



Vicious Queen

The Queen Circuit

Rowen Black

Vicious Queen

ROWEN BLACK

Copyright © 2022 by Rowen Black

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

 Created with Vellum

*To all the women who gave love a second chance when they
thought their heart was shattered.*

Contents

Foreword

1. Miranda
2. Miranda
3. Miranda
4. Peak
5. Silvan
6. Peak
7. Silvan
8. Miranda
9. Harland
10. Silvan
11. Mira
12. Wilder
13. Mira
14. Mira
15. Mira
16. Mira
17. Mira
18. Wilder
19. Bianca
20. Mira

Pre order

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Also by Rowen Black

Foreword

This book is a why choose reverse harem, which means the MFC does not have to choose between love interests. This book has some triggers such as rape.

This book is book three in the Knightwood Academy series and it is recommended to read book one and two before reading this.

CHAPTER 1

Miranda

Three years before Knightwood

Sphotes

I let my fingers glide down over his naked chest and further onto his cock as it stands to attention. His eyes open slowly, and I smile at him. “Hey handsome, I have to get up soon and want to say goodbye.”

Clay pulls me towards him and kisses me on the lips. “I have to head out as well. Have a good day.” A part of me sighs. Clay and I have been engaged for a while, but I just don’t think that he loves me like he says he does. I think lately it has been more about obligation than actually wanting to be married.

Forcing the smile on my face, I climb from the bed. I didn’t have to really clean up because Clay has been pulling out; he says it because we are too young, but I know it’s not the case. We were sixteen the first time we had sex, and he came inside me then and didn’t care.

I need to have a talk with him and tell him that it’s okay if he doesn’t feel the same way. I don’t myself either. There’s no more passion or fire with us. Only a general love of each other. I think I will always love Clay, but maybe not in the same way I once did.

Walking to the shower, I climb in once the water is warm enough. Closing my eyes as it hits me, a sadness wash over me. There was a time when Clay would sneak in with me and come up behind me and work me up into overdrive until I was

moaning with need and then he would take me against the glass shower. I can't marry him; I can't do this to us. Clay is an honorable, intelligent man, and he would stand at the altar for me if I wanted him to, but he wouldn't be happy and neither would I.

Once I finish showering, I slide out and run right into Clay. He is wearing a towel holding one for me and it confirms again how we shouldn't be together. He waited until I was out before coming in. My eyes travel over his body and a spark of desire so light travels through me. Clay looks like a perfectly carved statue. Like someone took the time to carve every inch of his jawline and abs to make women want to get on their knees and worship at his feet.

"Next week, the guys are coming." He doesn't have to say which guys, I know them well. Orion, Garrett and Archer. They've been taking turns visiting each other since they were little, all of them bettering themselves to stay the best. They knew they would be number one in the factions; in two years they will be up to be chosen.

"I know you all will have fun and be working on staying at the top." I watch his eyes spark with my words, and once again, a deep need sits in me. *He doesn't look at me like that.*

Turning away from him, he moves past me, but I can't help but peek at his perfectly sculpted ass as he steps under the water that I know is scorching hot like he likes it. I dry off quickly, dressing in my soft leggings and black flats. I pick out a soft hunter green shirt and slide on my lab coat.

I take my time hoping I will get to see Clay again, but it soon becomes apparent I won't. He stays there and the water only turns off once I shut the door. I start to walk to the lab in Sphotes. The weather is beautiful, but the closer that I get to the building, the more my stomach turns.

It could be from my morning with Clay and the realization that he doesn't love me or that I don't get that quick burning hot desire or the little butterflies that make me feel like a schoolgirl again. Whatever it is I try to push the feeling way down as I enter the large glass two story building.

The guards greet me as I walk in, and I plaster a fake smile on my face, waving to them. I go directly to my office, stopping to check my messages and see if I have meetings today, which I do. Sometimes the pressure becomes too much, and it feels like I want to scream. The men here are supposed to be strong, and they are constantly trying to be the best. Clay is one of the smartest men I know and being with him sometimes makes me feel the pressure to be anything other than perfect.

Once in the lab, I work. Time seems to slow down and disappear as I work. I've been working on a cure for the children's illness of Aether Infection that affects mainly the children ranging from ages two to ten. It gets into their system and slowly starts to eat at their insides, causing all sorts of problems before they are eventually killed by it.

I'm so focused on my task that I don't hear Fredrick come up behind me until he is breathing down my neck. Jumping slightly, I turn and glare at him. Fredrick is one of the few men here in this facility. He was involved in tactical war movements until a fake exercise that the men do to train got his unit fake murdered. He did it multiple times before it finally dawned on them to test his knowledge of medicine and they found he was brilliant.

He's constantly competing with me and looking at me like I'm the savoriest piece of meat he's ever seen. He gives me the chills and not the good kind. He constantly tells me that we would make the best couple and how together our brains would cure a lot of people.

"Hello beautiful, what are you working on today?" To other women, having Fredrick say this to them would make their knees weak, but not me. I have Clay and I can see right through Fredrick. He is a narcissist.

"My name is Miranda, Fredrick. I have asked you multiple times not to call me anything other than my name." I watch his face turn shades of red. His odd color of blond highlighting all his imperfections. The flash of anger in his brown eyes scares me for a moment before he masks it.

“I’m paying you a compliment Mira, just accept it. You know how many women would love my attention on them.” He puffs his chest like a peacock, and I have to take a moment to calm the rising anger. Yes, women would love to have his attention simply for the fact they think he is sexy, but what he doesn’t know is he is a second choice, someone to fuck and discard for most women. They want a top male. One who would be chosen to go to Knightwood Academy.

“Again, Fredrick, it is Miranda, not Mira, or Beautiful, or any other name you decide to call me besides my actual name.”

“Whatever you say Miranda.” He drags out each letter of my name hoping to annoy me. I plaster on a fake smile while turning back to my microscope.

“What is it that you need?” I say through an exaggerated sigh.

“I was wondering if you would come to my office later. I found some findings in one of the blood samples that I took from the infected children last week.”

While it appeals to me, I won’t ever be caught alone with him. Something about him makes me shiver. “Just send me the files and the samples that you have.” I don’t bother facing him as I reply because I know the anger will be there and I don’t want to bother acknowledging him.

“Stuck-up bitch.” Fredrick slams out of my lab and goes to stars only knows where. Shrugging, I go back to my work and engulf myself.



“HOW IS YOUR RESEARCH FOR THE AETHER INFECTION COMING ALONG?” Kissy looks at me. She is one of my newer friends and one of the new scientists here at Sphotes Medical Facility.

“The facts are there, and I can feel the cure within reach. I know I am just missing a component to solve this sickness.” I can feel myself getting closer every day and with the samples I am hoping Fredrick sends me them still.

“One day I hope to be where you are Mira.” Kissy says with a wistful look. Feeling a tad uncomfortable, I chuckle a little hoping she changes the subject. I am proud of my accomplishments, but unlike others, I don’t like them being brought up at every chance. I’m also not stupid to think most women don’t mean Clay when they just like me or would love to change to places with me.

“Keep working, Kissy, and you will succeed in anything you put your mind to.” I take a bite of my fish when she says.

“Ah but you have the best male in Sphotes so I won’t get that lucky.” *And there it is. Everyone always pairs my success with catching Clay Trevino.* “Fredrick is still single. I may have to shoot my shot with him.”

Trying to not roll my eyes, I smile at her. “I wouldn’t”

“Why is that?” Kissy leans on her hands now ready for the gossip, but she is wrong. I won’t be gossiping with anyone. Gossip always comes back to bite the person who started it.

“All I am saying is focus on you, make your way up in the facility before you try to find someone.”

Her face falls as she doesn’t get the gossip she wanted, but she answers anyway. “You’re probably right.” She dips her spoon in her pudding and I can tell that this is the end of the conversation.

I finish my meal in silence, waiting for the proper amount of time to make it look like I am not rushing off or away from the conversation. Image is everything in Sphotes and because of who I am and who I’m engaged to we are always in the spotlight.

Once finished, I start heading back to my lab when something catches my eye. It is a male wearing a janitorial outfit, but he seems out of place here. His eyes keep shifting and looking around like he is nervous.

Leave it alone Miranda. Mentally scolding myself, I force my feet to move and promise myself that if he is still here on my next break, I will report him.

Once in the lab, I immerse myself in my work again. I can feel the cure so close that it is becoming an obsession, an urgent need to make this cure. I hate hearing another child has died from this illness when I know the answer that I am missing is so close.

The floor shaking so hard that my vials spill is what brings me back in a rush. Then the screams filter in and the people running.

“Miranda, move. You have to go now. They’re coming.” One of the female scientists from down the hall is screaming through the glass in the front of my office. My body goes rigid and for a moment, I don’t know what to do. I am not built for this. I am not made for the chaos.

Clay.. I have to find Clay...

I stand and I grab the drive connected to my computer that has all my information about the Aether cure. Once whatever this is settles, I don’t want to have to start over again. When I am in the hallway I look down and that is when I start to panic. Everyone is pushing and shoving to get out the doors down below.

I have always prided myself on being observant and while I am looking down at the men; it seems they are specifically targeting women. Some of the best women, in fact. When the janitor from earlier looks up he yells at some of the other men and points directly at me.

Damn it Miranda, not the smartest move.

Panic and fear like I have never felt before beat into my body and I make a dash to the end of the hallway. I can’t take the elevators and the stairs will give me the best option. Not wanting to go up since that will leave me trapped on the roof, I make my way to the floor below.

I can hear the elevators binging and hear the heavy footsteps on the stairs and I feel like a caged animal. I do not

know where to go. I know most likely someone has enabled the automatic lock system for the floors, so our research is not stolen so I won't be able to get into an office. I can't get back to my own office. They are headed up there and going down further is risky.

I start running again down the hall, grateful that this hall doesn't overlook the lobby. Seeing that I am almost at the end everything feels like it is closing in.

"Miranda here, climb in here." Turning, I see Fredrick. I don't know what to do, he is not the person I want to be seeing, but he is also offering the only way out I climb into the vent. "This will take us down to the back end of the building and we can climb out and right next to it is the opening to another vent and we can take it all the way out to the woods. "

I know where he is talking about, but my body still seems to be warning me to leave. Before I can really make a decision, I hear voices.

"Did you find her?"

"No, we have her office barricaded off and a unit on the top and bottom floors, we just need to check these offices." This voice sounds much younger than the first person to speak.

A tap on my shoulder and I'm turning to look at Fredrick. He places his finger to his lips and shows me to be silent.

"King Vespian wants her. He wants to make sure she is found. She is one of the best scientists he's ever heard of." The first male responds.

"What about the male? He works here." The second one asks.

Laughter has me stopping again. "He is a male working here in a lab when he should be with the men. What does that tell you?"

"He is smart? I don't know." The second male sounds unsure.

"He may be smart, but King Vespian found out some evidence that his work—"

Fredrick yanks on my shoulder, causing me to hit the sides, making a loud banging on the side of the wall.

“Did you hear that?” The footsteps move closer, and I turn and start pushing Fredrick, but I can’t help but think of what the males were saying. We continue to move silently down the hall and eventually make our way outside.

“Let’s head to the woods.” Fredrick points to the woods and again the bad feeling arises. I have never ventured into the woods and there are so many things that could go wrong, but facing the guards from King Vespian’s land seems like the worst of the two, though being with Fredrick is not a fun option either.

I take a chance and I run to the woods with him. We run pretty far before we finally stop. I don’t know where we are, but we keep walking.

“Do you know where we are?” I stop catching my breath to look at Fredrick.

“Actually, no I don’t. I thought we were headed to the Kings woods, but we must have run opposite.” The way he says it and the way he fidgets makes me uneasy. I think he planned this. It is highly unlikely that we will run into anyone else.

I step back from him a little creating some distance and I watch his eyes track me. My flight instincts are kicking in and I take another step back.

“Where do you think we are?” I try to keep my voice steady, not to alert him as I am trying to locate the best way out of this mess. The creeping feeling that he planned this as he saw his chance is slowly eating at me.

“Well, I heard there was a kingdom completely disconnected from the Kings Land. We could be near that.” Fredrick again advances toward me. “You are so beautiful, Mira.”

Laughing nervously while I push my hair back and tie it back, I again step back. “Fredrick, I asked you to call me

Miranda, and I'm a little uncomfortable with you saying those things to me when I am with Clay."

His face darkens, his previous smile melting into a scowl. "You know what, Mira." He draws out my name purposely trying to get a reaction from me which I refuse to give him. "I am tired of you acting like you're better than me. I work in the lab just like you."

I again move away from him while looking right at him so I can make sure I can see any sudden movements.

"I never said anything about you, Fredrick."

"Yes, but you think you're too good for me."

"No, I am with Clay and you as well as everyone else in the faction know this." I cross my arms and his eyes squint.

"I tried to court you before he did." Fredrick did try when we were kids but something about him always set me on edge.

"We were kids, Fredrick."

"And yet you chose him and never gave anyone else the time of day."

Fredrick steps closer to me and this time I know it's now or never. I turn and run.

CHAPTER 2

Miranda

My heart is beating so fast that it is hard to hear Fredrick chasing after me. I have no time to avoid the low-hanging branches, so I'm hit in the face by the lower branches, which I feel tearing into my face.

I keep telling myself to run faster and to not look back. I know Fredrick has something sinister in mind and I need to get away from him, I almost hope I see a stray squad of Vespín's soldiers somewhere in the woods.

"I love the chase, Mira." Again, he drags out my nickname, and I notice he sounds much closer than I realized. Against my body's wishes I pump my legs faster trying to not focus on the fact that I am failing, he will catch me.

I don't respond knowing that it will cost me to try and respond to him, so I don't. I keep moving faster. The closer I get to the edge of the woods; I start to hear noise. I can't place the noise. I only know that it is there, and it is a possibility that it could be my salvation.

Something hard strikes the back of my head, and my vision goes fuzzy. Fredrick struck me with something, and I slow down enough to hear him laugh at me, everything feels like it happens in slow motion. I fall and as I do, I can see his boots moving closer to me.

I hear his laugh before my eyes close. I'm thankful for that seeing as I already know his intentions are evil.

