns to us. “You may go now. I’d like a private word with my new friend.”

“My flask,” Ellister reminds him, hiking up our luggage. Relief and excitement filter through our bond as we get closer to freedom, but the positive emotions get cut off pretty quickly with Envy’s response.

“You must stay for the tournament.”

“No.”

“I insist.” He uses his kingly tone. “This is history, Ellister. You don’t want to miss such an important event.”

“I’ve held up my end of our deal.”

“Not completely. Not until I’ve been relocated. Save a seat for me in the arena.”

With that, we’re dismissed.

Ellister glares at Envy with intense hatred, and I can see the wheels turning in his mind as he contemplates attacking the man.

But we can’t afford to go through a scuffle, especially when I’m certain Envy would kick Ellister’s ass with his wizardry.

Besides, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to see how the challenge plays out.

“Come on,” I say softly, tugging Ellister by the hand while limping toward the portal.



## CHAPTER 28

### *ELLISTER*

“Are you sure you’re all right?” I ask Hannah as soon as she’s settled into her seat.

She gives me a tight smile. “I’m not going to keel over within the next couple of hours.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do. This ain’t my first rodeo.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I’ve been through the sickness before, and I’ll know when the end is close. And it’s not. Trust me.”

I must believe her. Not just because her trust in me is so steadfast and she deserves the same from me, but because I don’t have any other choice.

Until Envy is completely satisfied with the outcome of my assistance, he won’t hand over the flask. Besides, even if I did have my Glow, I couldn’t leave right away. I’d need to rest for a little while to regain my energy.

I guess doing that here is as good a place as any.

“I hope your stomach is strong enough to handle the bloodshed you’re about to see.” I rest my hand on Hannah’s thigh to lessen the pain I know she’s battling. “If it becomes too much for you, just don’t look.”

“I went to a UFC fight once. It was kind of like this.”

I don't know what a UFC fight is, but I doubt it was anything close to what will happen in this arena.

These matches usually include disembowelment, severed limbs, and decapitated heads.

The stadium is packed with all kinds of people, and the excitement is palpable. Everyone here is gleefully anticipating a gruesome event.

In the front, warriors and anyone else who doesn't care about getting bloody are jovial as they wait for the appearance of the challengers.

The designated royal area is higher up, a safer distance from blood spray or possible injury. Looking much more comfortable than the stone benches everyone else is sitting on, it's the only shaded spot, with a silky blue canopy. Two upholstered chairs are under it. One is occupied by the current king. The other is empty.

The princess still has yet to arrive, and I'm betting she's scheming and bargaining in the rooms below us right this second.

Zetipher, Yorenzo, and Rymus are in the row directly in front of us, and when I glance around, I spot many of Envy's men scattered throughout the audience.

Since Hannah and I got here so late, we had to take the only seats left in the very top row. It's mostly peasants and farmers up here, and when Envy joined us a few minutes ago, he griped about how far away we are.

He's lucky.

Lucky I don't take him to some version of hell just for spite. I could, after our deal is done.

Currently, I'm having fantasies about dropping him in the middle of the Endless Sea and leaving him there. By the time any Seeker could locate him, he'd be gone from the mortal dangers of the waters. Probably eaten by some nightmarish creature or lured in by the deadly sirens.

As far as I'm concerned, I've done what he asked. I brought him and his people to the past. Whatever happens beyond this is none of my business.

If it were my business, I'd be wondering what Envy plans to do if Acealenvyos wins. His ancestor will be king, regardless of who caused the creation of the new universe. Perhaps Envy plans to challenge Acealenvyos. Or murder him in his sleep.

All I know is that their world isn't a place I want Hannah living in.

"I don't feel any different," Envy complains, impatiently tapping his foot. "I don't think it worked."

"Give it some time, Envy."

"King Envy," he hisses back, too quiet for any other audience members to overhear his claim for a title that isn't really his.

Suddenly, Hannah gasps. Her fingers grab onto mine, and they squeeze so hard it hurts my bones.

"What?" I rotate toward her, my hand landing on her waist as I brace for another seizure or a blackout.

Instead, her facial features show happiness and shock. With her jaw dropped, she blinks before a smile starts to spread over her lips.

She beams at me with bright eyes. Her color is instantly better. Some shine has come back to her hair. She looks stronger, just in the way she holds herself, spine straight and shoulders squared.

Her joy comes through our tether like bolts of lightning.

I cup the side of her face and feel her cooled skin. No fever.

"Darling?"

"The new universe..." she breathes out. "It's happening now. We're *in* it."

"How do you know?"

“You mean to tell me you didn’t feel that? The shift?”

I shake my head. “I felt nothing, except for your emotions.”

Envy reaches across me and catches her wrist. “Are you sure?”

I slap his knuckles like he’s a child who tried to steal a piece of bread before dinner has started, making him recoil with an expression so offended I almost laugh. Several of his men who happen to be sitting around us touch the hilts of their sheathed weapons as if they’re ready to lop off my head at any moment, but Envy waves them off with a fake smile plastered on his face.

“Dear Hannah,” he starts again through gritted teeth, keeping his hands to himself this time. “Please inform me of how you know this.”

“My symptoms. They’re gone. See?” Lifting her right leg, she rolls her ankle before stomping her foot. “No numbness or tingling. No headache. I’m just... completely healed.”

It’s like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders.

I wrap my arms around her, finally able to touch her with zero guilt. I run my fingers down her back, relishing every inch I’m allowed to caress. As I bury my face by her neck, I kiss her sensitive skin along her artery, moving up to her jaw before latching my lips with hers.

I kiss her once. Twice. Then I lose count.

I don’t have to keep track of kisses like each one is an indiscretion.

And it’s wonderful.

Although our watches haven’t been working since before we first completed the bond, I’ve felt the seconds going by. Every single *tick* has been like a mallet chipping away at Hannah’s life.

I’ve gotten so used to feeling like time is against us, but now it’s not.

We really can escape the bargain.

If I'm being honest with myself, I hadn't been one hundred percent sure traveling to the alternate universe would fix her. The theory was always a desperate solution, but it was the only chance we had, so I ran with it.

Now I know for certain, if we go to the reality Number Two created, Hannah will survive.

"Ackealenvyos refused the princess, just as you wanted," I speak to Envy while running my hands through Hannah's healthy hair. "That means the bargain has been successfully derailed. You have your new world, and Hannah is the proof."

"Yes," Envy agrees, studying her. "You do look much less ugly without those dark circles under your eyes."

Oh, how I want to hurt this man. A part of me hopes he'll refuse to give me my flask again, just so I have a reason to inflict him with a cruel and unusual punishment.

Before I can demand what belongs to me for the final time, the loud trumpets blow out a tune.

It's the announcement song. The princess has arrived.

She's at the top of the steps, waving and smiling graciously. Her waist-length, white-blond hair is half up, and a crown of white flowers sits on her head. Her red lips match her red dress. A bold choice in a realm where lighter fabrics are often favored.

Among the crowd, I hear whispers about how fitting the color of blood is for this occasion.

As she descends the stairs, it's obvious how loved she is. Everyone expresses their admiration. Some shout compliments and throw roses in her direction. Others clap with glee at being so close to the royals.

Princess Vetta plays to her admirers, blowing kisses and giving out smiles, but there's tension on her face when she makes it to the seat next to her father. Her eyes don't match the happy expression she wears.



When she leans toward her father, she begins whispering something to him.

They're too far away for me to hear, especially over the chatter of the crowd.

Opening a small vortex behind my head, I try to pull their sound my way. I envision a small tunnel from their mouths to my ears.

Realizing what I'm doing, Hannah leans closer to me.

The suction causes some unnatural wind, and several people in the rows ahead of us glance around with confusion. Fortunately, they have no idea what's happening, and I quickly catch snippets of the conversation between the princess and the king.

"He refused," she says.

"Why?"

"He was acting strange. Giving me non-answers."

"So he might try to kill me."

"I begged him not to." Her voice is strained with emotion. "I tried, Papa. I offered him everything, and he still wouldn't agree. Mihkyle will have mercy on you, so let's hope he wins."

"Don't fret, my dear." He pats her hand. "Fate will decide the outcome today."

I let the vortex close, and when I lock eyes with Hannah, I know she heard it all, too.

We just learned something Yorenzo's books couldn't have told us.

The princess made the bargain to save her father. Maybe that was the entire reason all along.

Not power.

Not to secure her position as queen.

Whoever wins this match will take on the king, and whether or not they kill him is entirely up to them.

It's funny how history has many sides.

All of the sudden, I see Princess Vetta in a new light. In the books, she'd been painted as a deceitful, uncaring bitch, but she's just trying to keep her father alive.

In the next second, I think of Eldyra, and I have a different perspective on her as well. Her situation wasn't so different. Vaeront had her sister in his clutches, and she did what she could to save her.

I was simply a casualty in an unfair situation, just as Acealenvyos would have been if we hadn't intervened.

Dread pools in my stomach.

It's an intuitive feeling, and my gut is telling me coming back here was wrong. What we did was wrong.

Unfortunately, it's already done, and now all we can do is watch history unfold.

Once the princess is situated, the crowd hushes so they can hear the announcer introduce the challengers. He names them by their full title, both men hailing from far cities in the Day Realm and born to lower stations. When he states their powers, he categorizes them as wizards.

According to Envy, his ancestor is known to be the stronger of the pair, but anytime you put two faeries with the same ability against each other, it makes for an interesting fight.

As Acealenvyos the First saunters out, a portion of the crowd cheers while the rest boo. He waves cockily.

Mihkyle emerges next, and he receives a mixed response as well.

They stop in the middle of the oval arena about twenty feet from each other.

Looking toward the princess, Mihkyle lifts his ring and kisses the ruby. Since we're behind Vetta, we can't see what she's doing, but when she raises her fist, I'm guessing she returns the gesture.

Shock and delight ripples through the crowd when they realize what that means.

Objects of commitment.

Mihkyle just made his marriage to the princess public.

Ackealenvyos glances between them with a confused glare that quickly turns furious. His face gets red and his fists ball at his sides as Princess Vetta suddenly skips down the stone steps, meets Mihkyle at the half-wall, and kisses him.

The audience erupts with more cheers and clapping.

Any of Mihkyle's naysayers have been silenced by the news. Now everyone in the arena chants his name as if he's already won.

And I realize what the princess is doing. She just made it very clear where her loyalty lies, and she's trying to throw Ackealenvyos off by enraging him with this unexpected news.