"You've always wanted this cock, you dirty bitch."

I try and yell no, but my mouth won't work, this feels like the worst kind of dream.

“Take this all of this. I will mark you, so no one wants a dirty slut like you, always thinking that you're better than everyone, now who's lying in the dirt?”

I start to feel the intrusion and my body tries to fight it but when I try to move, I feel the pain.

“I'm going to leave a part of me inside you.”

That's the last thing I hear before blackness takes over me again.



BREATHE MIRA, TAKE YOUR TIME.

I don't open my eyes, keeping them shut to listen to the surrounding sounds around me to see if Fredrick is near me. Once I know he is not near me I slowly begin to open them seeing as they are now swollen.

He must have hurt me worse than I thought.

I feel the bruising all over my body and a strong draft of cool air which would normally make me cold but instead gives me a nice breeze to cool the bruising.

I sit up a little and open my eyes as best as I can. I can see some of the bruising on my arms, it looks like I got into a fight. I am nude which horrifies me.

Taking a deep breath, I look down and notice the bruising on my thighs and can see the blood. I want to cry out, but I stifle it, not knowing if Fredrick is near still. My legs are all bruised except my feet. Which I find odd. Everything else is painted in colorful bruises.

A noise in the distance comes across on the breeze and it sounds like someone walking steadily through the woods. I

don't shout out to them not knowing if it is Fredrick coming to finish the job or rape me again.

Carefully but as quickly as I can I roll to my knees and try to gather the ripped clothing to me. I work on standing while my body protests every movement. I am able to stand fully, and I force my body to move forward.

I need to find help and hopefully not pass out from the pain. The noise gets closer, so I move faster. I don't even know how long I passed out for. Survival is everything to me now. I don't even care if I end up in a different faction from my own. *I wouldn't even mind Vultures Bay.*

I start to see black spots as I force myself forward. I keep chanting to myself that I need to keep moving, that it will be much worse if I stop.

By the time I hear people, my body is too weak to shout at them. I keep moving and when I come to a thicket of trees, my body gives way and I collapse.



Silvan

“WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT?” I TURN TOWARDS WHERE I heard a thump. Wilder is supposed to be helping me check the traps so normally I wouldn't hear anything in the bustle of town but having to be silent allowed me to hear things.

“I don't know, I'm right next to you, but I guess we should go check it out.” Wilder moves forward as usual without any concern for his own life.

“Do you want to alert the whole town, or do you think you could keep it down?”

Huffing and rolling his eyes Wilder stomps through the trees and I stand back and wait. No sense in both of us dying.

“Oh fuck, Silvan come here and take off your shirt.” Normally I would make some sex joke but the panic in his voice is real, he’s not joking. I start taking off my shirt and run through the trees, stopping when I see a bruised ankle leading to a bruised thigh.

“What the fuck?” I am astonished, a very bruised, naked woman with dark hair is laying in the dirt passed out, clearly, she had been assaulted.

“Help me grab her.” Wilder bends down and carefully pulls her to a seating position. I slide my shirt over her, making sure she is covered. Once she is, Wilder picks her up and we hear her groan in pain.

“Careful.” I say a little harsh, but my heart goes out to this woman. She looks so delicate and small.

“Where do you think she came from?” Wilder looks out into the woods like it holds the answers.

“Either the King of the North or the South lands, but we should take her back. Peak will be able to help her.” Wilder starts walking towards our home. We live farther away than high society does. We don’t like being in the bustle of things anymore. Not since we retired from the queen’s royal Vriven guards.

Peak became the town doctor, Wilder does some large game hunting, and we cook it and sell it, I organize the guards for the queen and Harland is the town animal doctor. He can never let an animal suffer so he started learning about animals when we served and opened shop. We have a few horses and barnyard cats and even a few dogs at home.

We walk in silence listening to her breathing. I switch between sadness and pure rage at whoever did this to her with the intent to murder, this person who is so evil is still out there and roaming around unaware that we found his victim.

Once the first hill leading to our home comes into view, we both sigh in relief, that short walk that only takes about ten minutes felt like it took hours.

I run ahead not seeing Peak. I rush into the house and find him in his room bent over his worktable looking through books.

“Peak, we need you now.” Hearing the urgency in my voice he stands, and I race back out catching the attention of Harland as we do.

“What is going on, why are you so frantic?” Peak says as we come to a halt and see Wilder with the woman. “What the fuck you two, who is that?”

“We don’t know, Wilder was going to hunt, and we heard her fall.”

“Inside.” Wilder grunts out while pushing past us. I see Harland in the kitchen clearing off the table. We normally don’t bring people here for medical, Peak has his own clinic in town, that is also attached to Harlands clinic.

We start to lay the woman down but Peak stops us. “Take the shirt off so I can assess the damages to her.” I nod and remove the shirt. Even with the bruises she is still a vision to behold. “Where did you find her again?”

“We were out towards the woods near where the deer usually eat.” I respond while watching how gentle Wilder is being with this woman. I look at Peak who has his little notebook and pen taking note of all her bruises, and Harland is getting water and soap with a cloth.

“We need to clean her.” Harland hands the bucket to Wilder and gives me the cloth. I take it, nervously.

“Just be careful.” Peak whispers while he gently prods his fingers into her legs looking for breaks.

I dip the cloth into the bucket and gently start at her face, cleaning off the caked mud. Wilder moves behind her and gently starts rubbing soap through her long dark locks. We do this in silence anxiously waiting on Peak’s assessment.

After what feels like forever Peak steps back, a heavy look on his face. “She was raped, and we do need to wrap her foot and her ribs. She is just bruised everywhere else.” We finish

cleaning her while Peak wraps her foot and then we lift her, and he wraps her ribs.

“Are we going to tell the queen?” It seems everyone freezes. The queen has been after us for a long time. She has a harem of men already, since she took on one when she won the trials, she was just pissed we denied her.

“No.” Wilder sounds gruff, but he is right. We cannot tell her. She has become bitter and cruel since we denied her. Every male unit within the kingdom can be chosen by the queen but they cannot be forced to consent. The unit has to consent to the queen for the harem,

The queen can choose any of the guards in the kingdom, and most of the time it is an easy choice, it is usually the queens private guard, which we were, but Bianca La'rue has taken being a queen and started ruling with fear and an iron fist rather than the gentle one we used to know.

Bianca had any female we have tried to bring in killed so now women tend to stay away, and if they happen to need either the pet or the doctor clinics, they tend to come in swarms, so every interaction is noticed, and nothing is unnoticed.

“What do we do with her?” I look at the guys and none of them seem to have an answer. “We could take her to the town and see if one of the nobles will take her in.” I wait for one of them to answer me.

“We could ask house Faith.” Peak mentions first. House Faith is a husband, wife and three daughters. The women of the house are very nice, the man however seems to be a bit suspicious. “I know their home is a little weird, but the women there are good, and they will take care of her.”

Shocked that he is already trying to get rid of this pure innocent woman before she wakes up is not something I ever thought that Peak would do.

“You want to get rid of her?”

Sighing, he looks at me like I'm a petulant child. “Silvan, do you really want to risk it? Bianca is a mad queen and

extremely jealous. She will kill this woman without a second thought.”

Fuck he's right. I look at Harland. “Do you mind taking the horse to the Faith’s and seeing if they will keep her and maybe see where she came from.”

“No, I don’t mind. Not at all.” Harland grabs some fresh bread we made the other day out of the cabinet. “I will be back tonight.” Harland shouts over his shoulder as he leaves.

“I’m going out to do some more work, you can put her in my bed since I won’t be in my room.” Peak nods while he scoops her up and Wilder turns to me.

“I’m going back to hunt; I will take a look around where we found her and see if I can track the person who did this.” He starts to walk away before looking at me. “If I find that fucker, he will be pulled along behind me while he is slowly choking to death.”

I grin at him and turn towards my garden. We grow or kill all of our food and we make enough to even sell in Wilder’s shop in town. Chuckling when we all retired and decided on our careers, we all were shocked that Wilder wanted to open his own food shop, but yet he is the best one in town.

I start to pick some of the foods that I have grown, such as tomatoes, potatoes and some apples. I am going to make my famous apple butter and send it with Wilder when he goes to smoke some of his meat.

My mind constantly wanders to the female most likely in my bed now. Who would do something like that to this woman? I also wonder what color her eyes are. Would they be blue or brown, would they stare at me with fear in her eyes or would they look at me with interest?

“I gave her some pain medication so she most likely won’t be waking up before she is moved.” Startled, I turn around with tomatoes falling from my hands.

“Damn it Peak, you’re like a freak of nature with how quietly you walk.”

“I walk fine, Silvan. You were in your own thoughts.” He clasps me on the shoulder. “What are you thinking about?”

“I just keep thinking about who would do something like that and why?” Here women rule the kingdom, well one does, but only one woman. Our system here may be in a sense archaic, we allow women who have been given the right to compete in the queen’s circuit.

The women come from all over the Vriven Kingdom, and they know that all but one will die and that they will have to kill the previous queen. Each queen has to compete every two years. If they win, they get to rule for another two until they are challenged again. This is Bianca’s year, and we can hear her training when we are in town.

We don’t know who will be in the circuit this year, but they have until the snow starts to fall from the sky to be able to enter. Each year the women start the circuit and even the queen starts with them. She will be tested just as hard as the other women to make sure she is worthy.

A horse coming up the road has Peak and I turning. Harland is coming with the Faith women in tow. They must have agreed, which makes me a little sad. I wanted to keep her long enough for her to open her eyes.

Once the horses stop in front of the house Peak walks over and I trail behind.

“Ladies, what a pleasure to see you.” Peak turns on his formal voice and I take the hint that he wants this interaction over quickly. “I have some medicine in the house for her that I will give you to give to her for her pain.”

Sally Faith steps forward, her large body stuffed into a very tight outfit, her hair curly and wind-blown, and her sights set right on Peak. “Peak, darling, how very kind of you to give this poor girl treatment. However, will she pay you back.” Sally looks toward the house and for a moment I think we made a mistake and then I remember the danger she would be in if she stayed. “I can have this woman come clean the stalls.”

“I helped an innocent woman, Sally; it is not all about money.” Realizing his tone is a little harsher he swallows, and I can visibly see him biting his tongue. “We really thank you for giving her a home.”

“Anything for you Peak.” She gets closer to him, trying to shove her large breasts into his eye view, but Peak keeps his eyes trained on her ridiculous hat that she is wearing.

Sally is a noble and she is also married but she never hides away the fact that she would do anything for Peak. She is obsessed with him, and she bluntly flirts with him. Knowing Peak needs an excuse to leave before he says something nasty, I step forward drawing Sally’s view to mine.

“Peak why don’t you and Harland go and get the woman and the medicine, I’m sure Sally wants to be headed home and we are being rude.” Turning to Sally with a fake smile plastered on it I watch her eyes squint. “Sally, where are our manners? We do apologize for holding you up. I’m sure you are tired.”

Sally looks taken aback for a moment before her face turns red and she steps back from me. “Well, you all are the perfect gentleman for taking this young woman in and then even finding her a home.”

“As for the woman.” Peak brings attention back to him. “Please make sure she takes the medicine three times a day for the next seven days. She needs to eat before she takes it so it would be best with each meal. I will be out to check on her.”

“I will make sure she is taken care of.” Sally tells Peak, as she moves aside while the woman is loaded onto a bed of hay that was pulled behind one of the horses. The Faith women load back up and I watch them until they are just a dot, the whole time wondering if I will see this woman again.

CHAPTER 3

Miranda

Waking up in a strange home should terrify me but I strangely feel warm and fuzzy, clueing me into the knowledge that I am on medicine. A strong one, one that dulls the senses and relaxes me. I try to move my head but for now it seems like only my eyes will work.

“Hello dear, you’re awake.” My vision is still blurry, but I can see the woman standing closer to me. I try to sit but I feel too weak to move. “It’s the medicine Dr. Peak gave you.”

“Dr. Peak?” My throat feels dry, and I try to cough feeling the roughness. “May I have some water?”

“Of course.” The larger woman rushes off and comes back with a glass of water, she gently lowers it to my lips while she starts talking. “Dr. Peak and his unit saved you dear. It was a good thing they called us right away because if queen Bianca found out before they gave you up, you would be dead dear.”

“My name is Miranda.” Sitting up slowly and moving my feet to the floor I face the woman. “What is your name?”

“Sally Faith and my unit is the Faith house. You will meet my wonderful husband and my two gorgeous daughters and my son as soon as they come home.”

Not wanting to accidentally slip and say more than I should, I smile at her. She seems very nice, but I learned a while ago not to trust anyone right away.

“Where am I?” I watch surprise cross her face before she masks it again and smiles at me.

“My dear you have entered the Vriven Kingdom.” I take a moment to process this. I have never heard of this kingdom. I didn’t know it existed, so now I need to be extremely careful. “Where are you from Miranda?”

I don’t know how much these people know so I don’t know if I should tell them I am from Sphotes. I don’t know how much these people know about what is beyond their border. I don’t know if they know of the war or what the factions are.

“I can’t remember.” The lie is like acid on my tongue, but it is a believable lie, my head injury could cause memory loss.

“What a shame, I wonder if you were from Woodland Wilds?”

I shrug not wanting to lie to her any more than I have to. “What is this kingdom?”

“Oh, dear you really must have hit your head hard. Why don’t you lie back, and we can talk about it later?”

Laying back again to appease her I wait to see if she will explain more to me. After a few moments when she doesn’t say anything, I ask her. “I must have hit my head pretty hard; I can’t remember anything; would you be able to remind me?”

She turns and again looks at me. “This kingdom is not well known, but the two larger ones beyond the forest, those are ruled by men while this one is ruled by a female.”

Hearing that is incredible to me. A woman ruling and not being challenged. “Every two years the queen is challenged for the crown.” Welp there goes that thought. “Either the queen will win and reign again, or a new queen will take her place and choose her unit.”

“Unit?” Confusion sets in.

“Yes, a unit of men to be her men. To be her husbands.” This makes me sit up a little straighter. A woman can have more than one man. I have heard of men sharing a woman, never seen it, but a woman who gets to have more men sends butterflies shooting through me.