I give Envy a hard nudge with my elbow. "Didn't you warn Ackealenvyos about the princess and Mihkyle?"

"Why would I?"

"Common courtesy?" Hannah interjects spiritedly, leaning over my lap to gawk at the clueless man. "Are you serious right now? You wanted us to leave so you could have a *private word*. You had the perfect opportunity to give him a heads up that he's about to be blindsided by the woman he thinks he loves."

"What's a *heads up*?" Envy asks, sounding befuddled about the human language.

It doesn't really matter what his answer is because the consequences are already in motion.

Smoke is filling the air.

I follow the swirls to Ackealenvyos.

He's literally fuming, his shoulders lifting up and down with his hard breathing as the stones at his feet start to glow red and crack from heat.

I'm slightly aware of the announcer blowing into his horn and yelling about being disqualified for starting the fight too soon, but it's hard to hear him over the noise of the people.

Everyone's starting to get concerned, and rightly so.

The smoke and heat are spreading, and anyone sitting in the front row is in danger. They start to back up, pushing against the people behind them.

Mihkyle shoos the princess back to the cover of her canopy and faces his opponent, but Acealenvyos is already in fight mode.

Regardless of the panicked announcer's threats for both men to stand down, Acealenvyos rushes to the weapon wall, and he goes straight for the wooden staff. As he lifts the rod, some of the smoke clears behind him briefly.

The sun glints off something sticking out of the back pocket of his pants.

I recognize the top of the flask.

My flask.

Standing, I squint at the familiar metal cap before grabbing Envy by the shirt. "Why does Acealenvyos have that?"

"Have what?" He goes for innocence.

"Don't." I shake him, jostling him around while tightening the material over his neck.

His men are too preoccupied with the shit going down in the arena to notice I'm about to maim their king.

"I gave him the Glow," Envy admits, barely able to say the words because he can't breathe. I'm twisting his shirt until it strangles him, and he rasps while trying to pull my hand away, "He already consumed it before coming out of the tunnel, so there's no point in dwelling on what you cannot change."

"The hell I can't. I'm dwelling, motherfucker." Betrayal burns hot in my chest. "We had a deal."

"I told him not to drink all of it. There might be some left for you." He weakly bats at my arms.

Envy isn't weak, but I suddenly understand why he isn't able to fight me off.

As powerful as he normally is, he should be able to blast me away with his telekinesis, but he fucked with one of the most important fae rules, and now he's paying for it.

He's experiencing the damage that comes with breaking his end of the bargain.

"I'm doing you a favor," he snarls, doubling down. "You'll thank me someday. If you go live in the human realm, you'll lose your power. I couldn't let you waste your gift like that."

"That's not your decision to make." Releasing the hold I have on him, I shove him backward so hard his head bounces off the stone. "The amplifier is dangerous, Envy. Why does Acealenvyos even need it?"

Gasping and rubbing at his throat, he replies, "I wanted to make sure he wins this fight."

"You said he'd beat Mihkyle. You were very certain about that."

"He will, especially now." Envy gestures to the arena floor.

All the square stones are charred. They look like blackened coals in the embers of a fire, with bright orange glowing from the cracks.

Mihkyle desperately tries to counteract it with a cold spell. The bubble he throws fizzles to nothing but steam when it hits the rock.

"Oh, this is bad," Hannah mutters behind her hand, her eyes wide with terror. "I think we need to get away from here."

An understatement.

She doesn't have to tell me how perilous this situation is. Powerful wizards on Glow... never good. Combine that with Acealenvyos' temper, and disaster is about to strike.

Many others in attendance are thinking the same. As the bottom rows clear out, people clump together, pushing and

shoving as they try to make their way to the stairs to exit the arena. Some of those occupying the top rows are simply jumping out and running away.

As I grab our suitcase and sleeping bag, Mihkyle runs to the weapon rack, but before he's even halfway there, Acealenvyos aims the staff at him. Flames blast out, so unnatural they're actually green.

Mihkyle combusts and disintegrates.

In seconds, he goes from being a man to nothing but dust.

A blood-curdling scream rises from the crowd as the princess runs from her seat. Her iridescent wings come out as she prepares to take flight and flee, but Acealenvyos has her in his sights.

She's his next target.

Before she can get five feet into the air, more green fire flies from his staff to her.

The red dress, her white hair, and the crown of flowers... instant smithereens.

The princess is gone.

Several guards surround the king to be his personal shield. They want to protect him if he becomes the object of Acealenvyos' wrath, but there's just too much chaos to carry out any kind of plan successfully. The military men are knocked over and trampled as everyone flees.

Some fae take flight, even though the area above the stadium is a no-fly zone. No one tries to stop them, though.

They've got the right idea, and Envy decides to follow their lead.

Like a coward, he releases his wings and takes to the sky without even trying to make sure his men get out safely.

Zetipher isn't far behind Envy, but Yorenzo is left fumbling with his books.

Trying to save the history is pointless now. The information on those pages no longer applies to this world.

Quite frankly, I'm not worried about anyone but Hannah and me.

Opening a vortex behind me, I hook my arm around her while holding onto our luggage.

We fall backward just as Acealenvyos starts spinning his staff, building a circle of destruction. The green orb is a bomb, and I don't want to be in this arena when it goes off.

There's minimal swirling for Hannah and me during our travel because I'm not taking us very far.

We get spit out into the sky high above the action, and I release my wings. Flapping hard, I try to regain our equilibrium as we spin. My full wings catch the wind, and I can't even appreciate the fact that I'm flying for the first time since my young years because there's too much shit happening.

Shrieking, Hannah hugs my neck while her ankles are linked behind my back.

This is the first time she's flown with me, and I don't think she's a fan. As much as she loves my wings, being this high off the ground must be terrifying for a human.

Once we're stabilized, I look down to see Acealenvyos hitting his staff against the ground.

The boom that follows is deafening, and a green explosion spreads out from the point of impact.

Not knowing how much destruction he's going to cause, I take us higher.

"We'll be all right up here, I think," I wheeze, barely able to speak with Hannah compressing my vocal cords.

Realizing she's squeezing too tight, she loosens her arms but she doesn't let go. "How do you know that for sure?"

I don't. I don't even understand what's happening, but I don't want her to be scared. She's had enough fear to fill a lifetime.

“I’m strong enough to stay in the air,” I reassure her. “I won’t let us fall.”

Her loving face swings toward mine. “I know, Ellister. I know that.”

“Just close your eyes, darling. I’ll tell you when it’s over.”

“What if I want to see?”

“You don’t.”

Hannah’s trust in me proves to be deep-rooted once again, because she takes my word for it. As her eyelids flutter shut, she rests her forehead in the crook of my neck.

Although I don’t want her to witness the tragedy unfolding, I can’t help looking.

I dip my focus back to the ground.

Then all I can do is watch the carnage.

The effects of whatever Ackealenvyos did spreads beyond the arena floor. It seems to be contained to the ground, but it’s destroying everything and everyone it touches.

All the folks still trying to make it out of the stadium become a puff of dust when they ignite.

Yorenzo doesn’t escape either. As he’s scrambling over the ledge, he and his books are gone within seconds.

And the flames keep going. Like a hole burned in the middle of a piece of paper, the green flare from Ackealenvyos’ staff has grown.

It razes the lush grass on the lawn until it’s just dry, cracked dirt. Anyone running, even the lucky ones who’ve gotten a good distance away, are obliterated when the circle reaches them.

“What’s happening?” Hannah asks, her breath puffing against my skin as she continues to keep her eyes tightly shut.

“Some kind of destruction spell. It’s heading for the palace now.”



Mere seconds later, it sweeps over the building. Although it doesn't make the structure crumble, it erodes and cracks the beautiful marble exterior until it's just a shell of its former self.

Next, the garden maze goes ablaze. The hedges making up the walls become brittle brown twigs, and the fountains dry up in a wisp of steam.

Rotating, I look to the forest behind us. Rabbits, birds, and other wildlife are wiped out. Although the trees remain intact, only a carcass of peeling bark and brittle twigs is left behind.

Nothing is spared.

With horror, I move my gaze in the other direction and watch the circle expand to the town beyond the royal walls.

I feel sick to my stomach when the entire city of Hailene meets the same fate. Just like with the palace, the buildings withstand the damage, but anything living ceases to be.

Farm animals. Children playing in the streets. So many innocent bystanders who had nothing to do with today's events.

I've never seen anything so devastating.

The few faeries who got into the air are the only ones untouched by the fire, and they're flying in all directions, swooping back and forth while trying to find a safe place to eventually land.

Ash starts filling the blue sky like a dark cloud, blocking out the suns as if there's a storm coming.

Bodies.

The air is polluted with what's left of them.

"Cover your mouth with my shirt," I tell Hannah. "It might be toxic."

While she pulls the fabric up to her face, she looks down and gasps at the desolate landscape. "When will it stop?"

"I don't know."

It just keeps going and going.

When I'd warned Envy about a worse outcome... this isn't what I had in mind. In my darkest imagination, I couldn't have predicted this would happen.

The muscles in my back are screaming at me from the overuse. My wings might be full enough to fly, but I don't have the stamina to keep it up for long, especially while carrying someone.

Because she can feel my strain, Hannah says, "We can't stay up here forever. We have to land sometime."

"I'm going to drop the sleeping bag," I decide, thinking if I get rid of some weight, it might help. "I want to see what happens when it hits the ground. If it remains whole, we probably will, too."

Keeping my firm grasp on the suitcase handle, I release the bundle from under my arm. We watch it fall, appearing smaller as it gets farther away from us. When the little dot finally makes impact, dust billows up, but there's no smoke.

I wait several seconds to see if the sleeping bag will catch fire, but it doesn't.

Letting my wings catch the wind, I soar in a spiral as we start to come down.



## CHAPTER 29

### *ELLISTER*

Surprisingly, the air gets clearer as we descend because there's a disconcerting wind blowing all the ashes away and up. Everything is whipping about; our hair, dried dirt, and dead twigs.

Landing by the sleeping bag, I hold my hand out to try to sense any heat that's lingering. There's a dry warmth in the breeze, but when I inspect the dead grass, I find no cinders.

I lift my feet to look at the bottom of my shoes. The rubber isn't melted at all.

I pat Hannah's butt. "I think it's okay to put your feet down."

She slowly slides off my body, and she glances all around us.

The ring of fire has traveled so far now, we can't see it anymore.

Perhaps it's dissipated.

Maybe it's still going.

Picking up the sleeping bag, Hannah brushes it off.

She gags when she rubs the ashy substance between her fingers because she knows it's mostly comprised of people.