“The queen has a unit now?”

“Yes, she does. Some of her guards and a single noble that came from a long line of nobility. She didn’t get the unit that she wanted, but she ended up doing really well.”

“What unit did she want?”

A smirk crosses her face. “The unit that saved you.” The smugness behind her smile interests me more than it should.

“Why are they not with the queen?”

She moves closer to me like she has some special secret to tell me. “They told her no, and from what I hear the rejection was brutal.”

“When you say brutal what do you mean?” Again, curiosity gets the better of me.

“Meaning she tried to get them to agree while there was a society function going on. They tried to talk to her privately, but the queen pushed them too hard and Silvan was the one who got angry and told her to fuck right off.”

This place is so different from where I come from, but I am curious.

“Can you tell me more about how the circuit works?”

“Well, once a female that has recommendations gets selected, she goes to the training center where she meets the new queen.” She pauses thinking over her answer. “Once there, the queen introduces herself and that night a dinner is served the new opponent’s honor. A potential unit will step in and help a candidate train.”

“How would one gain the favor to be chosen?” A thought that I didn’t think I would voice but it is too interesting not to.

A smirk comes across her face. “That is the hard part, units have to give you their backing, any family will do but the higher the nobility the higher the chance that you will be picked.”

Again, I find myself thinking about the unit that saved me. Embarrassment also crosses my mind on how they must have

found me. Fredrick left me in shambles and trying to escape with modesty was not an option.

I just got here so I know that the circuit is not something that I should even consider trying. “Would I be able to express my thanks to the unit who saved me? Maybe tell them what happened as to why I was found the way I was.” I don’t elaborate much not wanting to give her more information. I don’t know how much they gave her. I hope it wasn’t a lot.

“I think that it could be arranged with them.” Her tone is hiding something that I can’t quite figure out, but whatever it is I shouldn’t be really concerned. This place intrigues me but I have a fiancé waiting at home for me. *Or do I?* I try to stop that thought from taking over, but I wonder if Clay is even looking for me, or if he is relieved.

We haven’t been doing the best and I know that, but I still had hope that we would fix what is obviously broken between us. The words that Fredrick spoke to me in the woods try to enter my mind and I try again to shake the puke that threatens to rise. *What will Clay think when he finds out? Will he still want me?*

When I get back to Sphotes I will break it off with him and once I get my feet under me again, I want to travel. I want to see what the other factions have to offer and maybe find another kingdom.

“Actually dear, Peak will be out to see you in a few days.” Again, I watch her eyes light up and her chest puff up a bit. She is carrying a flame for this man, and knowing she is married is a bit uncomfortable. “He will most likely remove the bandages and give you some care instructions, he really is the best doctor in town.”

“Oh, that would be perfect.” The bandages on my body are killing me and they are tight. I wonder if I cracked some ribs.

“Around here we pull our own weight so once Peak gives the all clear we will rotate you in our list of chores.” Sally pauses for a moment. “Unless that is not something that you do”

I can tell she is waiting to know my answer and I know I will be judged on that answer. “Actually, I would love to help out, you have been so gracious and have opened your home to me.”

Her smile is one of relief and before she opens her mouth to say anything else, we hear the distinct sounds of horses moving closer.

“They are home. I will bring the family in to meet you.” Sally rushes from the room and I hear them all greet her and for some reason my nerves start going awry. I look like a crumpled mess when normally I look like a composed scientist who has her shit together.

The light knock on the door before it is opened has my pulse jumping a little. Sally is the first one in and her face is beaming with pride. “Miranda, I would like to introduce you to my family. This is my husband, John.” John walks in and I try not to be shocked. He is an older man, and he is balding, and he has graying hair and is almost hunched over.

He clears his throat, and he holds out his hand. “Nice to meet you, Miranda.” I take his hand for a quick second before yanking it back. His hand is clammy, and I don’t like the feel of it.

“This is my oldest daughter Nickle.” A petite blonde woman enters, and she holds her head high and holds out her hand to me. I get the feeling she is a lot like her mother was and her mother lives vicariously through her.

“Nice to meet you.” She takes my hand, and her blue eyes meet mine. She shakes my hand and a smile appears briefly on her face before she turns and leaves.

“These are my twins Lunar and Leonard, we call him Leo for short.” Two more bodies fill my room and I spot Lunar first. She has pitch black hair and light blue eyes. She has a genuine smile on her face, and she surprises me by reaching in and lightly hugging me.

“Welcome to our home Miranda. I look forward to getting to know you.”

“Lu, you’re going to re-injure her.” My eyes fly to the voice behind her, and my voice catches in my throat. Leonard, her twin, is standing there. Long dark hair like his sister, but his eyes are a midnight blue. Like what you would see in the sky at night. His build is muscular, and he is not afraid to show off that he works out. His beard is trimmed, and his smile is captivating.

“Hello, nice to meet you.” I reach out a hand to him which he grasps holding it tight. He releases it quickly and moves back.

Sally steps forward. “We have kept you long enough, I will let you get some sleep.”

“Thank you.” I lean back and close my eyes, suddenly feeling more tired than I was before. I listen to them leave and wait for sleep to claim me.



TODAY I AM GOING TO MEET DR. PEAK. THE DOCTOR WHO helped me. For some reason, the thought sends butterflies through my stomach.

“Knead the bread Miranda, don’t smash it.” Sally’s voice filters in and I look down at the lump of dough. I have never had to cook, and I am now trying to cook something from scratch. Back in Sphotes we had a cook. I have always wanted to learn how to cook, but being a scientist was always the first thing on my mind.

Sadness sweeps me as I think of all the long hours I put in trying to find the cure for the Aether Infection and how many children are still suffering from this disease.

“Sorry Sally, I got distracted.” Lunar and Nickle turn to smile at me, and I see their perfectly round shaped doughs.

“You’ve never made bread darling, what did you do where you were from?”

Again, I don't know them very well, so I do not want to give away what I was doing. I still don't want to lie so I give them partial truth. "I worked in a building, and it took most of my time"

"You worked in a building" Nickle seems curious as she stops kneading her bread.

"I did. I worked with lots of people." I close my mouth hoping that she doesn't pry further into that statement. She must sense that I don't want to talk about it as she continues her kneading.

"Like this Miranda." Leo shocks me as he moves closer to me, taking my lump and starting to knead it to what looks like the others dough ball.

"Thank you, Leo."

Chuckling he smiles at me before smiling at his family. "We have to eat these. I don't like lumpy bread." He shoulders me playfully and my stomach does a little flip. Not one that makes me feel all shy but the one that lets me know that I can feel a friend in the making.

I continue to knead the bread trying my hardest to keep it in the shape that Leo made it for me. "Alright ladies that is enough, bring the bread to the side here and lay them in the tray to put it in the oven." I look at their oven on the wall and love how beautifully it fits in their home, and I cannot wait to smell the different breads baking.

We made apple and cinnamon and white breads, and I know Sally wants to give the apple one to Dr. Peak when he gets here, hence why we started so early.

Once the breads are in, I start helping to slowly clean the kitchen with the girls, catching sight of Leo outside cleaning the horses and their stalls. It seems like they all work together to keep their household running.

After a while, I start to smell the bread, and it makes me miss home. The smell gives me a feeling of comfort and love.

"He's here. Come, ladies let's go and greet the Doctor." Sally puts down her rag and the others do as well. I stand there

awkwardly not knowing what to do. “Miranda, he will want to see you so you should go wait in the room.”

“Alright.” I move to the back of the room and sit on the bed. I don’t know why Sally wanted me to go back, but I am not going to make waves. I won’t be here much longer. As soon as I can I am going to make my way to the woods and pray, I can find my way back to Sphotes.

I’m not the best with direction, but I learned a lot from Clay. I hear the commotion from behind the door and I hear a deep voice replying to Sally. When the footsteps get closer to me, I prepare myself. I have been trying to picture what the doctor would look like. Sally’s taste in men is by far different from mine. Her husband sets me on edge.

The door opens and I see black hair first. It hangs in front of his face. When he looks at me, I nearly choke on the sudden saliva that builds in my mouth. He is gorgeous. His chin is strong and chiseled. Covered in a layer of thick beard hair that is trimmed neatly. His cheekbones are strong and high, highlighting his facial structure.

His hair has some waves to it and some pieces fall in front of his face and his eyes are a mesmerizing green. He smiles at me. “Hello, my name is Peak. How are you today?”

Clearing my throat, I force a smile on my face. “I’m Miranda and I am feeling okay. My ribs still give me some issues when I try to bend and my foot still aches but overall, I am doing better than the first time you saw me.”

He gives me a little chuckle before he sits down on the edge of the bed making sure to face me. “Do you mind if I take a look?” He points to my foot, and I raise my leg and he takes my foot in his hand making sure that he is gentle.

I watch as he unwraps the bindings on my foot. Moving it around to look at it. “It is healing properly, give it another week and your foot should feel normal again. Now, can I look at the bindings around your ribs.” I nod and lift my shirt up just enough when he clears his throat again. “Could you remove the shirt? I need to be able to see everything.”

“You need my shirt off?” I don’t like that at all.

“I am a Doctor, Miranda and I promise you it is to just see the healing process.” I swallow and I slowly remove my shirt noticing that he looks away as I do. Even though the binding is still around me I still feel completely naked.

When I am done, I wait for him to turn his eyes back to mine. He moves closer and moves me slightly to the side. “If I move like this, it feels like a sting.”

Peak hums a little under his breath. “Stand up for me, please. I will have to remove the binding to check underneath.” I nod my head I was expecting that, just needed to mentally prepare myself for it. “I’m going to slice this, and you will hear it rip but it will be faster and less spinning you around if I cut through.”

“Okay.” I am happy he told me what he was going to do instead of just cutting that would have scared me. I feel the cold against my back before he wiggles it under the wraps slicing the bindings and I feel a huge sense of relief, before I realize that now I am nude from the waist up.

I straighten fully, chanting to myself that this is an exam and that I am not now standing here in a room partially nude with one of the most beautiful men I have ever seen.

“It looks great, the healing is taking longer than I thought it would, but it should be fully healed within the week. To be sure, I am going to press on your back a little and if anything feels overly sensitive or hurts let me know.”

“Okay.”

Peak begins pushing on my back and my sides and while it tickles and stings in some places, nothing hurts to the point where I feel that it would need to be addressed. Once he is done, he tells me I can put my shirt back on and I do before turning around and facing him.

“I would still like you to be taking the pain meds while the healing process continues.” He eyes me making sure I am focusing on him.

“What is in those meds? What are they composed of?” The scientist in me has me curious and I want to know what ingredients are in it.

“A few common herbs along with some stronger liquid sedatives that are slightly diluted. Next week you can come to my office for your next checkup, and I can show you.”

“That would be wonderful. Do you make your own medicine?”

Peak smiles at me and it is the sexiest thing I have seen ever. “I do, the queen has her own scientists and doctors, but me I make mine and most of what I give is more natural, even the liquids are made from something else.”

A spark of excitement hits me. “You have your own lab?”

Again, a smile plays on his lips, with a look of amusement. “I have a small one that can be called my lab, it is not big and fancy, but it does the trick. I can show you that too.”

“Really? I would love that.” I stop talking when I realize that I subconsciously moved closer to him while we were talking and now, I am practically staring up at him. “Sorry I just got excited.”

Pausing a moment he looks at me. “What did you do wherever you came from?” I notice how he doesn’t ask where but what. I feel like he could be trusted which is odd for me to feel that way with someone I just met.

I decide to tell him anyway and see what comes from it. Will I regret it or will it prove to be a good choice? “I am a scientist.”

His eyebrows raise in surprise before he smiles. “I was kind of expecting that answer.”

“Kind of?”

“Meaning I could see the look of excitement in your face and knew that you must like something about what I said, but I also don’t know of many places that allow women to do that. Most women here are the head of the household but do not hold jobs like that, the common ones are bakers and chefs, and

teachers, and well the queen, but the queen is the one who made it like that.”

“Why would she not want women to have any job they want?”

Peak closes his eyes for a moment. “The queen wants the Queens Circuit to be the only thing that women strive for. She wants to have people watch her slaughter other women who thought they had a chance.”

I am horrified what type of ruler would want that for their people? Even our king, while I feel is out of his mind, he still makes it that our men are trained for battle.

Deciding to not dwell on it any more I change the subject to something that I need to know. This is not my home, and I will not be staying here.

“How long do you think it will be before I will be able to travel?” I watch the surprise cross Peak’s face before he answers.

“You should be fully healed within a few weeks. Your ribs will take the longest time to heal. Your ankle should be fine within a week. If you really need to go then, I can bandage you up enough to travel, but it would be slowly.” he watches my face to gage my response.

Do I really need to go? What is really left for me in Sphotes? Clay and I are just existing and by now he will either have gone to the school or have gotten his compass letting him know that he will be expected to show up.

I made my decision. I will stay here for a while and see what this kingdom brings me. “I will be fine to stay here. I do not need to travel just yet.”

CHAPTER 4

Peck

She is stunning. The moment I saw her my breath caught in my throat. Her dark hair cascaded down her back in waves and it looked like silk. Her porcelain skin glowed against the covers and her lips a deep red and plump enough to kiss.

I had to scream the doctor's code in my head to make sure I did not say anything wrong. My heart still felt bad for her and what happened to her there in the woods. I wanted to ask her about it but didn't think that it would be the proper time.

"You stupid goat HOLD STILL." I look up as I get closer to the house and see Harland chasing a goat around the yard.

"Harland what the hell are you doing?" I rush over to him trying to grab the goat who is now trying to use his horns on me.

"This stupid goat needs to be checked. His owner said he has been being weird and was concerned. I just can't get him to be still."

Sighing, I reach for the goat again the same time Harland does. "Let me help."

Together we both hold this animal still and Harland checks him out, making his normal observation noises without actually explaining what he is doing.

"Go ahead and let him go." Harland walks away and he goes into the house immediately moving to the pen and paper I know he keeps in the kitchen.

“Did you see her?” I look at Wilder who comes up behind me.

“I did.”

“And?”