Just then, someone swoops overhead, their shadow moving over us. Protectively, I hook an arm around Hannah, ready to take another vortex to the sky, but then I recognize the man.

Envy.

He disappears into the stadium where I'm assuming Acealenvyos still stands.

"They could've planned this together," Hannah suggests, but I shake my head at her suspicion.

"I don't think so. Most of Envy's men are gone. He wouldn't kill his own following on purpose, and I don't think he'd want to ruin a kingdom he plans to keep."

"What do you think he's doing down there?"

"Trying to talk some sense into Acealenvyos, most likely. Perhaps something can be done to reverse the destruction spell, or at least stop it, but with Glow thrown into the mix, I doubt it's possible."

"The Glow," Hannah says sadly. "You needed what was left."

"I still do." I start to walk toward the arena. "Stay behind me."

"What are we doing?"

"I have to get that flask."

Hannah barks out a humorless laugh. "You think Acealenvyos is just going to hand it over?"

"If I ask nicely..."

"Ellister."

"I was being sarcastic. I can do that, too, sometimes."

"Smartass." At least that brought a bit of humor into her eyes.

"I'm hoping Envy might be able to get it from him."

"And you think Envy's going to, what? Give it back to us?"

“Maybe. If he wants to get away from this place, I’m his only option.”

“We are *not* adopting that psycho. He made his bed. I vote we leave his ass here where he can rot.”

I grin a little at her viciousness.

She’s keeping up with my quick strides with a pep in her step. Out of habit, I hook my free hand under her arm, but she doesn’t need my help walking.

For the time being, she isn’t sick. She’s better now because we’re in a different universe.

A new universe...

... where the sky is darkened, all the buildings are ruined, and every living thing is dead.

A land that’s been... lost.

My feet falter, and I stumble to a stop just a stone’s throw away from the edge of the arena.

I scan the horizon, and the familiarity of the barren landscape becomes too recognizable to ignore.

“The Lost Land,” I mutter to myself.

“What?” Hannah asks, but I’m too busy having an epiphany to answer.

The mystery of the Lost Land is solved. This day, this event... this is how it came into being.

Talk about mind-blowing. I can barely wrap my head around the surreal knowledge.

All that time I spent in this place. The confusion, the misery. I was in a prison of my own making.

“It was me,” I rasp, my gaze bouncing to all the elements of the wrecked world.

“What was you?” Hannah gives me a confused look.

The wind picks up, howling as it blows over the mouth of the stadium.

I turn to face her and repeat it louder. “It was me. It’s my fault—The Lost Land. I didn’t realize it until just now. I’d always wondered how it was created, wondered where such an awful place came from.”

“That’s where we are now?” Hannah doesn’t seem as afraid as she should be as she curiously studies our surroundings.

She should be terrified. I know I am.

The destruction spell won’t stop. It’ll keep spreading until every inch of what used to be Valora is ravaged.

The Lost Land is still being formed. On and on and on, past the Endless Sea and beyond the scope of time, everything will be ruined.

I don’t feel detached from my soul yet, but it’s coming.

At some point, rational thinking and the ability to reason will be gone. The confusion will set in.

We can’t be here when that happens, and I’m more determined than ever to get my Glow.

Shouting echoes from the arena, along with a few flashes of green light.

Hannah and I crouch low and crawl to peek over the ledge.

Ackealenvyos and Envy are in the middle of a standoff.

I’m not sure what Envy is planning to do. For one, he’s weakened from breaking our deal. And, two, even if he were at full strength, he couldn’t stop someone on Glow.

Which leaves Envy with the option of getting through to Ackealenvyos with words.

Although they’re far below us, the shape of the amphitheater is designed to help sound reach even the highest row, and we hear their conversation.

“You must stop this,” Envy states defiantly.

“I won’t do that,” Ackealenvyos refuses.

“Because you can’t?” The taunt is clear, and it has its stinging effect.

“There’s nothing I can’t do,” Acealenvyos shoots back. “I’m the most powerful being to have ever existed.”

That’s the Glow talking. Acealenvyos must’ve drank quite a bit of it, and he’s probably prone to evil. The man was never meant to be king. Princess Vetta had the right idea to eliminate him, but it’s too late for regret.

“Not for long.” Using his telekinesis, Envy lifts the flask from Acealenvyos’ pocket, and it’s in his hand within a second.

At first, I think he’s going to call for me. I could quickly vortex him out of harm’s way. Surely, he saw us on the ground when he flew overhead. He knows I’m still here and that I can help.

Instead, he twists off the cap, lifts the container to his lips, and tosses it back. He gulps greedily.

A shout gets caught in my throat, and Hannah digs her nails into my bicep as a warning to stay quiet. If we’re discovered, there’s no telling what kind of wrath the wizards will turn on us.

With a satisfied sigh, Envy drops the flask to the stone. It clatters, sounding empty. The cap is still undone. Nothing drips out.

He finished it, and instead of appearing stronger from the amplifier, his shoulders sag from the fact that he intentionally fucked up our bargain to an even higher degree.

What a fucking fool.

Cocky, Acealenvyos grins, welcoming the challenge presented to him. “An even playing field. I like it. May the most powerful wizard prevail.”

He starts spinning his staff again, gearing up to do some damage to his new opponent. When he points his staff at Envy, sending a blast of red, I expect instant incineration.

But that’s not what happens.

Envy grunts with effort as he quickly motions in the air like he's opening a scroll. In the space between his hands, I see a reflective surface. Like a mirror.

The fiery ball bounces off it and rebounds straight back to Acealenvyos.

Shockingly, he doesn't go up in flames. This spell must be different than what he did before.

His body drops, then he convulses as he screams. Audible pops and snaps reverberate through the stadium as he mutates into... something else.

Something that doesn't resemble a person.

Thick hair grows on his arms, upper torso, and face. Claws elongate from his fingertips. His jaw gets bigger and merges with his nose. His pants rip as his thighs become larger, and a tail flops out of the leather scraps.

The process only lasts a minute. When it's done, a furry beast is lying where Acealenvyos the First once was.

"What the hell is that?" Hannah mouths soundlessly, her eyes wide with fear.

I can't even respond past the tightness in my throat.

A lycan. A terrifying creature I've encountered several times, but only in the Lost Land. In Valora, lycans were hunted until they were all but extinct. There's rumor that a few still remain in the Shadowlands in present-day. Some theorize that they spilled out from the Lost Land when the vortex was opened after the sentencing of the dark fae, but no one knows for sure.

Suddenly, everything gets darker. The dim light from the suns fizzles out altogether, and I feel something I'd hoped to never feel again...

My soul leaves me.

Just cut off.

Feeling it, too, Hannah gasps and places a hand over her sternum. She's detached from me and our connection.



From herself.

I think this means the Day Realm is no more. The magic of this kingdom has evaporated.

Dawn and Dusk is next. After that, the Night Realm and the Dream Realm will be gone.

“We must leave before the confusion sets in,” I tell Hannah. “Or we might never get away.”

She bites her lip as she considers our dilemma. If we hop back to the other universe where Valora is whole and unchanged, she’ll get sick again.

But we can’t stay here either.

Having recovered from his painful transformation, Acealenvyos stands on his four paws with an anguished growl. His snout displays sharp teeth dripping with saliva.

With a low bark, he chases after Envy, who’s realized he’s fucked. Trying to run and fly at the same time, he makes it halfway up the stairs at the far exit. He gets into the air.

He doesn’t stand a chance.

The lycan is built for the hunt, and Acealenvyos’ muscular legs propel him forward and up. He pounces on Envy’s back ten feet off the ground, and both of them fall to the stone steps.

Landing in a snarling, screaming heap, Acealenvyos sinks his teeth into Envy repeatedly. The arm, the shoulder, the face. He rips off Envy’s wing at the base, exposing muscle and bits of spine. He finishes his attack by taking a chunk of Envy’s neck, and blood pools out from the broken body left behind.

It’s a horrific scene, and Hannah hides her face against my arm.

Satisfied with the damage he did, Acealenvyos runs from the arena, his claws scraping ominously before he jumps out and disappears.

After a good minute, I assume he's far enough, and I rub Hannah's shoulder. "I think it's safe now."

"Safe?" she squeaks incredulously as she lifts her head from her cowering position. "On what planet?"

"I used the wrong word. I think Acealenvyos is gone."

"But what about him?" Hannah flinches as she gazes upon Envy's bleeding form. "Is he dead? He's not moving."

"He won't die from that. However, he'll turn."

"Turn?" Her maple eyes go to mine.

"Into a lycan—the creature Acealenvyos accidentally became. When I resided in the Lost Land, lycans were one of the greatest dangers when it came to wandering around, especially alone. They're very predatory. When Acealenvyos finds any survivors, their fate will likely be the same as Envy's. Lycans are pack animals. They want companionship. At least now I know how they got here."

"A lycan is like a werewolf?"

"Not exactly. Werewolves have the ability to shift between man and beast. These lycans are changed forever. Never again will they have the body of a man, but the mind will retain remnants of who they once were. I imagine that's the worst part—knowing what you are, remembering what you did to become it."

"Well," Hannah sighs sadly. "Looks like they both got their kingdom, one way or another."



## CHAPTER 30

### *HANNAH*

“He didn’t even leave me a drop.” Ellister’s face is etched with devastation as he throws the empty flask, then he goes in to fix-it mode as he paces a bit.

Since he’s unwilling to let go of my hand or go very far from me, my body is being rotated as he drags my arm back and forth with his anxious walking. I kind of hate being on the floor of the arena. Too much shit has happened here, and I want to get away.

“I could make a lateral move back to Valora,” he continues. “We can produce more Glow. I’m not sure if your illness will resume where it left off or if it will start at the beginning. Either way, if you can survive for two more days \_\_\_”

“We’re not doing that,” I say firmly. “We’re going home. To the farm. Our plan is still on.”

“Some Glow is still in my system from earlier, but I don’t have enough energy to make the jump.”

Squeezing his hand hard enough to make him stop walking and look at me, I lift my pocket watch from my chest.

The pocket watch that will never tick again because now it’s just an inconspicuous container that’s been holding the secret I’ve been keeping.

It dangles so innocently and covertly from my fingertips. “When the men came to take you away and I was hiding in the barn, I tried a little experiment of my own.”

Ellister’s eyebrows pinch together. “What experiment?”

“Waterfall mist. I poured what I had into the distiller, then I threw logs on the fire. I put so much wood under there, the flames went up the sides of the barrel. And then I opened the back of my pocket watch and I gutted it. I took out all the wheels and mechanisms. I applied the glue around any seam I thought might leak, then right before Zetipher and those guys could leave with you, I poured what Glow I’d collected into it and sealed the back shut with more glue.”

I look down at the antique, and I shake it a little, hearing the soft slosh of the liquid inside.

Ellister looks at me like I’m speaking another language, his lips tight and that adorable wrinkle on the side of his nose.

“Did you hear me?” I ask. “Ellister, I have Glow right here. Now, it’s not a ton, and I know if adding the waterfall mist was a risk. I honestly have no idea if it helped, but I figured if waterfall mist is basically a stronger version of Day Realm water, why wouldn’t it be more potent in its concentrated form?”

“You-you’ve been hiding Glow in your pocket watch all this time? Enhanced by waterfall mist?”

I shrug. “For back up.”

“You little genius.” He lunges for me, picks me up by the waist, and spins me around. “You crazy little genius.”

Setting me down, he presses a hard kiss to my mouth. When he grips me by the shoulders to put a little distance between us, he’s smiling at me like I hung the moon.

But we can’t celebrate yet. “It might not be enough. There’s maybe a gulp in here.”

Thinking, Ellister cocks his head. “I never thought about distilling waterfall mist, but it could give the Glow something extra.”

“Or it could ruin it.”

“I guess we’ll find out. We’ve got nothing left to lose at this point.”

The wind suddenly blows harder, bringing more debris with it. Sticks and twigs from dead trees start raining down around us, and Ellister raises his hand to collect the dust.

“Sand.” He rubs the gritty stuff between his fingers. “That means the damage has reached the sea.”

Suddenly, the ground starts to tilt.

Horrible cracking and groaning sounds come from the surface under our feet as the world slants.

“What’s happening?” I ask, shrieking when my feet start to slide.

Still carrying our suitcase, Ellister grabs me with his other arm as he looks around with wild eyes. “It’s flipping over. The Lost Land... it’s a mirror image of Valora. Everything is turned around.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The axis of this world has been destroyed. All stability is gone, and this entire land will end up on its ass.”

Since Ellister’s wings are still out, he’s able to get us into the air, though I can’t tell which way is up or down. My hair is sticking straight out, like it doesn’t know where to go.

As the ground becomes almost vertical, dizziness invades my head as all equilibrium is lost.

Gravity isn’t doing its job. Everything feels off. I have the sensation of being light and heavy at the same time.

“Give me the sleeping bag,” Ellister orders. “Then use your nails to scrape the glue away from the back of the watch. You’re going to have to put it up to my mouth. Pour all of it in.”

Keeping my legs wound tightly around his waist, I remove the chain from my neck and begin the imperative task.

My hands shake as the world moans and emanates deafening booms. Above us. Below us.

“I don’t want the liquid to fall out.” I’m breathing hard as I pick at the glue around the back. “I’m going to put it up to your mouth, and I want you to suck hard, okay?”

We both know his sucking skills are top notch.

I put it up to his mouth, and he does the damn thing.

Just as he slurps out all he can, the landscape seems to stop moving, and the odd feeling of being suspended in the air stops.

My balance is still way off, but at least the ground seems like it’s where it belongs again.

To make sure Ellister consumed every bit of Glow inside, I completely open the back and shake out a couple more drops into his mouth. He even goes as far as sticking his tongue in the hollowed-out space and licking around.

Now all we can do is wait.



We don’t have to wait long. That waterfall mist must’ve done something, because a vortex starts swirling behind Ellister before I can put the chain back around my neck.

I cling to him, and we get sucked in.

We freefall through the chaotic abyss.

Time travel is a bitch. I mean, going through a vortex is always disorienting, but this is worse.

It takes longer.

So much longer.

Maybe it just feels like we’re spinning forever because of the anticipation. I have no idea where or when we’ll land once we get to the other side of this.

But I have hope.

Within minutes, we could be back on my farm.

Now that we're officially out of the Lost Land, I feel my soul return. The very essence of who I am—and my connection with Ellister—is back.

Some stress travels from him to me through our reestablished bond.

“Hannah,” he grits out, sounding like he’s hurting.

Squinting, I try to look at him, but everything is blurry, dark, and windy. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m running out of power and losing control.” His body trembles against mine. “I don’t know what year we’re going to land in, but it’s not what I’m aiming for. We’re going to fall short.”

“It’s okay,” I say, meaning it.

He’s created universes for me. Just to save me. Just to be with me.

How many other girls can say that about their man?

“You’re everything, Ellister,” I continue hugging him as the swirl becomes sluggish. “Everything I want. Everything I need. Just... everything.”

The swirling motion starts to slow, and I know we’re close. I brace myself for impact.

As the vortex loses steam, I sense the change in the atmosphere. My ears pop from pressure when we get spit out into cool air.

With a shout of exertion, Ellister spins us so his back is turned toward the ground. Less than a second later, we hit a solid surface.

It’s dark. In the past, Ellister has favored traveling to times of daylight. There’s something uplifting about going from a dim vortex to sudden brightness.

But he just went as far as he could.

“Are you okay?” I lightly touch Ellister’s exhausted face.

“I should be asking you that,” he counters, always putting me first. “How do you feel?”

“Good.” I wiggle my toes inside my fae slippers. “No symptoms.”

“Fantastic.” Eyelids heavy with fatigue, he smiles at me a little, showing one of his pointy teeth.

At some point during our travel, one of his caps came off. I look around for it, happening to get lucky when I spot it a couple feet away from his head.

I pluck it up from some brownish leaves on the ground, then I slip it into the pocket of his pants.

“So, where are we? *When* are we?” When I look up at the moon shining through the leaves overhead, I see orange, red, and yellow. From those colors, I’m estimating it’s October.

It smells like home. I’m well acquainted with the scent of damp leaves and crisp autumn in Vermont.

“As far as the year goes, I don’t know. We’re on the farm. Near the outskirts.” Ellister points to some place that’s cloaked in shadows of night. “In your original universe, the wrought iron fence would be just past those trees, but it’s not there.”

I gulp as my stomach twists into knots. “The fence was built in the 1940s. So we arrived before then?”

If we’re that far back, my parents haven’t even been born yet.

“I don’t think so. I felt us go past that time.”

“Then where’s the fence?”

Ellister’s face softens when he sees the concern in my eyes. “Remember, darling, in this reality, Waylon didn’t bargain away his grandchild’s life. He wouldn’t have feared the bad faerie man, and he wouldn’t have gone into debt building a barrier to keep me out.”

Relaxing, I blow out a sigh. He has a point.

He sits up, placing his hands on my hips as he glances around. We’re too deep in the forest to see anything other than



the trees, but he sniffs the air and utilizes his super senses. “Car exhaust. It’s faint, but it’s in the air.” Then he looks up. “I hear a plane flying overhead.”

So cars and planes have been invented. “That’s good news.”

“Perhaps I shouldn’t have brought us to the farm. It will be suspicious if we show up on foot, but I don’t have the energy to take us anywhere else.”

“Well, we’re not hijacking a vehicle.”

“It’s an option,” he says with a shrug.

“No.” I playfully push his shoulder. “The last thing we need to do is end up in jail.”

“Then you want to go with the drifter jig? Show up like the stray kittens do?”

I nod. “It’s our best bet, even if we’re not as cute as kittens with how filthy we are.” I gesture between us, indicating the fine layer of ash coating us both.

Getting serious, Ellister trails a finger down my arm. “Hannah, I’m being completely honest when I say I’ve never seen you look more gorgeous than you do right now. You’re healthy, and you’re mine, and the fact that both of those events can occur at the same time is a miracle. A miracle of your making.”

“Our miracle. We did this together.”

“Ours, then.”

Affected by the cold air, I shiver. “Are we just going to camp out here tonight?”

We do have the sleeping bag. It’s not like I’ve never slept outdoors before, but the temperature is dropping by the second.

“No.” Frowning at the paper-thin fabric of my dress, Ellister shakes his head. “I have a better idea. Let’s take a walk down Memory Lane, shall we?”



## CHAPTER 31

### *HANNAH*

More clues about what timeframe we're in reveal themselves when we make it to Great Grandpa Waylon's old house.

The little two-bedroom building is vacant, structurally updated, and the informational plaque my family put on an exterior post is where it belongs.

I rub the engraved metal plate. "In my universe, this was installed about twenty years ago."

"Is there anything inside the house that might tell you more?" Ellister's focus is on the building. "We'll stay here tonight. I wish I could vortex us in, but my power stores are completely depleted. I can pry open a window."

"Or we could just use a key."

Before he can question me, I walk over to the bushes next to the front porch steps.

"Let it be here, let it be here," I chant to myself.

After some digging around, I find the collection of gnome statues. Anyone who sees them among the rocks and dirt might think they're simply garden decorations, but one of them holds a secret.

I pick up the gnome with the little frog coming out of its pocket.

I stand and hold it up like a prize as the metal rattles around inside the hollow container. “The spare. It’s still here. My dad is the one who put it there. When he chose this silly statue, he got such a kick out of it. Do you realize what that means?”

Ellister mirrors my happiness. “It means your father is here, and he’s an adult, so we can’t be that far off.”

My smile fades as I remove the key I’ve used many times before.

Because a disturbing feeling nags at my heart.

Deep inside me, there’s this sense of... unbelonging.

I’m misplaced.

When I think about letting myself into Great Grandpa Waylon’s house like I own the place, I feel like an intruder.

The predictability of things like the plaque and the key are a comfort, but this world doesn’t know me, even if I know it.

“What’s wrong, darling?” Ellister asks, noticing my long face. “Aren’t you happy to be home?”

“I am. But do you feel that? There’s a... wrongness about us being here.”

“I’m so used to that feeling, I guess it doesn’t stand out to me. The only time I’ve ever been content is when I’m with you.” Reaching for me, he laces our fingers.

As soon as he touches me, the discomfort dissipates, and I bring his hand up to my face so I can kiss his fingers.

He makes everything right.

We can belong everywhere and nowhere as long as we’re together.

Home isn’t a place anymore. It’s a person.

Before I met Ellister, I never knew what it meant to be whole. Apart, we’re like that split apple tree—trying like hell to survive, but forever damaged. Always missing our other half.

Someday, we'll be separated. Death will come between us eventually.

But tonight, and hopefully for many years to come, we'll have each other.

“What do you need, Hannah?” Ellister’s pale eyes glow in the moonlight. “Tell me what to do and I’ll do it.”