“And she is stunning. She is very well spoken, and she told me she is a scientist.” I can’t believe there is a place that allows women to hold such high jobs, it sounds incredible. The women here are encouraged to be in the latest fashion, hold the best parties and in most cases, they are encouraged to try the Queens Circuit.

“Did you say a scientist?” I hear the skepticism in Wilders voice, and I would be too.

“Normally I would say I wouldn’t believe it, but the way she talked and the excitement when I mentioned my lab let me know that she is being truthful.” Her eyes lit up like blue sapphires shining in the moon.

“Did she give you anything about where she came from or who hurt her?” Wilder starts walking towards the house, and I follow knowing the guys will eventually ask me the same questions.

Once inside, I sit down and wait for the incoming questions that I know will happen.

Silvan is the one who comes to talk first while the others put whatever they have in their hands away. “You believe that she is a scientist?”

“I do, I think that wherever she was she was in a place where she was highly respected. She was very interested in what was in the medicine that I was giving her.”

“That doesn’t mean she is a scientist; she could be lying.” Silvan as always is skeptical. Part of his job is to question everyone and expect the worst until they prove otherwise.

“I watched her eyes, Silvan. She is telling the truth. Maybe not everything but that is truthful.” I think back to her eyes, there was no way that she would lie about that.

“But she didn’t tell you where she was from or what she was doing in the woods to get her raped?” Wilder sits down after putting his hunting things away.

“I didn’t press her Wilder. She experienced trauma and when she is ready to open up she will.” I know they are just as curious as I am about her and that is why I can spot the irritation on Wilder’s face when I say I am not going to press her. “She is coming here next week and her name is Miranda.”

“Why is she coming here?” Harland asks.

“I told her that she could come see my makeshift lab since she looked excited, and I want to see how well she does coming here. Most people can fake their pain when they want something. However, they can’t when they are forced to walk or do many things at once.”

Silvan smiles at me. “So, you want her to do stuff here to see if she is lying about her pain level?”

“I do. She wants to travel, and I want to make sure she is healed and is able to fight or run before she leaves.”

Wilder whistles. “You’re not going to try and keep her here?”

“Why would I?” I eye him wanting to hear why he thinks I would want to keep some woman here that I know nothing about, no matter how intriguing and beautiful she is.

“Because she has the whole damsel in distress thing going on.”

“No, she is intriguing and beautiful, but a damsel in distress is not what she is. I see a fighter in her.” Something about her makes me want to know her, but I won’t ask a woman to stay here just so I can probe her mind.

Smacking a hand on the table Harland chuckles. “How were the Faith’s, did they try to coerce you to marry one of the girls?”

Grinding my teeth, I think about Sally. She has been after me for forever, and even attempted Silvan and Harland. When she realized that I wasn’t going to be with her she started

throwing her girls in my face. I would never be with them. I am perfectly fine being single and being with my unit.

Bianca left a bad taste in my mouth. She was the one at one point until she turned into a bitter hag. Sure, she is beautiful and fierce, but her mind is all about the worship and the fear she receives when the people of this land fear here.

“As usual, she has Lunar and Nickle dressed to impress and right outside waiting to greet me like peacocks.” I chuckle when Harland snorts.

“Peacock.” He laughs.

“I don’t know when she will get the hint. I don’t know when she will understand that I do not want her daughters.”

“Did you see Leo?” Silvan asks.

“I did, he was out training and taking care of the horses. Why?”

“Because I told Leo he would be perfect for the royal guard if he trains every day.” Silvan runs a hand through his hair before talking again. “Did Miranda meet him?”

“I’m sure she has why?” Curiosity as to why Silvan would care is eating me.

“Just wondering how long it will take him to get her in the sack.” Leo is known for being a rouge and bedding women but for whatever reason I don’t think he will do that to her.

“I don’t think he will do that. I just have a feeling.”

“Well, we will see.” Silvan stands and I know he is done with this conversation.

“I’m curious to see where she is going to be.”



Miranda

MAKING DINNER IS HARD. I DIDN'T REALIZE ALL THE WORK that is put into making things from natural ingredients. I didn't think this would be so hard to prepare food from natural ingredients. Now I have a better appreciation for what the cooks do back in Sphotes.

I take a look at the other women all deep into what they are doing. They move so quick and efficient that for the first time in my life I feel useless and lost. I miss Sphotes and I miss the lab. I want to go back to what I am good at. Though I guess everyone needs a little humbling in their life, and this is mine.

“Miranda, do you need help?” Lunar looks at me, curiosity shining in her eyes. I know they want to know where I have been and what I led me to their land. I am thankful that Lunar doesn't ask me.

As much as I want the help, I am determined to do this myself. I flash her a smile and nod my head. “Thank you for asking Lunar but I want to try and do this, and you can call me Mira if you want.”

“Mira? I like that.” Lunar smiles again and returns making whatever it is she is making, and I go back to trying to make the fresh biscuits that I was tasked with tonight. When I finally feel like I am making progress a sound outside distracts me and I look out the window to see Leo standing there practicing sword movement.

Vulture Bay is the only one that learns how to use swords and when they get to the academy, they help the others. The other factions don't ever focus on another faction's gift unless they are in school. Leo moves through the motions gracefully and it is like watching a weird, dangerous dance.

He cuts through the air and slices his blade straight like he would be cutting through someone. I so badly want to go out there with him but with them I am not sure they would like it. I shelve the thought for now and decide I will ask Leo later.

My dough balls are fully fluffed and cut to the proper measurements from the cookbook Sally left. I begin to place them on the sheet and add the ingredients to the top and as I

am sliding them in; I watch as Nickle starts the pot for the pasta.

I slide the bread and hobble over to the window to watch Leo some more. “You know my son is single right?” Sally makes me jump coming up behind me.

“I..Um.. Well...” Lost on what to say I close my mouth before I look stupid. Leo is not an ugly man, but he is not the one for me.

“Yes, well, you would have to have land or a title to be considered to be with him.” Sally turns and walks away like she didn’t just insult me. I am relieved that she won’t pursue something with Leo and I, but in the same breath I also don’t like being judged for not holding lands. If she knew I was one of the top scientists from where I came from, she would shit herself.

Well maybe not since they don’t care about that shit here.

The thought that I will get to see the doctor soon and go to his lab crosses my mind, making me smile. I can’t wait to see a lab again and learn from another. We both create our own medicines and Peak looks like he is extremely intelligent.

This place is definitely different, and it holds traditions that I would love to study some more. I want to learn more about how this land runs and why they allow what they allow here. Sphotes is so advanced, but I am not naïve enough to not know that we even hold weird traditions.

The Vriven kingdom is not as advanced. They seem to have the ability to be advanced but are stuck in an unknown time. For the simple fact that the women need to have everything made from scratch which in some cases can take up their entire day.

Once I finish my portion of dinner, I decide to talk to Leo. I excuse myself and I know they are all watching me, and it irks me knowing their eyes are on me. Leo stops when I get to him, and he wipes the sweat beading on his forehead.

“Hey Mira.” My face pales. I haven’t heard anyone say that in a while and it is still weird to me. I shouldn’t be freaked

out by my nickname, but *he* used to say it to me all the time. Something on my face must have shown because he looks at me and his face pales. “I’m sorry, is Mira not ok?”

I force the smile. I will not let something as small as a nickname frighten me or make me think of him. “No, it’s fine actually, my friends back where I come from used to call me that.”

Still looking unsure he moves closer to me. I feel his eyes search mine. “Are you sure?”

“Leo, I am positive.” I smile brighter this time watching his face relax. “I actually came to see if you would teach me some sword movement, and some protective moves.”

The surprise that crosses his face is comical and I can’t help but release a giggle. “What for? Are you trying to enter the queen’s circuit?”

Now it is my turn to laugh. “No.” Honesty is what I go with for this answer. “With what happened to me I don’t ever want to be left defenseless again.”

Leo pauses and I know he is thinking about what I said. I know women here are not looked upon kindly doing what they consider being either for the queen circuit options or a man, but this time for once in my life I don’t give a shit what anyone has to say.

“I mean Silvan would be the one to ask but seeing as you probably don’t know who I am talking about I will show you. He is the one who told me I would be good enough next year to do the queen’s guard. I am training for either the new queen or the old one.”

“What are you hoping the outcome will be?” It’s his turn to force a smile and I watch as he looks around.

“We don’t speak badly of the queen. Now let me show you a move.” What I think is him changing the subject. He draws a sword and moves behind me. His mouth grazes my ear as he whispers. “Queen Bianca has lost her way. She is mad with power, and I think if she continues to rule, she will bring this

world down and keep us in the dark ages. She needs to be stopped.”

Leo swings my arm with the sword showing me a proper swing and also letting me feel the weight. He backs away from me and directs me in a few positions that allow me to get used to the weight of the sword.

The sword is a workout, and the thought that people in Vulture Bay handle these massive things astonishes me. I work with the movement and Leo watches everything I do. He corrects me when he sees something that can be improved and by the end I am sweating and kind of sore, but proud of myself. I feel the muscles in my arm letting me know I did a workout.

“If you are serious about wanting to know how to work a sword, I can get a smaller more, lightweight one made.” I scrunch my nose. I must have looked pathetic trying to wield the sword if he thinks I need something. “I see the look on your face and no it’s not because you’re a woman. My sword was commissioned for me. Something that gives me an edge and is made to flow with me. I think with one commissioned for you, you could be lethal with the sword.”

Pride wells inside me. “Really? You think I could be good with a sword?”

“I do, how about we stop and take a walk to town?”

I look down at my now dirtied clothes and dusty boots that I wore. I don’t even want to imagine what my hair looks like. “I’m a mess.”

Chuckling Leo points at himself. “So am I.” I look at him and while he looks messy, he still looks handsome.

“You’re different.”

“How?”

“Because you don’t look like you rolled around in a pigpen.”

“And you don’t either.” He smiles again before grabbing my hand and pulling me towards the horses. Not wanting to

miss the opportunity I decided to just let it go and go with him. I want to have a sword for myself. It is getting late, and I don't think many people will be out this late and so close to dinner.

“Come on, get on the horse.” Leo holds his hand out to me, and I don't hesitate as I place mine in his. Leo makes sure to pull me up on the horse slowly and keep my foot safe. The road from the Faith's home looks like it does visiting other factions.

The road is bare and dusty. The trees that line the scenery in the distance are gorgeous. Each changing color. This has always been my favorite time of the year. The leaves would change colors and slowly fall from the branches creating the most picturesque scenery.

It doesn't last long as the Faiths are a more noble house, so they live closer to the castle. I look at the castle and its solid white and gray walls and the black high peaks. It is breathtaking; the windows are black and gold from what I can see. I can see what looks like sprawling gardens that would be beautiful in the warmer months and a stone path leading to the massive black and gold doors.

“Beautiful, isn't it?” I can hear the awe in his voice.

“Yes, it is.” I'm equally awed by the castle. “You're trying to be a royal guard, aren't you?”

“I am. I have wanted to be for so long.” He leaves out the fact that he no longer cares for this queen. “I train every day and like I said before, if you're serious you can train with me. Maybe even join the circuit.”

“That wouldn't be something I would do.” As much as this place interests me, this is not a job I am willing to take on. These people, just like mine, need to be brought forward in time.

“Never say never Mira.” Leo says before he points out the little marketplace. “This is where the sword will be made. There are tons of shops here where people come to sell things and make things. The swordsmith has his own shop. Blade is a nice guy.”

The moment we dismount in town I am immediately enraptured by the town and the bustle of it. It doesn't look like much but being in the middle of it, differs significantly from being on the outside.

“Mira, the queen is here when she passes be sure to bow.”

I look around noticing people bowing and at first; I don't see anyone, but then a small woman in the middle of four men comes into view. She is standing tall and proud. Her golden locks fall well past her waist and the curls are long and beautiful.

I see her gray eyes, but they look disgusted as she walks through town, like she would rather be anywhere but where she is. The dress she is wearing is the color of blood, the fabric bunches by her waist is making her figure stand out more. The golden crown is filled with diamonds the color of blood.

As she nears, I lower my head. That is until she stops in front of me. I see the dainty feet clad in dainty red flat shoes.

“Who are you?” Her voice is harsh, and I can already hear the distaste and anger coming from her.

CHAPTER 5

Silvan

I only agreed to meet Bianca here so that she wouldn't come back to my home. I know what she wants and again I have to tell her to fuck off in the politest way possible. I waited until the moment that the queen would make her appearance wanting to avoid all the pomp that goes with her.

I took my time walking to the marketplace. I decided the fresh air will do me good. The road brought with it many memories. I am the one who found our home when we left the queen. I would always run this path, it was nice enough and secluded enough to where we would be hard to find yet not be too far from the market.

The land was big enough and fit all our needs. For the most part Bianca has left us alone except when she catches wind of any female beginning to sniff around us. The only reason she hasn't chased the Faith family away is because she knows we would never ever go there.

Once I see the marketplace, I stop and look. I do not miss the bustle of this place. The noise is overwhelming and because of my job I see many potential dangers. I take a moment to surveil the market before looking past the market and seeing the beginnings of the queen's circuit being built. Part of the arena will be built here before they have open trials.

Seeing the disgusting blood red dress I notice Bianca in the market already, and for a moment I am relieved until I see that she is standing rather combatively in front of a woman. It takes me a moment before I realize it is someone Bianca has never seen which means it is the new woman. *Miranda*.

Cursing out loud I make sure to keep my pace steady and not let Bianca catch a whiff of concern coming from me. She would have Miranda executed right here in the market, just to scare the other potential queens and remind them how vicious she still is.

“Bianca.” I make sure she hears me and the moment my voice reaches her she straightens and plasters on the fake smile she tries to use to cover up the evil swirling through her.

“Silvan, hello. Nice of you to finally get here.” She laughs at the end, but I know that she is irritated. She wanted me to see her entrance, she wanted me to watch her walk in with her men hoping that some part of me would swirl with jealousy.

“I told you I would meet you here. You know I like to walk.”

Bianca moves closer to me, an appreciative look on her face. “It shows. I know you like to keep fit. After all, you wouldn’t want someone else to be the one to train the queen’s guard.”