He said that the day he let me have my way with him when I was still sick. Only then, we had a time limit and a whole lot of hesitancy between us.

I lift my finger up to his exposed fang and press against the sharp point. “Now that we’re in the human realm, we’ll have to stop drinking from each other, won’t we?”

“It’s possible blood sharing won’t hold the same appeal here, especially after my body has adapted to being human.”

“You mean I won’t crave you like I do now?” My thirst is hard to ignore, and I’m betting it’s the same for him.

“I hope you still crave me in at least a couple ways.” He smirks.

“Always,” I say, pulling his face to mine. “Kiss me. Just touch me and don’t stop.”



The sleeping bag is like a warm cocoon as Ellister fucks me from behind on the dining room floor. I’m flattened out on my stomach, my legs slightly spread as his cock hits deep in a quick, brutal rhythm.

He’s never fucked me this hard before, not even the first time when the bond was driving us crazy.

I don’t have time to recover from one thrust to the next, and I end up biting the material smashed against my face to stop myself from screaming.

We’ve already made too much noise as it is.

When we entered the old house, we were simultaneously trying to carry shit, touch each other, keep kissing, and

fumbling with the lock. The suitcase got dropped, and it loudly clattered down the porch steps. The door swung open so hard, it smacked the wall with a deafening bang.

And Ellister already made me come twice. First with his mouth and tongue, then with his cock. Which resulted in some pretty enthusiastic moans. Mine, not his.

Somehow, he's holding out on his orgasm.

Usually, when I come, he's not far behind.

He seems determined to fuck me into feeling like I belong here.

It's working, but I need him to come inside me. I want the heat, the pressure.

I'm so glad we still have our mate bond. Through our connection, I can feel how close he is. And I hope it's always like this with us.

Eventually, his magic will fade. At some point, he'll become human just like me.

I can go without vortexes. I'll miss his pointy ears and wings. I might even crave his blood from time to time, but I'll manage without it.

But our souls? I want them to stay entwined just as they are. I want to be able to sense his nearness, get that sizzle in my veins.

Squirming beneath him, I gasp, "Do it. I want you to finish."

"Not yet."

Stubborn ass. "Why?"

"Do you realize how difficult it's been for me to resist you for so many days?" Ellister's voice is almost angry and accusing, like I've been withholding myself from him on purpose. "I'm just making up for lost time. How many orgasms do you think I should've given you during the time we stayed apart?"

My mind is a jumble of endorphins and thinking straight is impossible. “You’re seriously asking me to do math right now? Fuck that.”

He bites me.

Without warning, his sharp teeth sink into the side of my neck, and he sucks vigorously.

All while pumping into me harder.

I can’t help it—I scream.

He unlatches long enough to promise, “This is the last time. I swear it.”

“Are you sure?” I taunt.

“I’m sure.”

After a few more long pulls, he bites his own wrist and puts it up to my mouth. I drink him down, savoring every drop.

He slips his other hand under my thigh and finds my clit. He pinches it with his fingers, rolling the sensitive bud until an orgasm explodes in my core.

My pussy contracts around his dick so hard I see stars. I lose track of time. In this moment, seconds or minutes could be going by. I really don’t know.

Once I regain my wits, I hear Ellister’s growl of surrender, and he shoves himself deep. His cock jerks inside me while I’m filled with his heat.

Despite how cold it is in this house—and the fact that I’m naked—I’m sweating. Ellister’s damp flesh is sticking to mine, and I briefly consider staying here in the long term. We could be squatters. We could lay low and hide from the world for as long as possible.

But I know that’s just my fear talking.

I’m afraid of what the world will be like out there. I’m scared of both the familiar and the unknown.

Ellister pulls his softening cock out of me and flips me over.

Bracing himself on his elbows, he gazes down at me with my blood on his lips.

My monster.

“I can sense your turmoil.” He tenderly wipes some blood away from my chin. “Your mind is full of worries. You were totally content while I was inside your sweet cunt. Perhaps I should stay there for a bit longer.”

“I appreciate the distraction, but I think the best thing to do is to just face it. The sooner I figure out this universe—what year it is, who’s here in my place—the better.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do at first light. According to Number Two, many aspects of the world are still the same as what you knew, so I don’t think it will take long for you to settle in.”

At the mention of Ellister’s other self, it fully hits me how strange it is that there’s another one of him out there somewhere.

Number Two is someone who loved another version of me so much that he just wanted to know I survived, even if he couldn’t be with me.

I owe my life to him. To Ellister. To them both.

“Thank you,” I say with raw emotion. “Thank you for saving me.”

Ellister grabs my wrists, holding me in place like he never wants to let me go. “Hannah, it’s me who should be thanking you. I’ve existed for over five hundred thousand years, but for the first time, I have a life. A home. Unconditional love and acceptance. You’ve given me a reason to exist, Hannah Wildwood.”

I smile a little and correct, “Hannah Lostland.”

Shaking his head, he returns my soft grin. “Let’s leave that last name behind. Choose something else.”

“Valora would be fine. We didn’t get to spend much time there, but I didn’t hate it. Plus, it’s where you’re from.”

“Hannah and Ellister Valora it is, then.”





## CHAPTER 32

### *HANNAH*

I don't think we'll have a hard time convincing anyone we're homeless. Although we tried to clean ourselves up, we've got messy hair, and our faces are streaked with dirt.

I adjust the gauzy scarf around my neck. The fae dress ended up being good for something—hiding my bite mark. After getting dressed into our human clothes, I tore a long strip off the bottom of the hem, then I tied it into a fashionable knot over my throat.

Unfortunately, the cute style won't make up for the bad condition my clothes are in. My jeans are in one piece. Dirty, yes, but at least there are no holes. My shirt, however, is another story.

I've got on the flannel button-up Ellister had been wearing the day he took me from the meadow, but part of the right sleeve is ripped. I've hidden the defect by rolling up the cuffs.

Ellister changed into his jeans, and he's got the beanie on his head, but his tank top isn't weather appropriate. It's too chilly to go sleeveless, but he doesn't seem to mind the cold.

As we stand in front of the gift shop, I look to him for the bravery to go inside.

Giving me a nod of encouragement, he pushes the door open for me.

The bell chimes, signaling the arrival of a customer, and I walk into the store.

It's almost exactly how I remember it. There are a few design differences. After all, the honey display along the back wall had been my idea, so it's not there. Instead, there are shelves of syrup. And I'd been the one to insist on having a Christmas selection up year-round because people are always on the hunt for unique gifts, no matter what season it is. That corner just has some 'Wildwood Maple Farm' T-shirts.

Without me here, they're not reaching their full potential—that much is obvious.

That'll change if Ellister and I get hired.

But first, it's time for me to get an answer to a very large, looming question. What year is it?

We always keep a calendar by the register. The kind that has those daily inspirational sayings. My dad loves those cheesy lines.

Walking over to the little flip book, I turn it around and swallow hard.

We're an entire decade short of our goal. It's ten years in the past.

Ellister's behind me, and he gives my shoulder a comforting squeeze as he looks at the page.

Before he feels the need to issue an apology, I whisper, "It's okay. It could be worse."

"Can I help you?" a voice asks from behind the counter, cracking the way it does with boys entering puberty.

I'd been so focused on the calendar, I didn't notice the kid. The teenage boy is close to Cody's age. He resembles my cousin with the blond hair, but his eyes are the same color as mine.

He's my height, but obviously not old enough to be officially working here. Which means he's family.

His name tag says 'Chase' on it.

My breath gets caught in my throat, and my heart is going a mile a minute.

That's the name my parents always talked about giving me if I'd been a boy. I think I'm looking at my brother.

I don't know what to say, so with my clammy palm, I just squeeze Ellister's hand.

"Are you campers?" Chase's focus goes from our luggage to our faces.

Now is the time for me to respond like a normal person. I just can't because my emotions are running wild. I don't know if I should be happy to meet him or jealous that he has my life.

We look so much alike, and under the red apron, he's wearing the Wildwood Maple Farm uniform that's supposed to be mine. I've always wanted a sibling, and it's such a mindfuck to see the actual person right in front of me, standing where I have so many times.

Thankfully, Ellister stays cool in most situations and speaks up. "We were thinking about staying for a while. Do you have a cabin available?"

"My mom does the vacation booking. Let me go get her." Chase strolls away to the kitchen.

"Are you all right?" Ellister says low by my ear.

"Yeah. Just processing."

When my mom comes out, she's even more beautiful than I remember. "Hello and welcome. How long would you like to stay? A weekend?"

"Um." *Breathe, Hannah, breathe.* "We're not sure."

"A week? A month?"

Forever.

I glance at Ellister, using his presence as my strength. "My husband and I have been traveling a lot. We're in between jobs and we're sort of playing it by ear."

My mom's expression turns understanding as she reads between the lines—we have nowhere else to go. “All right. I'll just need a copy of your driver's licenses and a credit card on file. We can charge nightly, weekly, or monthly. The longer you stay, the more you save. I have a pamphlet with our rates.”

I don't know how I could've let it slip my mind that they require background checks. It should've occurred to me that my own parents wouldn't recognize me, but a part of me actually believed they'd let me in with no questions asked.

They hired Jack when he was in a similar situation, but the world was different then. The internet wasn't a thing yet, and people tended to take others at their word.

No matter how well I know them, I have to remember that I'm a stranger to these people. A stranger with no proof of existence.

If they look us up, they won't find anything. We have no identification, and we lack job history.

I'm probably going to have to make up some elaborate story about why we don't have any records. Maybe I could tell her we grew up in a cult.

“That's the other issue. We were robbed.” Totally not a lie because that bastard Envy royally screwed us. “We have no IDs and no money. I know that probably sounds like we're looking for charity, but we're not. We can pay you, just not upfront.”

Yeah, Ellister will have to do some stealing. His vortex power should hold up for a few weeks before it disappears altogether. In that time, he can collect enough for us to get by on.

“To be honest,” Ellister chimes in, “we just escaped an oppressive community, and it's been emotionally taxing for us both.”

Well, he didn't call it a cult, but close enough.

I nod, backing him up. “My husband and I left with very few belongings, and we almost didn't get out at all. It'd be

nice to have some peace for a while, and I can't think of a better place than here."

Sympathy blankets my mom's face. "Oh, you poor dears. Let me go get Bobby. In the meantime, why don't you have some donuts and apple cider on the house?" Turning her head, she calls to the kitchen, "Chase, would you take care of these two? No charge."

My eyes sting at her kindness, and I can't hide my tears when I croak, "Thank you."

She bustles around the counter. On her way to the door, she stops in front of me and envelopes me in a hug. "It'll be all right. You're okay now."

While I hug her back, I try not to become a sobbing mess.

She's exactly how I've always known her to be. Quite a bit taller than me because she has on those damn heels. She smells like cinnamon. As she ends the hug, she does the double pet on my hair.

Leave it to Catrina Wildwood to welcome a dirt-covered homeless person with literal open arms.

After she leaves, Chase brings us our treats.

I'm curious about the brother I never knew. I want to stick around and ask him questions but pestering him seems like a bad idea when we already showed up under mysterious circumstances.

As he goes back to working the register, Ellister and I decide to go outside to eat on one of the benches. We sit close, our thighs pressed together, while we watch loads of customers arrive.

Kids pile out of cars with parents barking at them to watch for vehicles in the parking lot. A school bus pulls up, and there must be a field trip tour on the schedule today. A newly engaged couple walks past us, the woman chatting about her plans to have their wedding in the barn.

It's chaos. It's the life I want.

My heart jumps when I see my dad walking down the driveway with my mom. She's gesturing wildly, her expression concerned as she states our sad case to him. He scratches his hair, not quite completely white yet at his younger age.

"Oh, here they are." Mom smiles genuinely at us when they approach.

Ellister and I stand, and I self-consciously brush off all the donut crumbs off my hands, smooth my flannel shirt, and wipe some residual dirt off my jeans for good measure.

"Hi," I say with awe, and I manage, "It's very nice to meet you."

Ellister steps forward with his hand out. "Hello. I'm Ellister and this is my wife, Hannah."

Dad shakes his hand but stays guarded. "If you two are from the same place, how come one of you has an accent and the other doesn't?"

This man misses nothing.

"We didn't grow up in the same area," Ellister answers honestly. "But we were sort of thrown together along the way."

"He saved me," I add, lacing my fingers with his.

He smiles at me softly. "We saved each other."

"All right." Getting down to business, my dad crosses his arms. "Let me take a look at you. I can tell when a person is good just by looking them in the eye."

It sounds hokey, but it's the truth. My dad can sniff out a sketchy individual any day.

I'm confident I'll pass his test. Ellister, not so much. In my Astrid-given memory, my dad didn't trust him the moment they met.

But Ellister was soulless then. He's different now, and I hope my dad can see that.

Plus, in this universe, there's no bargain for a life. No enemy who might come to take anyone.

Dad has no reason to be paranoid.

First, he stares at me. As if he can immediately sense the familial connection between us, his expression turns wistful, and he pats my shoulder in a fatherly way.

His stamp of approval.

Next, Ellister is under Dad's scrutiny. This one takes a little longer. It feels like a minute goes by, even though it's probably only twenty seconds.

Then Ellister gets a hearty pat on the shoulder, too.

"Okay." Dad puts his hands on his hips. "Are the two of you looking for jobs?"

I nod enthusiastically while Ellister responds with a polite, "Yes, sir. That would be much appreciated."

"Okay, then. Fall is in full swing, and I'd like to say it's our busiest season, but that'd be a lie. We're in need of employees all year round. There's a lot of work to be done around here. If you can learn how to clean out horse stalls, feed chickens, and do some landscaping, that'd be a good start. Each season has its challenges, but I can teach you as we go."

Little does he know, I won't have a learning curve. I could operate this farm in my sleep.

"I grew up doing this kind of work," I tell him, my soul jumping for joy. "It won't be hard for me to start wherever you need me."

Ellister feels my elation through our bond, and he gazes at me lovingly. "I might not be as talented as my wife, but my stall-cleaning skills are unbeatable."

My dad smiles. "You're hired. I'm Bobby Wildwood, and this is my wife, Catrina. Our son is Chase—you probably met him already. And you'll see a few others around here. We're literally one big family." His face lights as he points at someone coming out of the barn. "That's my brother, Tommy. My other brother, Terry, he's got the wanderlust, so he's only

here at Christmas, but his wife and kids are a hoot. My sister Billie's around here, too, and she's got a little one who you've got to look out for."

I furrow my eyebrows. "Look out for?"

He chuckles. "Millie's four, but don't let her big brown eyes fool you. She'll pick your pockets every chance she gets. Then there's Jack. Hello, Jack!" Dad waves at the old man as he drives by on the golf cart.

Without stopping, Jack grips the brim of his hat and tips his head in greeting.

Mom chimes in, "My sister and her son come by quite often as well. Cathy and Cody don't work here, but they help out where they can. If you get overwhelmed by all the people, I apologize in advance."

I am overwhelmed, but in the best way.

I'm downright thrilled.

I couldn't have possibly imagined how drastically the dynamic of my dad's family shifted when the bargain was changed, but now I know what it looks like.

Dad's not an only child. I've got uncles, aunts, and cousins.

Life here is so full. This is the way the farm was always meant to be, and I realize the future is brighter than I knew.

People say everything happens for a reason. Until Ellister, I wasn't sure if fate was a real thing. And even after I learned about soul mates and realized destiny was directing us, I didn't know if the force was friendly or cruel.

It's friendly, definitely. Because I couldn't have ended up in a better place.

"Let me show you to your cabin." As Dad fumbles with his ginormous keyring, he asks my mom, "Is number one open?"

"I believe so."



That's my house, and I take that as a little nudge from this universe that we do, in fact, belong here.



## CHAPTER 33

### *HANNAH*

Three days. That's all it's taken for Ellister and me to fit seamlessly into this world. A world where we've carved out a place for ourselves with shoveling, pruning trees, and sweat.

With each hour that passes, with every task we complete, this universe feels more like... ours.

Best of all, I'm healthy and strong.

For the first time in our tumultuous relationship, Ellister and I can touch as much as we want without fear of consequences.

Every chance we get, we're attached to each other in some way. We shower together. The nights are filled with sleep, sex, and snuggling. I've discovered Ellister is the worst cook ever. I mean, the guy can barely boil water without some kind of mishap. I guess that's what happens when someone spends hundreds of thousands of years in the Lost Land. I've been trying to teach him small things, like scrambling an egg, but he seems to use our lessons as a way to seduce me instead.

Like this morning. He picked me up, set me on the counter, and licked my pussy until I came. We burned breakfast, but I couldn't complain.

It's all very... normal and wonderful.

Our butts bump as we both bend over to shovel some horse crap at the same time.

“You’re in my way,” Ellister comments playfully.

“I’m helping.”

“You’re distracting me.”

“Don’t act like you don’t like it.”

“Oh, I like it.” Setting our shovels against the wooden partition, he backs me up until I’m cornered by him. “I think you should finish up early every day just so you can help me with this task.”

I mock gasp. “Trying to get me to do your work for you?”

“No. I just want to be able to do this.” His lips fuse with mine, and my heart hammers when he breaks away to kiss along my jaw.

Despite the fact that I’m totally gross from working the entire day, he nips at my skin like I’m a tasty snack. When his teeth graze my neck, I gasp, but I know he won’t bite me.

He filed his teeth down the first night we were here. He said he didn’t want to take the chance that one of his caps would fall off. Plus, making the change permanent would lessen his temptation to feed.

Ellister desperately wants to be human. He doesn’t want to do anything that might get in the way of his goal to be mortal and letting go of blood sharing is one way to distance himself from his old life.

Growing old together is more important. He wants to age with me, get gray hairs and wrinkles, and feel his body weaken with mine.

It’s a whole experience he thought he’d never get to have, and I want that for us, too.

What else I want? Babies. Getting pregnant is at the forefront of my mind. Every time we have sex, I think about it. Although Ellister hasn’t voiced it, he wants kids ASAP. I can

tell in the way he buries his cock extra deep when he comes, like he's trying to plant himself inside me.

As he cups my breast on the outside of my T-shirt, we're interrupted by two voices. I recognize the first one as Chase.

"What's the problem?" he sighs heavily.

"I saw you talking to Charity." That snippy tone sounds... familiar.

Younger than I remember, but familiar nonetheless.

"I had to sell her a pie, Faith," Chase explains patiently but firmly. "I talk to customers. They give me money, and I give them a receipt and tell them to have a good day. That's how a sale works."

"But did you have to smile at her?"

Oh my God. Faith is here.

Slipping away from Ellister, I peek over the stall door and see a teenage version of my frenemy.

"That's called good service," Chase quips, his arms crossed in a take-no-shit stance.

"You just looked really happy to see her."

A charming grin breaks out on his face, and he reaches out to tickle her ribs. "I'm happy to see *you*."

Finally appeased, Faith giggles. "I'm happy to see you, too."

She puts her arms around his neck, and I absolutely do not want to see two thirteen-year-olds making out. Scrunching up my face, I back away silently and give Ellister a can-you-believe-this look.

There's some smooching noises, then Chase suggests, "Why don't you go help my mom finish up with dinner? I'll be there in a minute."

"Okay." Faith's footsteps fade away as she leaves the barn.

"Sorry you had to hear that," Chase calls to us, since he apparently knew we were in here all along. "Girlfriends, am I

right?”

“I’ll finish up,” Ellister says quietly, placing a kiss on my forehead. “Go talk to him.”

I come out from the stall a bit awkwardly as I wipe my hands on the jeans my mom gave me. Both my parents—I mean, Bobby and Catrina—sorted through their closets to find extra clothes for Ellister and me. Because of their generosity, my wardrobe is almost as versatile as it used to be. Sure, I don’t have any petty T-shirts, but I can get some as soon as I receive my first paycheck.

I give Chase a genuine smile as I meet him in the open doorway.

If I’d grown up with a younger brother, I would’ve given him advice in a situation like this. Unfortunately, I have no practice at being a sister.

However, I can be a friend.

I don’t know Chase well enough to tell him what to do, but I can’t help speaking up. “Aren’t you a little young to be dating?”

“I’ll be fourteen soon.”

Nodding as if I just made my point, I drawl, “Like I said.”

“Faith’s been my best friend since we were in diapers.” Shrugging, Chase scratches the back of his neck. “We’ve always liked each other. We were gonna get together eventually.”

“You’re not stuck with someone just because you’ve known them for a long time.”

“That’s not why we’re together,” he defends. “I love her.”

“Those are some strong words.”

“I mean it.”

“She just seems really...” I trail off as I try to come up with a neutral word that won’t offend him.

“Bossy? Jealous? Self-centered?” he supplies, grinning.  
“Yeah, I know.”

“Wow.” Okay, maybe he’s not as naïve as I’d assumed.  
“Well, at least you’re well-informed.”