Vomit threatens to come up and I swallow it down before I puke all over her. She makes my skin crawl and I have to fight the urge every time she says something even remotely sexual to me.

I spare a glance at Miranda who has now stood with as the others around her have. She looks beautiful and I can see what captured Peak. Her hair is a little messy and I can see some dirt on her face and the sweat beading down her forehead, but it makes her look attractive.

“What did you want to see me for again, Bianca?”

Her head turns to Miranda, and I see the sneer immediately. “Did I tell you, you could stand up?” She gets right in Miranda’s face and the look of confusion as she glances around at the others around her standing and now most likely gawking at her.

“I’m sorry I didn’t know.” Miranda whispers and looks around again. Leo is standing next to him and bends again keeping his head down.

“Not you Leo.” Bianca reaches out her hand and places it under his chin. “Only this ugly woman, I don’t want her to look upon me.”

Her voice is like nails dragging in my ear, and she pisses me off. Degrading women and showing her jealousy. Miranda’s head whips back up.

“Excuse me?”

Bianca’s face turns red as she stares at her. “Keep your head bowed.”

Miranda again lowers her head and I think fast before Bianca again starts stuff with her. “Bianca, why don’t we move along here and talk?”

Bianca looks at me and shakes her head before grabbing Miranda and forcing her to stand upright. “Where are you from?”

Miranda nods her head. “I don’t know I had an accident and can’t remember much past my name and age.”

Bianca gets closer to her, looking into her eyes and trying to find the lie. “I know you’re lying. Tell me the truth.”

This time I can see the anger in Miranda as she looks at her. “I already told you. I don’t know, now back off.”

“Who the fuck do you think you’re talking to bitch.” Bianca is furious and I can see her hand inch towards her waist where I know she keeps the dagger hidden within the folds of her dress.

“You obviously.” Miranda crosses her arms and I almost groan out loud. She has no idea how close she is to death, but Bianca surprises me when she smiles at her.

“Leo, is this woman in your family’s care?”

Leo looks surprised that the queen is talking directly to him, but soon fear fills his eyes. “Yes, she is staying with us while she heals.”

“Heals?” The queen looks between the two before looking back at Miranda and looking her over. I don’t think she can

really see past what she wants to see.

“Yes, Dr. Peak asked us to care for her until she remembers where she is from.” Leo makes sure to add in a little about her memory loss.

“Well, I have another plan in mind for her.” My stomach drops as Bianca looks at her. Miranda raises one eyebrow at her and waits. “You will join the queens circuit.” Everyone around us that can hear the queen gasps out loud.

Women have waited and trained to be able to join and have the chance at queen and Bianca is just forcing her into this. Trying to cut in, I call her. “Bianca, you know the rules, she doesn’t have the backing to join and I’m sure she has not trained.”

In a flash her eyes met mine and they bore into me with pure rage. “Who do you think created the rules, Silvan? I will add her to the circuit, and it is up to her to figure it out.”

“Bianca.”

Her hand slams across my face moving me back. “Don’t say another word or I will have you arrested.” Slamming back any more responses. She is mad and for whatever reason she is more in a pissed off mood than normal. Turning back to Miranda she says. “Be there next week for outfit fitting. If you don’t show, I will kill you.” Instead of talking to me further she decides to storm off leaving me in front of Leo and Miranda.

Most women will be at the castle next week to be fitted for their uniforms. The queen will be blood red while the rest of the women will be in gold. It is a curse and an advantage. A lot takes place in the snow so the contenders and the queen will be easily spotted.

Once Bianca leaves, I look between the pair in front of me. “Leo, bring her over later and make sure you train her. I can help and so can the guys.” Looking at her I hold out my hand which she places in my hand. They are soft and delicate. “My name is Silvan. You must be Miranda. Peak is a part of my family, and we are the ones who found you.”

Her face pales for a moment before she smiles at me. “Thank you for saving me.”

“No need to thank me.” I let her hand go, weirdly missing the feel of her skin against mine. “I don’t know what was up her ass today, but now there is no coming back from this. You will have to run the circuit, or she will kill you.”

“I don’t want to do this; this wasn’t a part of my plans.” Miranda looks defeated and for a moment I can see the wheels in her head turning. “I can be gone by next week.” For the briefest moment hope shines in her eyes before Leo clears his throat.

“If you leave, she will come and kill my family.” Miranda looks at him and I see the hope disappear as quickly as it came.

“Guess I have no choice.”

“You don’t, but we can help prepare you.” I talk softly to her. Miranda nods her head and I turn to Leo. “Come by and we will start getting you prepared to join this year’s royal guard, and I can also show you some sword movement.” I watch as shock again crosses her face.

“Really?” Leo sounds excited.

“Yes, Leo, you are ready, and I think no matter who the queen is, you will be beneficial to the guard.”

“Thank you, Silvan.”

“Of course.” Not having much to say I take one last look at them before I start heading back the way I came. I need to tell the guys what has happened.



Miranda

I HAVE TO RUN THE CIRCUIT. THIS WAS NOT THE PLAN. THIS WAS not supposed to happen at all. I wanted to just lie low and

learn.

All the thoughts are swirling around my brain and the one that keeps coming back is to run, and that is something that I cannot do. Leo knows the queen better than I do and if he says she will kill his family then I believe him.

Leo and I walk silently until we find the swordsmith, and Leo is the one to talk. “This is the newest queen contestant. She will be needing a sword that is lightweight and sharp.”

“The new contestant? I thought they already had some in mind?” The swordsmith looks me over, and I look him over. He is a burly man with no hair and a very long gray beard. His eyes are blue, but I can see how well he lived life through them. “Can ya fight girl?”

Usually that would offend me, but he is much older than me and I know he has much more wisdom than I. “I can wield a sword, but Leo here is going to fine tune my skills.” I smile at Leo and look back at the swordsmith.

“Well, he better, the circuit this year’ is no joke. I would know I helped to make it.”

Leo cuts in. “Silvan will be helping her too.”

Silvan, that man was as hot as the sun. The way he looked at me nearly melted me where I stood. I didn’t really get the time to appreciate him since I was shook with the fact that now I will have to be thrown into a circuit. It feels daunting.

“Silvan is a remarkable man who is probably the best one to help train you.” The swordsmith sounds proud of him. “I have crafted every one of his swords and I know he understands how to battle and to think, which sounds silly out loud, but it is something people tend to forget.”

I know what he is saying. I am with one of the smartest, most tactical men in Sphotes. *Well, I was with him.* Being with Clay I was able to learn many things and one of them was how to be smart when faced with enemies. I know where to go, how to blend and I know what I can eat in the wild.

Right now, I couldn’t be more grateful. “I know what you mean.” I say and from the look of the guys, I know they are

debating whether I really know what they are saying or if I am just saying things to have something to say.

“Well girl I hope you know something other than cooking and making shit. The circuit is no joke, and the queen is as mean as a viper. Now get into your sword position and I am going to check on how you handle one so I can properly make you a sword and balance the weight for your form.”

I shake my head and again try to not take offense to him calling me a girl and thinking that all I do is sit at home and cook or make shit. He walks around his table and moves around me kicking my legs out to better fix my stance. Once he does, he places a sword in my hand and watches me swing it a few times.

Once he is satisfied with my movement, He tells me to hold the sword a few different ways and I see him taking notes. At times he feels my fingers around the hilt and takes notes on the different positions. This man would be so beneficial to Vulture Bay. I don't know how they handle making swords there, but I bet that they would love someone like this man.

Deciding to take a risk I look at him. “Have you ever heard of Vulture Bay?” His eyes fly to mine right away and the shock that is in them before he masks it lets me know the answer even before he spits out a lie.

“Nope, never heard of it.”

“What is that?” Leo asks from besides me.

Again, I curse myself. Now I have to tell him something. “Vulture Bay is a place from around where I come from.” My eyes plead with him not to ask anything more and thankfully he takes the hint.

“I will have this made at the end of the week for her. Please come back for it and then have Silvan train her with the new sword. Her movements and her sword handling needs massive help. If she goes against another contestant like that, she won't make it past the first round.”

The lack of faith irritates me, and I want to tell him I am stronger and smarter than what he thinks. I am a fucking scientist. I cure people.

“Thank you, we will be back.” Leo pull on my shirt to get me moving.

“Thank you as well.” I start to walk away but decide to leave him wondering. “I can make you something for your hands.”

“My hands?” The swordsmith looks down at his hands.

I smile at him. “I can make Viritasol, you work with your hands a lot and I can see that you constantly open and close your hands signifying that they bother you. Unfortunately, I won’t be able to get rid of the pain but using it daily will help the pain ease and you won’t feel it as much.”

Looking baffled and speechless he nods, and I feel the satisfaction of showing him that I am not the complete idiot he has been thinking I was in his head.

“Um, thank you. I feel with old age you begin to feel the aches and pains of a career you once loved so much.”

Smiling again I say to him. “I will bring it to you when I pick up the sword.” Walking away with Leo again I know the questions before he even opens his mouth.

“How do you know how to make medicine? Where is Vulture Bay?”

“Leo stop talking and give me a minute.” I feel like I can trust him, so I am going to tell him everything. “I am from Sphotes in Kingsland. Our home is divided into factions and only the men mingle throughout them.”

“Factions?”

“Yes, we have Sphotes, again is where I am from. Home to the top battle tactics males and mainly female scientists like me. Fire Valley is full of males who have the magic of fire, don’t ask me what the females do in most of these factions.”

“You don’t go to any of these places?” Leo is watching me intently now as we make our way back to his home.

“No, I haven’t. We also have Golden Isle which is home to the best archers in the world, Diamaird West home to the best hand to hand combat males and then Vulture Bay being our poorest faction but home to the best swordsman. I also know their females usually mine the fields, because a lot of our food comes from there which is strange since they are the poorest faction by far.”

“How does that even make sense?” Leo now looks baffled.

“Honestly, it doesn’t make much at all.” I pause walking. “Leo you can’t tell anyone what I told you okay. I don’t trust people, but I am taking a chance trusting you.”

“I know you are. I can tell how hard this is for you and I won’t tell anyone what you have told me.” We fall silent again and I feel like a small weight has been lifted with telling Leo my secret. “Make sure you don’t tell my mother or even my sisters and most certainly not my father.” Leo looks at me and I can see the guilt building in his expression. “They are all about this world and making sure they are one of the most known, they will tell everyone everything just to have that spotlight.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I hate to say it but that is the way they have always been, and it won’t change.” Again, the look in his eyes tells me he isn’t thrilled with the way things are going. “Don’t worry between Silvan and I, you will be trained and ready.” Now he sounds confident, and I hope that he is right. I don’t want to lose my life for something I don’t believe in.

The funny thing is I always thought that if I died young, it would be in my lab, by some freak accident, but that the accident would produce a cure to some deathly disease. Now I’m pretty sure this is where my life will end. The queen has won many times already and even though she looks small, you can tell she is nasty in a battle.

My hopes now lie with the guys and hoping that I can learn quickly.

CHAPTER 6

Peck

“Well, everything looks great.” I pull her tight leggings back into place and move back from her. “It looks like the swelling went down and the bruising is the worst of it now. How do you feel?”

Miranda smiles brilliantly at me. “Much better, thank you so much.” She moves her ankle a little, testing it. “It still feels a little painful but like I said I can walk on it now.”

I nod my head at her. I am glad she is looking at the bright side of things. Silvan told us a few days ago that Bianca is now forcing her into the queen’s circuit. I have not brought it up to her yet because it is her business.

“Would you like to see my lab?” The way her eyes light up makes her incredibly stunning.

“That would be wonderful.” I turn and lead the way. We are in the same building as the lab, so it is not a far walk. Upon entering the lab, I hear her gasp. “This is incredible, the setup is amazing. How do you manage to have this technology here?” I watch her move through the lab and normally it would make me nervous to have someone here, but not her. I like having her here.

The feeling is surprisingly nice and yet weird. “Do you know much about advanced scopes?” Miranda’s head whips up and her eyes study mine for a moment.

“You have advanced scopes here?”

“I do.” I walk over and open the door on the lower cabinets and pull out an advanced scope. All scientists around the

world seek after these scopes. These scopes were made by one of the last mages that we know of. He magicked a bunch of scopes and gave them to some of the best scientists hoping they would be able to cure the mages' human family who were dying.

The scopes can take any sample and analyze it within minutes giving you a diagnosis. It can tell you what is in the sample and what ingredients could be used to hopefully cure whatever the sample is.

“This is incredible, I have been dying to get one. No one in my faction has one of these. If I had one, I may have been able to cure Aether infection already.” She is so animated and distracted that I don't think she realizes that she is giving more information away about herself. “I was getting close, and I guess if I had one of these that I wouldn't have had to work so hard. I guess in a good way I am glad that I didn't have one.”

“Aether infection?” I cut her off.

Miranda pauses looking at me. She bites her lip and I am guessing mentally scolding herself for how much she just revealed. Sighing, she runs a hand through her long hair.

“Aether infection is a disease that has been in most cases making children very sick. There has been an uprise in deaths though.”

“Miranda, where are you from?” Again, she looks at me and something in her expression changes and I think whatever she sees she knows I won't tell anyone.

“I'm from Kingsland and my faction is Sphotes. We are home to the world's best tactical men and best female scientists. I am the leading scientist.” She pauses. “Well, I was the leading scientist.”

“I know that land.” I know where she is from. Bianca has talked many times about traveling there and meeting the king. She said she likes the way he did things and wanted to adopt a similar fashion for this land. We have never gotten far since those in the Woodland Wilds always seem to stop us.

“You know of our king?”

“I do, not many do since it was palace and private guard talk. Bianca liked how he did things and thought that if she was better prepared, then she would be ready for war, but we never got that far.”

“Why not?”

Now that is an interesting tale. “The Woodland Wilds always seem to know when we will try to cross and they ambush our parties we send ahead, drastically eliminating our numbers.”

“You don’t want to do what our king does.” Now that’s interesting. Miranda doesn’t like what her king is doing in her lands. Deciding not to push it I move to another topic. “Aether infection, how did you figure it out?”