“She gets a hair up her butt sometimes, but I know how to talk her down. We just work together.”

“I hope she doesn’t hurt you.”

“She’d never do that.”

“Well, if she does, I’ll be pretty upset.”

He chuckles. “Man, you’re as protective as everyone else around here.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I kinda like it. It’s nice knowing people are looking out for you, you know?”

“Yeah.” My smile is bittersweet. “I used to have that, too.”

“Nah, there’s no ‘use to’ anymore. You’re one of us now.”

I can tell he means it, and it makes my throat tight.  
“Thanks.”

“No problem. And I can’t tell you how nice it is to have someone else cleaning out the stalls for once. I appreciate you, Ellister!”

I laugh. “Oh, the real reason comes out.”

Chase pulls a funny face and tilts his head like I hit the nail on the head, but I know he’s just joking because he gets serious a second later.

“Truth is, I’m glad you’re staying.” He pauses. “You are staying, right?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Good. You’re coming to dinner at the main house? It’s Saturday. We always have dinner together once a week.”

“We wouldn’t miss it,” I tell him. “Hey, have you guys ever thought about hosting a movie night?”

His eyebrows knit together. “Movie night?”

“Yeah, like a drive-in kind of deal, with a projector and speakers. People could set up on the grass with blankets.”

Nodding slowly, he considers it. “And then we could sell them snacks and stuff.”

“Exactly.”

“Why don’t you bring it up at dinner? All your ideas have been great so far. You wouldn’t believe the way Dad talks about you.”

Dad.

It’s still weird to call my parents by their names. Several times a day, I have to catch myself, but I think I’m getting the hang of it.

“Bobby talks about me?” I ask, unable to keep the hope out of my voice.

“Yeah,” Chase replies. “Like he’s proud of you. Really proud. To be honest, I’m kind of jealous I didn’t think of all these things first. Like the haunted corn maze? I haven’t seen my parents that excited in a long time.”

“Hey, I tell you what,” I start. “Why don’t you and I present the movie thing together? It could be our project.”

Chase’s grin gets huge. “All right. Gotta go clean up. See you tonight.”

As he turns to go, I revisit the start of our conversation. “Hey, Chase? Just be careful with Faith, okay?”

“No need to be,” he says with the confidence of someone who’s never had their heart broken before. “But I appreciate your concern.”

With that, he walks out, and Ellister comes up behind me. “You good?”

“Better than good.”

I take a deep inhale, and he smells like fresh air, autumn leaves, and him. Like night and sunshine.

Like everything wonderful and right in the world.

*Everything.*





## EPILOGUE

*Eleven Years Later*

### ***ELLISTER***

When Hannah and I first came to this world, the lifetime ahead of us seemed so wonderfully long. But after more than a decade has flown by, I've realized how short the years really are.

Life is precious, but I believe there's more in store for us after it's over.

Our existence is fleeting but our love is forever. We're soul mates. Fate brought us together, and nothing is more powerful than our connection, not even death.

After my ears shrank and my power dissipated, I thought our tether would fade along with my loss of fae-ness, but it's remained. I can sense Hannah's moods. When she feels pain, so do I. Frankly, childbirth was a bitch. I thought after the first time, Hannah would've been done with it. But no. My strong woman went through it a second time to add to our family.

Now we have two beautiful daughters.

As I bring my nose to my wife's neck, I sniff deeply, and I can smell the sweet essence in her veins.

The last time Hannah and I fed from each other was so long ago—that first night in Waylon's old house. When I promised I'd never do it again, I meant it. There are times

when I still crave her blood, but I resist for the sake of normalcy and social acceptance.

Besides, her cunt tastes sweet enough to satisfy me.

“I still can’t believe Chase and Faith got married,” Hannah says from where she sits between my legs, pulling me from thoughts about the place between *her* legs.

She doesn’t sound thrilled, but there’s resignation in her tone. After so many years, she’s had no choice but to accept the match between her brother and her frenemy.

Hannah’s as protective of Chase as any sister would be.

During our time on the farm, we’ve become full members of the family. In the first few months after our arrival, Hannah slipped up and called her parents Mom and Dad so many times that they just started insisting on it. At first, they might’ve just felt sorry for her, but now they look at her like a daughter and me like a son.

Amused, I hook a finger under Hannah’s chin and turn her head until I can see her beautiful face. “And I can’t believe you’re holding a grudge against someone who doesn’t exist here.”

She narrows her eyes. “She does exist. She’s right there.”

“She’s not the same person, and you know it.”

“I just know what she’s capable of,” she grumbles.

“Do you, though? Has she ever betrayed Chase? Lied to him? Cheated on him?”

“No,” she admits. “But that doesn’t mean she won’t.”

“This version of Faith is different. She might be a go-getter, but her sights don’t wander. And she’s had her eye on Chase for her entire life.”

I look out to the orchard.

Hannah and I are under our apple tree while the wedding party has a fruit picking contest. The reception will start soon, but no one seems to care about that.

Faith, being the competitor that she is, has one of her bridesmaids holding her dress up around her thighs as she stands on a ladder to reach some apples no one else can get.

Cody—fifteen years old now—stands with his clipboard in hand, acting as referee as he keeps score and makes sure no one is cheating. While that kid and I got off to a rocky start in the other universe, in this world, he and I are buddies. He's taught me so much about technology, which I desperately need help with.

He starts flagging Faith for skirting the rules when she tosses a few of her apples to Chase to help him out with his lacking loot, and everyone laughs at the bride for thinking she could get away with it with Cody on watch.

"I guess you're right," Hannah agrees. "Faith loves Chase."

I toy with a lock of her hair. "You know, I have a theory."

"What's that?"

"There are soul mates in the human realm. Maybe it's not the magical connection we've experienced, but still. There's a feeling when two people are meant to be together. And those two? They're it, Hannah."

"You really think so?" Her question holds a hint of doubt, but I'm positive.

"I do," I state. "So, to get to my theory... Faith in your original world was selfish and backstabbing because her soul mate was somewhere else. Because of the bargain, she'd been robbed of him. She felt his absence, and she was trying to find something, anything, that felt right, even if that meant taking everything from you. The whole time, she was just missing a shadow she couldn't see."

"There you go with the shadow talk again."

She rolls her eyes because she likes to give me crap about how often I credit parallel realities for déjà vu or hair-raising feelings, but she knows I'm right.

“That’s kind of sad, though,” she muses. “Because that means in the other universe, Faith will never have the person she’s supposed to be with, and she’ll always sense it.”

“Yes. That is tragic. That’s why it’s best not to make or break bargains. Too many people learned that lesson the hard way.”

I think of Ellister Number Two. How alone he is. By now, we’re almost a year past the date when he first met Hannah. Wherever he is, he’s been suffering from the loss of his soul mate. He got a taste of true love, only to have it ripped away days later. Then to be sent back to the Lost Land... I thought it was hell before. Adding unescapable grief would be unbearable.

Suddenly, there’s a quick, unnatural burst of air. The breeze ruffles my hair and Hannah’s, and she immediately straightens her spine.

I was just reminiscing about Number Two. I try to tell myself that’s all it is—I’m imagining things because he was on my mind.

Surely, he’s not here.

Hannah looks behind us.

Focusing on some spot over my shoulder, her jaw drops, and the pink drains from her cheeks.

Fuck.

I don’t need to turn around to know who she’s looking at, but I do it anyway.

There, hiding in a bush about fifty feet away, is my other self. He’s peeking out at us, his pale eyes zeroed in on Hannah.

On instinct, my hand goes to my shoe where I used to keep my dagger, but I’m not wearing my boots. I’m in human formal attire, complete with a black suit jacket and tie. Definitely not dressed for battle.

However, I do have a pocketknife that I keep on me out of habit. The blades are good for peeling apples for hungry little girls. It’s not going to do much damage in a fight, especially to

someone who can suck me through a vortex before I can even pull out the knife, but it's better than no defenses at all.

Before I can dig it out of my pocket, Ellister Number Two holds out a hand in a show of peace, then he gestures us over.

Hannah and I look at each other as a wordless debate passes between us.

She gives me curious eyes, and I have to admit I'd like to find out what the hell is going on. Why would he visit us now? Is he here to give us another warning?

When it comes down to it, we really don't have a choice in the matter. Number Two could use his powers against me. Against our family.

After helping Hannah to her feet, she and I discreetly slink away without being noticed by the wedding party.

While we walk closer to Number Two, I start noticing his haggard appearance and gaunt face.

I thought he looked bad the night he traveled back in time to intercept me, but he looks much worse now. His beige long-sleeve shirt hangs on his boney frame, his shoulders sticking out like knobs. The flesh on his cheeks is sallow and sunken, and his hairline is patchy and receding.

Number Two raises a shaky hand in greeting once we stop about ten feet away. "There's no need to be on guard. I didn't come to harm you."

"Then why are you here?"

Technically, this is his universe. I'm the intruder in this instance, but that doesn't mean I'll show him mercy.

I'll protect what's mine at any cost.

"I came to see paradise one more time," he claims, a bittersweet smile lifting his colorless lips. "I didn't realize you'd be here, but I'm glad you are. All these years, I've wondered if you succeeded in saving Hannah, and it's so good to know you did." He looks me over before his eyes move to Hannah. "It's like seeing old friends."

“We are not your friends,” I say gruffly, “and if you know what’s good for you, you’ll stay away going forward.”

“You fool.” He coughs, and some blood sprays out, spattering his shirt and painting his lip with bright red dots. “Can’t you see? I’m dying.”

The next thing I know, he’s collapsing, dropping to his knees.

Leaping forward, Hannah gets to him in time to grab his shoulders and guide him gently to the ground. He rolls to his side, and despite his claim that he’s not a threat, I don’t appreciate the way he smiles up at her.

“Hannah, don’t touch him,” I warn. “It could be a trick.”

Continuing to kneel next to Number Two, Hannah shoots me a glare over her shoulder. “He’s sick, Ellister.”

I step forward to put a hand on her upper arm, ready to pull her away at any second. “Another reason why you should keep your distance.”

“What I have isn’t something you can catch,” Number Two states roughly, his breathing becoming louder with an unnerving wheeze. “As it turns out, mate withdrawal does happen even if you don’t have your soul—it just takes much longer to kill you. Much, much longer.”

I relax a bit because I’m starting to believe him. “How long? How much time has passed for you in the Lost Land?”

“Don’t know. Decades. Possibly a century or two. I’ve been so miserable, I can’t even keep track of the years. Every agonizing moment bleeds into the next, and it’s just an endless cycle of torture. At first, the changes in me were so subtle, I was able to hide it from Vaeront. Until recently, he was too self-absorbed to notice the decline in my appearance or my fatigue. But when my ability started to slip...”

“He finally realized something was amiss because it directly affected him,” I conclude.

Number Two nods. “He tried everything to save me because I’m his only doorway from the Lost Land. Spells.

Elixirs. Nothing has worked.” He grins a bit victoriously, some blood still coating his teeth. “Vaeront won’t be able to bring me back this time.”

From the way he’s talking, I can conclude he’s attempted—and possibly succeeded—suicide before. But because the death was his own physical doing, necromancy could reverse it. But if he goes by way of mate withdrawal... he’ll be free. Permanently.

The fact that Vaeront would continuously force Number Two to serve him is ridiculous and cruel, though I shouldn’t be surprised.

I shake my head. “I don’t think of Vaeront very often anymore, but I’d hoped he might’ve evolved into a better person eventually.”

“No.” Number Two scoffs. “He’s as selfish as he ever was. Him and Gia both. They’re a volatile pair of rulers still.”

“Do they know you’re gone?”

“I suspect if they haven’t found out I’m missing already, they will soon.”

“Is anyone going to follow you here? Merina?”

“No,” Number Two responds, sounding sure. “The witch died long ago, and Vaeront has no one else who can mimic my power. Even if he could get out of the Lost Land, he wouldn’t be looking for you. He doesn’t know you exist.”

“I hope you’re right. Because I have a family to protect.”

Just then, there’s happy squealing and cheering from the orchard as my daughters celebrate Faith’s apple-picking win.

Number Two lifts his head, and his eyes peer through the leaves of the bush blocking his view. “A family?”

“Our kids,” Hannah says softly, giving him a sympathetic smile.

“We have kids?”

As he struggles to sit up, I motion between him and her. “*You* don’t have anything. You’re not part of this.”

“Ellister,” Hannah scolds with a hiss.

“What?”

“He’s not trying to take anything from you,” she berates. “Have a little compassion.”

She takes a tissue out of her bra—her fucking bra—and dabs the blood at the corners of his mouth. The fact that she’s touching him with something that had just been against her boob makes the addicted mate within me rage, but she’s right.

My wife usually is.

Taking a calming breath, I push my temper down. “How close to death are you? Will your suffering end soon?”

He nods. “The next location I jump to will be my final resting place. I’m thinking the Night Realm. I want to gaze up at the moons I was born under as I experience my last moments. I’m still an outlaw there, but what are they going to do if they catch me? Kill me?” He forces out a laugh. Then his face gets serious, and he suddenly looks so weary. “I just want to go home.”

That might be one of the saddest things I’ve ever heard.

Number Two doesn’t have a home.

He hasn’t had a place to belong since ancient times, but he yearns for it.

It’s then that I finally drop my lingering hostility.

My happiness is because of him. When I think about how much courage and strength it must’ve taken for him to come back in time to warn me so I could have what he never will, it’s a little hard for me to believe I could’ve been that selfless.

I crouch next to him, put a hand on his back to support him, and I point through the bushes at the flower girls in the orchard. “Our daughters, Maysa and Merry. They’re nine and seven.”

Number Two grins. “Troublemakers, I bet.”

“Yeah.” I laugh, watching how they’re absolutely ruining their fancy dresses by climbing one of the trees.



“They look like us,” he observes whimsically, and no one can deny that.

Both girls have my darker hair and light eyes. Their facial features are all Hannah, though. Attitudes, too. I never knew children could be so snarky, but the sarcastic quips my kids come up with are hilarious. And the sheer honesty—the kind of bare truth only children speak before they learn to disguise it—is brutal.

Especially the younger one, Merry.

“Daddy!” she calls out, noticing my absence.

I stand, ready to get to her before she can find us with our uninvited guest, but it’s like she’s got a homing mechanism when it comes to me. She’s attached to my hip most days, following me and mimicking everything I do.

She ducks under some low branches and sprints our way.

“Everyone’s going to the barn for cake.” She’s winded from excitement, but she becomes concerned and quiet when she sees Number Two sitting on the ground with us. “What happened? Did someone fall?”

As her hand slips into mine, I simply respond, “This man is just visiting.”

“Oh. We’re closed today,” she tells him like she owns the place. “It’s Uncle Chase and Aunt Faith’s wedding day. But you can come back tomorrow.”

Number Two is charmed by her just like everyone else is. “Thank you, little one.”

She smiles. “Hey, that’s what my dad calls me. You sound like him. You kind of look like him, too, but you’re a lot skinnier, and your face is kinda saggy.”

There’s that brutal honesty. It pulls a wide grin from Number Two. “I suppose we are somewhat similar.”

Merry’s face turns thoughtful, and she changes the subject to a random topic in the way kids do. “Did you know my great aunt Cathy survived cancer?”

Number Two shakes his head. “I did not.”

“Well, she did.” She gets animated, gesturing in a circle. “And then she got a disco ball.”

He barks out a laugh. “Really?”

Merry nods emphatically. “She hung it right in her living room.”

“Well, there’s probably...” His voice trails off as his eyelids flutter, and I can tell he’s struggling to stay conscious. “Probably a lesson in that, right, little one? Do the hobbies you enjoy. Wear the clothes you like. Take the trip to the place you’ve always wanted to see. Buy the books you want to read. Fill your life with whatever makes you happy.”

Swallowing hard, Hannah looks away as tears fill her eyes.

I’d be lying if I said mine weren’t stinging, too. Apparently, watching a dying man give advice to the daughter he never got to know is a direct hit to my soft spot.

“Can you promise me you’ll do that?” Number Two asks Merry solemnly.

She shrugs, the seriousness of the conversation flying right over her head. “Or I’ll just get a disco ball.”

We all snicker a little, and Ellister Number Two agrees, “Definitely get the disco ball.”

“Merry!” Maysa shouts from behind the gathering, which is currently heading out of the orchard. “Where are you? You’re going to miss the bouquet toss!”

Gasping at the threat of being left out, Merry turns on her heel and sprints away without a goodbye, but Ellister Number Two doesn’t seem to mind the flippant exit.

He actually looks at peace.

“They’re beautiful,” he says wistfully. “Beyond anything I could’ve ever hoped for. Thank you for this. I came here thinking I would spend my last minutes alone and full of regret, but you’ve given me the gift of knowing I’ll live on

after I'm gone. I can honestly say I'll be able to die a happy man."

"Want to know something?" Hannah takes his hand in both of hers and squeezes it. "I don't think it's the end for you. Ellister and I discovered the soul connection is more powerful than anything else in all the universes. The Hannah who belongs to you... I think you'll find her soon."

Number Two's hopeful eyes go to me for confirmation, and I back up my wife. "It's true. If there's one thing we learned by completing our bond, it's that the love between fated mates conquers all."

"Then I must go," he says in a rush, releasing Hannah's hand and scooting back.

He grunts from the effort it takes. Once he's far enough away, he lies down, and the ground immediately starts swirling beneath him.

All Hannah and I hear before he's swallowed up is, "Farewell, my friends."

And then he's gone.

Letting out a sob, Hannah reaches for more tissues she managed to stuff into her bra, and she blots at the big tears dripping down her cheeks.

"Hey," I say softly, pulling her onto my lap. "We've always known he was out there somewhere, but our questions are finally answered."

"It's just so sad. It's hard for me to see you like that."

"He's not me."

"You know what I mean."

I do, so I let my mate have a good cry. I hold her while she mourns another version of me and another version of herself. The star-crossed pair that never had a chance.

After Hannah's all cried out, we walk hand-in-hand back to the orchard. We stroll under the broken apple tree, walking

over the exact spot where we stood for a proper nuptial ceremony the spring after we arrived at the farm.

Hannah got the wedding she dreamed of.

As I put my arm around her, holding her closer to my side, a gentle breeze blows, and a rush of absolute joy passes through me.

It's a strange, almost transplanted emotion. A kind of happiness that doesn't feel like my own.

It's like being touched by a ghost.

A shadow.

The hairs on my arms stand up.

Hannah's affected by it, too.

She stops and looks up at me with wide maple eyes. "You felt that, right?"

"Yes." Somehow, we both know what it means.

"The other Ellister and Hannah." More tears stream down my wife's face as she rubs her chest where the joy lingers still. "They're together now. They got their happy ending."

Nodding, I bend down to kiss her. "Now let's go live ours."

THE END

Thanks for reading *The Moonlight Duet*! If you want more Ellister and Hannah, I have good news! I wrote a bonus deleted scene (between chapters 15 and 16) where Hannah tries to tempt Ellister into touching her. [Get it here!](#) Also, if you're enjoying the fictional world of Valora and you want to stay in it for a while longer, I recommend reading my *Between Dawn and Dusk* series. Start with [The Fae King's Curse](#).

To stay up to date on all my book news, please [subscribe to my newsletter](#) and join my reader group on Facebook.

# OTHER BOOKS BY JAMIE SCHLOSSER

## **Between Dawn and Dusk Series:**

*Between Dawn and Dusk: A Prequel*

*The Fae King's Curse*

*The Fae King's Dream*

*The Fae King's Prize*

*The Fae Warrior's Princess*

*Between Dawn and Dusk Box Set*

## **The Moonlight Duet:**

*Monster in the Moonlight*

*Magic in the Moonlight*

## **The Good Guys Series:**

*Trucker*

*A Trucker's Christmas (Short Story)*

*Dancer*

*Dropout*

*Outcast*

*Magic Man*

*Loner*

*The Good Guys Box Set: TRUCKER, DANCER, DROPOUT,  
and A Trucker Wedding*

*The Good Guys Box Set: OUTCAST, MAGIC MAN, LONER,  
and The Last Bachelor in Tolson*

**The Night Time Television Series**

*Untamable*

*Untrainable*

*Unattainable*

*The Night Time Television Box Set*

**Standalone Novellas:**

*His Mimosa*

*Sweet Dreams*

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jamie Schlosser writes steamy new adult romance, romantic comedy, and fantasy romance. When she isn't creating perfect book boyfriends, she's a stay-at-home mom to her two wonderful kids. She believes reading is a great escape, otters are the best animal, and nothing is more satisfying than a happily-ever-after ending. You can find out more about Jamie and her books by visiting these links:

[Facebook](#)

[Amazon](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Bookbub](#)

[Newsletter](#)

Website: [www.jamieschlosser.com](http://www.jamieschlosser.com)