Sadness seeps into her eyes. “I used to work with a woman who had the cutest little girl. She was always so bubbly and happy and then one day she began coughing and her skin turned a shade of almost gray. We tried the common medicines and when nothing worked almost three days later, and her symptoms got worse we moved on to taking samples. By the time I even established this was a new strain of bacteria Jemma died.”

“I am so sorry. That is so hard to even think about.” I reach out and touch her shoulder bringing her back into focus. “If you would like, you can work from here and try again with my scope.”

“You mean that?”

“I do.” Taking a giant risk and by giant, I mean I should talk to the guys first, but Miranda draws me like a moth to a flame. One that I still haven’t understood if I would be happy to be burnt by. “There is a small guest home out back and if you want you can have it. It is very basic, and you would still have to come into the house to eat and bathe but it has its own room, and bathroom to use. Just not a shower.”

“You don’t even know me.” She looks cautious now and I need to fix it.

“I know that but from what I learned of you today. You have a brilliant mind and the way you talk about your work and that little girl I know you’re compassionate.”

“Still doesn’t explain why you would offer a complete stranger a place to stay.” She gives me an incredulous look and it’s comical on her face.

“Besides what I said, I know the Faith family and aside from Leo they are all pretty crazy. Leo will be here with Silvan training, so you won’t want to be left there alone for periods of time.” I don’t know why I am pushing the issue, but I can’t help it.

Miranda doesn’t respond and I don’t push for an answer. I can see the wheels turning in her head and know she is thinking about what I asked. I watch her move to the high cabinets in the lab and look at some of the vials.

I wait it out, watching her walk around, and I find I enjoy her facial expressions as she explores. That should alarm me but it doesn’t. She makes me smile which is odd since I don’t know her, but I can see a brilliant mind behind what people would only see as beauty.

After a while she comes back over to me. “I think I would like to move in. It would be nice to have my own space again.” She pauses for a moment. “And you’re sure I would be able to use your lab to work on the Aether infection?”

“Of course, and if you don’t mind, maybe I can help you.” Her eyes light up and she smiles.

“I would like that, but I can’t move in today. I want to tell Leo and thank the Faiths for their hospitality.”

“I understand that. Let me take you back and I will let the guys know.” I have a feeling it would be better if she didn’t stay today. The guys are not going to be happy.

I watch her take another look around the lab. I know what she is feeling without her having to say anything. She is excited to be back near what she is familiar with. There is something literally magical and exciting about medicine. Being able to cure someone because you worked to find that

cure is like no other feeling. I think the only things that beats it is amazing mind-blowing sex.

I follow her out and when she is ready; I take her home leaving her at the Faiths. Now I have to go back and tell the guys what I did.



Wilder

THE FACT THAT PEAK IS TRYING TO EXPLAIN TO SILVAN, Harland and I that he not only is going to work with Miranda in the lab, he asked her to move in. He has lost his mind and he hasn't been laid recently. None of us have seeing as Bianca finds every excuse to have them executed for the stupidest shit.

“Peak, what the fuck? What were you thinking?” Silvan is raging mad and when he gets this mad, he starts pacing all over. I am leaning against the wall trying my hardest not to laugh at him. “Harland, Wilder, back me up here.”

Harland looks like he would rather be in his office working than listening to this, just like I wish I was in the woods. I could be getting meat and storing it here for the winter.

“Silvan, he has a point, she will be here a lot to train and having her here would allow her some of the privacy I'm sure she misses.” Peak told us where she was from, and I immediately knew where he was talking about. We learned of the factions a while back when Bianca did her investigating.

Personally, I prefer Vulture Bay or Golden Isle. Wonderful swordsmen and archers hail from those factions and they to me seem more useful.

“Have you forgotten Bianca the psycho who made her enter the circuit to begin with?” Looking at me he throws his hands up in the air exasperated. He knows I won't get involved. I can see the valid points of both sides, but it boils

down to what is done, and she is planning on coming here tomorrow.

“Silvan.” Huffing he turns on his heel to face Peak. “She was working on a cure for Aether infection. Something that we know nothing about and what if it comes to our land? Having her here and being prepared will benefit everyone. On top of it, I know you are going to train her in sword play alongside Leo.” Again, Peak looks at me. “And I’m sure Wilder won’t mind teaching her to hunt.”

Being put on the spot is not something I like so I shrug and agree. There is no harm teaching her to hunt. “I don’t mind, as long as I am able to do my job.”

There is silence while Silvan takes everything in. He paces and I watch in amusement as he realizes that he is losing this argument. Silvan has never felt comfortable with a woman around when Bianca is concerned and now, we are bringing a woman in our home

“Fine. Do what you want Peak, but you know Bianca will fucking find out.”

“I don’t care, she is brilliant and together we can create something to help this land. That Aether Infection can reach our borders, and I would rather be prepared.” The logic is there, and I know Silvan hears it. Peak is always passionate about his work and knowing that this is a serious threat Silvan won’t fight too much harder to win this.

“Fine you win Peak, but we need to be careful.” Silvan eyes him and I see an understanding pass between them. Silvan will always have Peaks back and vice versa. I know they will always have our backs too, but right now it is about them.

“I got it, and we will be careful.” Peak is calm and I know he is relieved that everyone is on board. I couldn’t care less; Harland and Silvan have always been the more cautious ones. Bianca never wanted me to begin with, but she knew to have them she would have to accept me.

Women always see me as too tall and too domineering. They want to be able to say they slept with me to tell the others that I am an animal in bed which is why I haven't fucked in a while. I know I am not the nicest and the least social of the four of us but I'm not going to change the foundation of who I am as a person to please anyone. Least of all Bianca the psycho bitch.

"I will have the place cleaned up." Harland says as he walks away. The idea of having a woman around again is not as appealing to me. I remember when we used to all be with Bianca. She wanted things a certain way and when they weren't she would cause so much headache.

"I'm going into the woods. I need to hunt, and I need to cover some ground today to make sure the Woodland Wilds are not moving this way."

I always do that when I hunt. I make sure that I see no closer tracks that would look like they came from the wilds. I always make sure the town has enough food for the harsh winters here, and because being in the woods during that time is dangerous.

I walk to the house and grab my bow and arrows. I love this bow. I crafted it myself. The wood was from a Bubinga tree. It is not common here, and I traveled as close as possible to the location of what we think would be the lost kingdom.

Bianca had us there trying to locate someone who could help us with the war and the moment we got to close the sickness took over and we all buckled as our stomach gave out the dizziness took over. We left, and I went back months ago just to grab the wood I would need.

I was able to grab enough to make bows for all of us. Starting my normal walk, I track the footprints trying to figure out what animals are out here today. Deer, and pigs, which makes my life a lot easier. Enough pigs and deer would keep us stocked where we won't need to ration the meats.

Out here, I feel at home, there is a certain feeling when you are in nature. The air is purer, non-filtered. When an animal is near you can smell them. The trees blend together to

make the nicest aroma. I walk further in listening to the branches break under my feet.

I can also hear the movement of smaller creatures running away from me as they hear me coming. Scared because I am the hunter. Could I share this with someone? Would Miranda appreciate this? The thought of bringing her here to what I see as my own little escape feels intrusive.

I have always been more closed off than the guys. I am the one who prefers solitude and does not like too many people. I don't know how this with Miranda is going to happen and I think I may have agreed a little too quickly for teaching her.

Spotting a red elm tree I decide I can make Miranda a bow and arrow set and this she will be allowed to take with her to the circuit. Grabbing what I need I place it in my sack and move to find something to kill. I need this, I need to hunt.

CHAPTER 7

Silvan

It's been hours, and she is getting better as the sun fades into the sky. A week has passed since the meeting with the queen, and today when night falls, she will need to be at the palace for her fitting. Miranda also got her sword today and because it was made for her, it is perfectly balanced, and she uses it like it is nothing.

“Make sure your hips follow with each swing. It will give you the momentum you need to hit harder.” Miranda wipes the sweat from her head and looks again at the placement of her hands, her sword.

“I need a shower I smell.” Most women sound whiney when they complain but she manages to sound more factual. Miranda moved in the very next day and since then we have been training every day and most days with Leo.

“Stop complaining, you won't get a chance to shower when you're in the circuit.”

“I'm not complaining I am simply stating a fact that I smell like a horse's ass.” She sniffs herself again and it takes everything in me not to break out in laughter. Having her here even for this short amount of time has been strangely comforting and fun.

“I'm sure you're exaggerating.”

“But I'm not, here smell me.” With the challenge in her eyes, she doesn't think that I will smell her. Miranda doesn't know me that well. I walk over to her and watch her eyes turn into saucers the closer to get to her. “I was kidding Silvan.”

“Oh, but Mira you didn’t think I would, did you? Rule one, don’t challenge me.”

“I didn’t challenge you.” She steps back and I laugh grabbing her arm. I spin her to around and bring her arm up in the air and smell her quickly before releasing her.

“It was in your eyes, and you’re right you stink, head in and shower.” I’m lying, of course she smells like jasmine and vanilla and a little bit of sweat. Her hair is a tangled mess after hours of sword play. It was in a bun, but most has fallen in front of her head that she keeps trying to push away and her blue eyes are on fire.

“I don’t stink.” Got her. I knew she would say that. I smirk and cross my arms, the power pose of I got you.

“I thought that you said you did?”

“Well, I.” She smirks at me. “Fine, I lied I’m tired, and I need to get ready anyway. Laughter dances in her eyes as she looks at me. “I really do need to go get ready.”

“Ok, well we will pick up in the morning, your form is improving nicely, and I think we can start moving to harder moves.”

“Thank you, Silvan. Thank you for helping me and allowing me to stay here. Will Leo be here tomorrow?”

“I believe so?” Leo has been coming occasionally but ever since Mira left the Faith’s, Sally has made it a point to show how unhappy she is that Mira is here, and she makes it almost impossible for Leo to come train.

“Well, I hope Sally gets over it at some point. I know she is not happy, and I know she is most likely disappointed.”

“She is just salty. She wanted her daughters to find comfort in our bed and we have denied them for years so she probably thinks that you are in our bed.”

Her eyes widen as she takes in what I said. “She thinks I am sleeping with all of you?” Her face is not one of horror and I don’t think she knows she is portraying curiosity instead of the disbelief in her voice.

“We come as a unit Mira, when we add a woman to us she will get all of us.” I smile at her and watch the emotions run across her face.

“All of you?”

“All of us?”

“How do you decide who you will be the woman?” Now her brain is running a mile a minute and I can see the intelligence and critical thinking that Peak always sees. “What if one of you is in disagreement? How do you deal with jealousy?”

“Mira, when we find someone, we will know, and the jealousy won’t be there. She will be the perfect match for all of us.” For a brief moment the thought that she could be the one crosses my mind. I don’t even bother to escape that thought. She is brilliant, funny, and so far, we all seem to take to her.

“Oh well there is so much here that is fascinating.” I notice her little nervousness when she tucks her hair behind her ear.”

“We have a different way of life here. We lack the amount of women so we usually end up sharing. It does create harmony and brings units together. However, there are some that choose the wrong one and then you find yourself in a nightmare.”

“Is that why your unit denied the queen?” I was wondering when she would ask about Bianca.

“Yes, we knew that she didn’t really like all of us, she really didn’t like Wilder. She was becoming a person we no longer recognized and with each circuit she won she became a tyrant.”

“I guess all that power can really get to someone who doesn’t know how to manage it properly.”

I eye her. I think she would do fine but there is always a chance that someone would lose their minds trying to keep the throne. “Just be careful, Mira.”

“I will. I have learned the hard way not to trust people.” I know what she is talking about. She knew the person who hurt her, and she must have known him from somewhere.

“Did you know him?” I am hesitant to ask her, but I know keeping that inside could destroy someone. Her eyes meet mine and a flash of anger flares to life in them.

“I did, he was a scientist in my faction. He was considered brilliant but weak minded.”

Interrupting her I ask. “How can one be considered brilliant and weak minded at the same time?”

“Well, he was not like the other men. In my faction men are known for their brilliance in the battlefield, they are tactical, and they can plan fifty different moves in their heads under a few minutes. He was brilliant in science and always failed the tactics classes. He was moved here and while he did amazing work, he is less desirable to women.” She takes a moment. “He wanted me, but I was engaged to the top tactical male in my faction.”

“Was engaged?” I didn’t know she had someone.

“Yes, was. I say that because we were pulling apart and I know he didn’t really want to be with me anymore. He was just going through the motions and if my assumption is correct, he will be headed to Knightwood Academy.”

“That is where the men go?”

“Yes, they train there for three years and then they get sent to the line. I don’t know the statistics of everything, but the women just have to hope they make it home.”

“That must be hard for all the women.”

“Not just for the women in our factions in all the factions. Only the men are selected.”

“There is no chance for you and your fiancé?”

Mira looks down for a moment before giving me a small smile. “I don’t think so. He may look for me if he’s not snatched up by Knightwood. Sadly, it was coming to an end. I

knew the moment my heart shattered inside he was no longer mine.”

A part of me sparks hearing that they are no longer a thing even though I know I should probably show some sympathy, but I don't have it in me.

“It's getting late you should probably go and get ready.”

“You're right, I have a feeling if I don't show she will just have me murdered.” She laughs a little but she has no idea how truthful her statement.

“Mira be careful.”

“I will.”



Mira

YOU CAN DO THIS. YOU'RE SMART AND RESOURCEFUL. A CHANT I have been saying since I left the little cottage. I showered after I finished with Silvan and even with his words of confidence, the closer, I got to the castle the more nervous I became.

I know that this is a very real problem that I am now in and before Silvan I hadn't had any time with weapons. Clay taught me everything I needed to know about survival outside in case of the worst possible scenario. I snort and laugh while I reach the gates. This is the worst possible scenario.

One thing I have learned about being around women is to never let them see you sweat or know that they have the upper hand. I know this queen would prey on me if she did. Once I am at the entrance, I tell the guard that I am here for my fitting, and he allows me in.

I focus on calming myself down and think about what Silvan said. Here it is normal to be with more than one man. How amazing it would be to feel the love of not just one man

but multiple. Men who are all different but together make it their mission to love you and show you.

Sighing as I walk down this horrendous red carpet that is leading to the throne room, I think about Clay. He used to be so full of passion and want, but as we aged and worked to become the best we simply grew apart. I can't seem to stop thinking about the last time I seen him.

Reaching the door all I hear is silence until the insult is thrown at some woman by the queen bitch herself. "Pathetic, how do you expect to survive if you keep getting fat you cow, I bet you will be the first one out." What she doesn't say is that she knows she will be the first one to be killed.

I push open the door and the silence is deafening. The queen, as much as I hate to say it is stunning in her white outfit. It is form fitting and her boots climb all the way up her suit and cut off at the knee. Her blonde hair is braided down her back and hangs right above the top of her ass.

"Look who decided to show up ladies." All the attention turns to me, and I take a moment to look at the people gathered. There is ten women here me being the eleventh. Some have passive looks others hold fear. I step further into the room and bow the best I can trying to show the queen respect even though I think she is a bitch.

"I'm sorry your highness." Choking on the words I pray she doesn't see that they slide across my tongue like glass.

"I don't want your excuses; you need to get fitted." Her hand flings to an elderly man who looks exhausted and quite frankly terrified.

I walk over to him, and he nods his head and I stand on the weird display on the ground that is a black glass circle. I am turned towards the group of women who look at me while I study them. They are all dressed in black like I know I will be.

I don't think it is fair that the queen is in white, she will blend in with the snow. Though this queen seems to be unfair anyway.

“Raise your arms Miss.” I raise my arms as the little old man takes the measurements around my chest and stomach. I again start thinking about Silvan as the tailor takes my measurements. How wonderful it would feel to be feel beautiful and desired again.

To have a man touch me like I hung the stars instead of turning my pussy into a chore. “Her outfit will be ready by tomorrow your highness.”

“It better be.” Her snark brings me back to focus. I want to say something to her, but I know it would be worse for me in the end.

“Yes, your highness.” The little man bows and excuses himself while Bianca glares at me.

“Sit down.” She points to the final chair that is a half-moon shape around the black glass display stand. “My males will be in to talk to us about the circuit.”

I see four men walk in, all of them looking regal and strong. The final one looks uncomfortable as he keeps adjusting his glasses, but he is the one who steps up next to Bianca. His black hair is polished to the side and his green eyes shine. I can spot danger immediately and even though he may look the most innocent, I think his intelligence makes him the most dangerous.

“My name is Luke and I helped with the circuit this year and of course that means I will be the one positioning our current queen.” I again have to hold back a response. Again, this feels more rigged for the queen than it does for anyone else to have a fair chance. “All of you will be dropped off in different locations and will be able to take your sword and one additional item. What you decide will be on you.”

The queen steps forward, cutting him off. “You may not bring another weapon larger than your sword.” She lifts her head and looks at all of us making sure that we had heard her.

“That is correct, you don’t want to be carrying a weapon that could weigh you down, this is more for you protection. The queen will also not be allowed to carry one that large

either.” Luke continues. I listen intently while trying to think of what Clay would bring with him.

While he is explaining everything, I make sure to listen to the tone of voice when he describes the locations. If you’re a good listener, then you can catch on to more than what people want you to know. He gets excited in some places, and I know this just by the slightly higher tone he speaks of which makes me think that these places are going to be the ones I want to avoid.

The other places are ones he speaks in almost monotone, and I know that is where I am going. Another mate steps forward. “My name is Raid and I will be allowing questions, but you will all clear the room for these in case someone is smarter and asks something that may help the others.”

Again, that is terrible but at this point I think it is worth it. I know what I am going to ask, and I know what I am going to take if I can. We stand and we leave the room only coming in when called. When it comes to my turn, I hesitantly walk back in.

They are sitting down and when I move to stand in front of them the queen sneers at me, not bothering to be polite. Raid motions with his hand. “Do you have a question?”

“I want to know if I can bring a backpack? And pack that with things.” I don’t miss the quick look of surprise and then admiration in his eyes before he blanks his face again. “Yes, you can. As long as you follow the weapon rule.”

“How did you think of this?” Another mate of the queens leans forward looking intrigued.

“I just knew it would be more beneficial for me.”

“That it would be.” He leans back with a smile on his face, he is the only light colored haired one and with a quick look to the queen I can see that she is not happy that he is looking at me. I focus on him again. “Do you have any other questions?”

“Just to be one hundred percent clear, I want to be able to carry a duffel bag with me filled with items, and as long as no weapons are larger than my sword it will be ok?”

“Absolutely.”

Satisfied I turn to walk away, and I hear the queen start whispering things to her mates. Her tone is one of anger, and it puts a smile on my face. I am not like the others here. I know how to survive without the items I am planning on bringing but they just handed me the crown to the kingdom.

“I am going to kill that bitch first.” Is the last thing I hear before I close the doors and leave.

The first thing I do when I get back to the little cottage is find Peak. Heading right to his lab where I know he will be since I started giving him the formula, I was working on for Aether Infection. He has been putting all his time into making it viable.

I stand in the doorway when I open it looking at him. He is a genius, and he is so damn gorgeous. His mind runs a mile minute and the way he comes to a solution is different from mine but seems too always be harmonious with me.

I watch him for a little loving the way even though he tries to maintain his hair falling in front of his face, it still does. I love that like me he always has a notebook and pencil which is currently tucked behind his ear on him.

He mutters as he looks through the scope. I know the formula is frustrating and I still know we aren't even close to figuring it out, but he wants to make sure his land has it as well.

I walk over to him silently before tapping him on the shoulder. “Peak.” He jumps and spins to face me and his eyes are wild before they settle on me.

“Mira, don't do that, especially not to Wilder.” That is interesting that they are scared so easily. “We had a rough couple of years and some of those scars stayed with us. We don't like being scared.”

“I get that I'm sorry.” Now I feel embarrassed by not announcing myself.

“No, it's really okay. I'm just giving you a warning on Wilder. He really hates people sneaking up on him.”

“I won’t he is supposed to teach me to hunt with a bow and arrow tomorrow.”

“How did the fitting go?”

“It went well, I was able to bring a duffel bag and I actually came here to see if I can have a extra book and pencil so I can write down things from memory, because when I get out there, I will be in the midst of things and won’t want to have to think.”

Peak walks to the desk in the room and pulls out a small notepad and pencil. “You won’t have much time to think anyway. Bianca is going to try to come for you first.”

I knew that but I also had a plan for that. I know she will tire eventually, not all of the women seemed weak and scared. The look on some of their faces was a strength that I know they will need when they get dropped off.

“I know and I have a plan for that.”

“Okay, show me some of the things you are going to write in the pad and then help me with this formula.”

CHAPTER 8

Miranda

“**M**iranda, wake up.” His voice is rough but does things to my body that is still trying to catch up. “Miranda.” Impatience now.

“Go away.” I wave a hand in the air, at least I think I do. Rolling over on my side and trying to block out the sexy voice that just let out the sexiest growl.

“Miranda out of bed.” Again, choosing to ignore the voice I yank the blanket over my head and try even harder to block out the voice because it is starting to wake me up. What I don’t expect is for the blanket to be yanked away from me and my ankles to be grabbed.

My eyes fly open, and I find myself at the end of the bed with a very irritated Wilder standing above me. “What?”

“We are going hunting.” I lean up and look out the window seeing the darkness.

“It’s not even light.”

“And it won’t always be light in the circuit.”

I sigh and give myself a moment to wake and look down and see my bare legs and the shirt that I’m wearing is bunched above my stomach. Wilder also notices at the same time and before embarrassment takes over me, he turns red and stumbles back.

“I uh... I..can..sorry.” He is shaking his head and looking anywhere but at me. It gives me confidence that I have not felt in a long time, and I stand up.

“It’s fine Wilder, let me throw some clothes on. Not like I am going to have privacy in the circuit right.” I raise my eyebrow at him seeing if there is any reaction and he looks flabbergasted. Again, having confidence, I decide to turn my back and toss my shirt off leaving me in underwear.

I hear a gasp and I smile to myself. I go to move forward to the small closet when I feel him at my back. “You’re smart but not smart enough to know not to play with fire.” The growl in his voice is the sexiest thing I have ever heard.

“Maybe I like playing with fire.”

“Until you get burnt.”

Again, being bold I turn and watch his eyes rake across my body. My nipples harden, but I don’t back down. I like the feeling of him watching me. For a beat we are frozen in this moment, I can see the thoughts running through his head but not knowing what decision is going to be the outcome.

It doesn’t take long when he grabs my waist and slams me against his front. His mouth is on mine before I can even catch my breath and he devours me. My mind is jumbled, and my body is heating. Wilder releases me just as quickly. Stepping back he winks at me. “Let’s go Miranda, and next time I will lay you out on the bed and fuck that sweet pussy of yours, until you’re begging me to stop.”

It takes everything in my body for me to move out the door with the thought of Wilder between my legs. I can picture this man with his dark hair eating my pussy until I scream. Trying to change the subject I shake my head and follow him. “How deep into the woods are we going?”

“Deep enough, I want to show you how to track because you will need it going into the circuit.”

“How long is the circuit?”

“It doesn’t end until there is only one standing.”

“Oh.” There is not much to say about that. I am going to have to fight if I want to stay alive. For a moment I was holding out hope that I would be able to find a way out of this, but I am wishing for something that I can’t get out of.

“The first thing about tracking is not about finding the tracks it is about having a clear understanding of the animal that you are tracking.” He is leading me deeper into the woods and a flash of fear hits me. I ran through here running from Fredrick.

“What are we tracking?”

Wilder stops and pauses a moment. “We will be tracking the easiest animals today like bunnies, foxes and deer. Obviously, deer’s will give you the most meat but they are harder to find. You can kill a bear but that would require you going into their cave during hibernation and that can turn deadly.”

“The easier the better.” I file that away trying to retain as much as possible from Wilder.

“The next important thing to understand is not just the animal but the landscape. You will have minimal time to find these animals. They will start to disappear and be harder to track when the snow really comes down and the white bunnies are going to be nearly invisible to find.”

I know a little about deer. “They prefer the deeper parts of the woods; deer thrive when they aren’t fearful of their surroundings. They need plenty of food.”

Wilder smiles at me and again I feel the flutters erupting through me. “Do you know what else is important?”

He crosses his arms waiting for me to answer. “To see if there are bigger predators in the area?”

“That is one thing but get deeper into it. You need to know what else lives in these woods, not just bigger predators but the smaller ones.”

I didn’t think of it like that. I was only focused on how I would get food. “Smaller predators?”

“Yes, and there is smaller prey that are actually dangerous, they blend in and try to remain unseen. You need to know what to do if you come across one.”

We fall silent again and I watch as Wilder walks around, I try and mimic his soft movements, trying to figure out how a man that large is able to walk with such light feet. I hear the movements in the woods, and I try to guess in my head what they may be.

Some of the sounds seem to move quickly while others are slower and make as little noise as possible. I watch Wilder stop and bend down to look at something. “What is it?”

“Come here come look and you tell me what you think.” I walk over to where he is and get close to him while I lower myself to the ground. I remember some lessons from Clay and what he taught me. It is too small to be a deer and from the tiny delicate footprint I know it is a fox.

“Fox.” Wilder’s eyes light up with praise and surprise.

“Correct, now can you tell me where it went?”

This I can tell him; Clay always taught me about land and tracking land which can’t be much harder than tracking animals.

“I know foxes tend to find either the heaviest wooded area or around the stream.”

“Good but in the circuit, you can’t afford guesses. Tell me where he went.” His voice is stern and he patiently waits for me to try and tell him. I look at the tracks and try to determine where the fox would go. Leaning in I see that the tracks are not deep but seem hurried which means he was spooked.

“I think he went towards the thicker woods where the grass would be higher. It looks like he was spooked making his impressions not as deep, he would want to hide from whatever spooked him.”

“Very good.” Wilder is happy with my response, and I feel proud that I can surprise him. “Now can you tell me where he went or close to his hiding place. This will be the difference between eating and starving.”

He steps back allowing me to make the first move. I start following the tracks trying to pull on all my knowledge from Clay. I start following the erratic tracks avoiding the ones that

I can see are either bigger or steadier. This fox was scared, and he was rushing.

I continue until I find what I know is a foxes den. I can tell that it is freshly made and that could mean that the fox is either a mother or can be a single male.

“Don’t think about it, Mira. If you do you will starve. Here.” Wilder moves behind me and places his bow in my hand. “You shoot it Mira no hesitation.”

“What if it’s a mother?”

“What if you starve?” He places my hands on the bow. He pulls it back and positions my arms to pull the bow back and I take a deep breath. “How would you draw it out if you were on your own?”

“I would make some noise.”

“Then do it. You need to not think about it.” I kick the nearest rock and within an instant I see the fox dart from the den, he looks around and his eyes meet mine. I let the arrow fly while my heart breaks. I know the mechanics of a bow; I have studied one but never shot one. The arrow hits the fox in the side and I hear the little screech before it falls over.

I know I needed to do it, I will have to again and Wilder is allowing me time to numb to feeling like this. “I’ve never thought that I would have to kill an animal.”

“I know it’s hard but think about it as surviving.” He moves behind me a places his hands on my shoulders. “That was an amazing shot.”

“Thank you.” I move towards the fox already knowing the next steps and it is to skin and cook it.

“Do you know how to skin something?”

“I have read about it.” Wilder stops and stares at me.

“How?”

“I was engaged to the top battle tactics male in my faction. He would teach me some things as he learned and we would

read together and my father was also very good at battle tactics and a lot of that has to do with surviving outdoors.”

“That is incredible.” He doesn’t pressure me about what I said, and strangely I like it. I don’t want to think about Clay. Wilder grabs the fox before I can reach out myself and grab it. “Clean kill, nicely done.”

He moves through the woods and I follow him, I watch his steps and how he is taking in his surroundings. I know if this place had the same factions as my kingdom, Wilder would be in mine. He sees and hears more than what people probably think he does.

We make our way to a large rock where he places the fox down. “You may not get the chance to find a rock like this to clean your kills so you will have to improvise, but I wanted to see how you do it so I can if needed make corrections.”

I smile and move closer. He doesn’t make the mistake of assuming I do not know what I am doing, only offering to help if he sees something that can be improved. The first thing I do is look for something that can be used to hang the fox on the tree conveniently near the rock he picked.

I tear some of the clothing off my shirt and use it to tie the fox making a mental note to use this later. Wilder smiles and again I see the look of surprise. I know the fox will get stiff if not drained properly. Once an hour passes, I start with the front feet and work my way up.

To start I run my knife from the pad of the paw up to the back of the front leg until I reach the fox’s armpit. I use the sharpened arrow and again make the note to pack a small sharp knife.

After making the incision, I pull back the skin to separate the fur from bones. Cutting only what is necessary, the membrane connecting the fur to the muscles. This process takes a lot of time since the feet have lots of little bones, so patience is the most important part of the process and while I know I will be in danger I need to figure out how to shorten the process.

I will need to cut what I can from the kill and take it. I know that I will have limited time to do these things and I have a feeling the queen will be gunning for me right away.

“Now to cook it, how will you sanitize it and cook it?”

“If there is water, I can use that, if not I will have to use the fire which is technically a way to get the bacteria off.”

“Well start a fire and let’s eat.” He smiles and again the flutter in my stomach makes me want to giggle. I start looking for some sharp pointed rocks that I can use the tip of the arrow to strike against it. I know using them together and at the right speed will create a spark which I then can get some dried grass and use to keep it smoking and going.

Once I start, I become so focused on the task that I forget to pay attention to the surroundings. I look up and Wilder is not there. “Wilder?”

I hear movement and I get up and start looking around for the source of the sound. Wilder is a big man so him not immediately being seen tells me that he knows what he is doing and at some point, perfected being outdoors and protected.

I stop to think about what he said about tracking. I have to know my prey. I don’t know Wilder much but I know what I need to know for this. He is large but soft on his feet. He wouldn’t be able to hide too low unless he went to an underbrush.

Looking around I don’t see anything that he would be able to hide under, so I start to track a route. I end up near a tree and see that the footprints have stopped, smiling I look up. Wilder is in the tree smiling down at me before he drops.

“Very good, but never lose track of your surroundings you could have been killed.” Wilder moves closer to me and my body heats. This moment is intense. He moves like a deadly panther and cages me against the tree with his arms.

I breathe deeply loving the smell of him. He is looking at me intensely. It’s a heartbeat before his lips crash against mine and my body sinks into his. I wasn’t expecting this at all, but I

am more than ready to touch him. His chest is solid and the hair there is so sexy. Wilder is a dangerous man, and I can sense that in his body.

I hike my leg up and wrap it around him pulling him closer. My body is heating with every swipe of his tongue against mine. “Mira, I want to taste you.” I feel how wet his words made me and the thought of this sexy man on his knees in front of me is a thought I can’t seem to get out of my head.

I lower my leg and watch him as he backs away slightly. His hand comes out to yank my head up a little kissing my neck and slowly moves down towards my chest. My head leans against the tree letting this gorgeous man do what he wants with me.

He drags his tongue down the column of my throat, leaving me needy and breathless. I run my hands through his hair loving how long his hair is. I don’t expect the sharp sting of pain as he bites me. I his hand comes out to wrap around my throat and I almost cum on the spot.

I didn’t know I liked it a little rougher but apparently this is a thing and right now this man can do whatever he wants. He doesn’t waste time and yanks my pants down without even bothering to pull them all the way off.

I look down at this massive man on his knees looking at my pussy like it is a gift.

“I’m going to worship this pussy until you scream my name and cum on my tongue.” His hands grab both of my thighs pulling them apart as much as they will go still in the pants and before I have time to feel exposed his mouth is on me. I grab onto the tree to keep me steady as his tongue does things to me that I have never felt before.

His low growl is as he sucks my clit hard into his mouth has me seeing stars. “Wilder, please don’t stop.” I decide to grab his head instead of the tree and listen to him eating me out like I am the best dessert he has ever had.

“You taste as amazing as I imagined.” I feel his finger start to push inside me and I nearly lose my balance with the

sensations flying through me. I move my hips desperately chasing the release I can feel coming, “Good girl Mira.”

His voice sends me over the edge and I cum harder and shout his name. He doesn't stop once he knows I came and keeps swirling his tongue inside me and over my clit licking up all my juices. When my knees finally give out, he catches me and lets me lean against him.

Embarrassment floods me when I look up at him but his smile and the way he licks his lips takes it away. This was the last thing I was expecting when I came out here with him, but I am so happy that it did. Wilder moves closer to me and his hand comes under my hair and wraps around my neck. He pulls me in for a kiss and when my mouth meets his I can taste myself.

I start to run my hand down his stomach wanting to feel his hard cock, and when he doesn't stop me, I reach into his pants finding him rock hard. Gulping I feel how large he is and thick. My mouth waters with the thought of sucking him into my mouth and hearing the pleasure I can bring him.

He watches me as I lower myself to my knees, gripping his thighs I watch him pull himself out for me and I see the cum already leaking a little from him. I lean closer running my tongue on his length, licking the droplets from the head of his cock.

Wilder's head falls back, and he lets out a moan so deep it sends shivers down my spine. I lick my hand and slowly run it up and down his length before leaning in and taking it in my mouth. I start moving my head back and forth, trying not to gag on his cock.

He places his hand behind my head and holds me there while he moves his own hips. “I'm going to cum in your mouth and you're going to be a good girl and swallow it.” Dirty talk is sexy from him, and it is again doing things to my body. “Rub your clit while I cum.”

I start touching myself while I let him abuse my mouth. The more he moans the more wet I become. I start rubbing my own clit, feeling the wetness as I cum and he fills my mouth

with his cum. I don't think about it as I swallow feeling pride that I made this man cum.

He lifts me off the ground and slams his mouth against mine. I melt against him loving the way this feels, knowing he wants me as badly as I want him. A noise in the wood has us pulling away from each other and looking around.

Not seeing anything, Wilder listens and after a few moments he motions me to follow him. We walk until we are back in the path of this house and cottage.

"Someone was out there; I just don't know who." Wilder looks serious but I didn't see anyone.

"How do you know?"

"I could smell them, and I know the movement was to practiced to be an animal which would have been more chaotic. We need to talk to the guys, if that was a queen's spy then she will know about you sooner than we would have liked." I shake my head and gulp silently following him back.

CHAPTER 9

Harland

“Sweenie sit.” I push the puppy back down for the fifth time. The Brinks brought him by for his first check and this puppy has a long way to go before he is trained. He won’t sit and he won’t listen to anyone.

I was able to give him some shots but the last one seems to be the hardest. “Do you need some help?” My head whips up and meets Miranda eyes, as she looks at the puppy.

“Sure.” I move over to make room for her to help calm the puppy. I can’t help but stare at her. Wilder told us what happened in the woods, and it wasn’t to brag but to tell us that he wanted her, that she would be perfect for us.

I was skeptical at first and we don’t even know if she will survive the circuit. I have faith that she will but the possibility that she won’t is there. Miranda starts cooing to the puppy drawing his attention to her. He seems just as mesmerized by her as I am.

Once I stick the puppy, he barks really loud and happens to catch Mirandas hand before she has time to pull away from him. I see the scratches on her hand and once I take Sweenie to the round kennel and let him lay down.

Moving back to Miranda I reach out and grab her hand. The bite broke the skin but it wasn’t too deep. “Here let me help you.” I pour some disinfectant on it and bandage it. I’m not too worried about the bite. Sweenie is a new pup from a healthy litter I delivered a few months back. I do, however, see

the potential to help her. I don't have much to offer when it comes to the circuit, but I can help her with bites.

"Mira, do you know what to do if you get bit by a snake or a deadly spider?" I watch her eyes and can almost see how fast her brain is working to try and find the answer.

"Honestly no." she sighs but I can see the hope that I will tell her.

"The first thing you want to do is sit in a neutral position, you don't want to risk any venom going to your heart and try to stay calm. Do not try and make a tourniquet and do not try and suck the venom out, that happens to be the worst myth of all time." I have seen so many people lose limbs from trying to do that that it seems to be a pretty stupid decision.

"It is really a myth?" She doesn't look to be happy, and it is kind of cute. "Of course, it isn't how stupid am I."

"Not stupid Mira, you just been told that through your life that it become a fact and not a myth."

"Yes, but I am a scientist how good am I really if I believe something like that?"

"Human Mira, it makes you human. The next thing you want to do is find some water. I will give you some anti-bacterial so you can take it with you and wash it and bandage it."

"Thank you."

"Of course."

She walks around the clinic looking through the doors to Peaks lab. Her mind seems incredible, and she is one of the sexiest women I have ever seen in my life. I want her to win this circuit. I want her to be the queen. We haven't known each other for long but I see the potential in her to bring us out of the dark ages.

She paces around a little more stopping to look at the things here in my clinic and exam them. I watch as she picks up a few instruments I use for surgery if needed and when I

normally wouldn't want someone touching my things, her being here feels right.

“Harland, I'm scared of the circuit. I feel there is so much left in my life that I can do, but in an instant it can be over. I know it can be over without the circuit, but I know if I die in the circuit, it will be deadly, and I don't know if I can kill others.”

I move closer to her. “Mira, the circuit brings out the worst in the people. I know that you want to remain not a killer, but you will have to if needed. These women are ruthless, and Bianca is the worst that is why she has remained queen.”

“Is she really that bad?”

Sighing I shake my head yes. “She didn't used to be, but every time the circuit comes around she shows just how really far gone she is.”

“You loved her once didn't you?” Miranda doesn't sound jealous, more curious.

“I thought that we did but there was always something off with her. The way she presented herself and the way she treated others. When it came time for her to pick her men, we jointly turned her down which I think even made her worse.”

“I guess some people cannot handle rejection well.” I watch as she disappears into herself for a moment, and I know without asking that she is thinking of the person who hurt her.

“Mira, for what it's worth I am sorry for what you went through. I know it doesn't change what happened but you're a strong woman and I am so thankful you are here.”

“Thank you.” She smiles at me shyly. “How did you get into taking care of animals?”

No one has ever actually asked that, only the guys have, and they were there when it happened. “Well, I was at the palace one day and while we were drilling and working out with weapons, a new guy was trying to show off for his friends and was throwing a knife at the target, but it went the wrong way and it got a cat.”

“There was a cat in the training field?” Her look is incredulous.

“Yes, she was always there, and she had just had kittens. There used to be a bush where she would go to hide and watch. If he was paying attention, he wouldn’t have even had to throw it that hard.”

“Did the cat die?” Miranda’s tone is showing how interested she is in the story.

“Unfortunately, yes, but I found her kittens and cared for them. It sparked my want to start helping animals. I started slowly and when I left the palace, Peak and I built and started our passions. Our reputation only grew and soon we were the best in this kingdom making a name for ourselves.”

“That is incredible. I know how hard work pays off. I was the best scientist in the faction. Every day I challenged myself to do better. I helped people and we made sure that there was always medicine.” Pride is in her voice and she is so happy with what she did in her land.

“I would love to see where you come from.” I know this is the place Bianca wanted us to go to, but if they have brilliant people like Mira there then it should be worth the trip.

“It is not the best but I don’t think any part of this world is. We are divided and we shouldn’t be. I believe each faction should be demolished and that it we should all live and help each other.”

“I think so too and one day there will be someone who will lead us that way and we will prosper from that person or even persons.”

“I hope you’re right, these royals who claim the throne are all crazy.” Again, she shuts down and moves away from me. “I see a different world.” Again, she pauses. “I haven’t ever said that outloud before.” She makes a loop coming back to me. “What is it about you guys that make me so comfortable and like I can trust you?”

Smiling, I look at her. “She has no idea how much she is already changing with us in such a short amount of time. “I

know what you mean.” I lean before I can think it through, and I lightly touch my lips to hers. Again, I move away from her and back away. “Come back some more and help if you want and whatever I can help you with I will.”

She smiles and nods and I can see the little blush on her cheeks. I walk out letting her think about what I did and hoping that she wants more.



Miranda

HARLAND KISSED ME. WILDER.. WELL HE IS SOMETHING ELSE. These men are invading my mind and my heart quicker than I would expect. They are all so smart and they all draw something out of me that I want, something that I find I am craving.

I didn't think that I would be getting so close to someone so quickly, but with them it's like new jitters but this feeling of everything feeling like it is meant to be. I have been trying practicing with Silvan, hunting with Wilder, working with Peak and helping Harland. I feel like I fit into their lives, and it scares me that I want them so much and may not make it out alive.

A part of me wants to make it so bad but then when I think about killing someone I cringe. I don't want to have to do it but at this point I want to make sure I come back and explore what I find is my new life with these men.

I have been working with Leo on moves and both of us is learning better movement. The sword is like a fluid movement and is becoming easier for me to move with and strike with. The cottage is always a welcome sight when I get done for the day.

Tonight, is like all the others. I say goodbye to Leo, and I head to the cottage. There is nothing better than a good shower and laying down for a bit after training. I grab my things once

inside the cottage and make my way to the guys home. I don't hear anyone, so I head to the bathroom and undress and climb in the shower.

I don't take my time like I usually do, washing myself quickly and getting out. For a moment I listen at the door and when I don't hear anyone instead of getting dressed, I rush out the door wanting to just lock the cottage and lay naked under the covers.

I race across the guy's home and into the cottage out the side door and race inside the cottage and slam right into Peak who starts talking immediately.

"I think I figured it out Mira. I think if we change some things..." He stops speaking and looks down just realizing I am in a towel. "Oh, I am so sorry." He starts to back away while his face is turning red. The lust for him hits me hard and fast.

I stop him. "Peak, don't go." Peak is so damn sexy from his outer appearance to his inner self and his brain is amazing. I take a deep breath and pray he feels the same right now. Letting my towel fall I watch his eyes rake over me.

Peak moves closer to me and when he doesn't say anything after a heartbeat, I start to feel self-conscious, and I whisper. "I'm so sorry, I just thought..."

He puts his hand out stopping me from moving. "Mira, you're perfect." His mouth meets mine and fire ignites all over my body. Leaving me breathless. His arms circle me pulling me closer to him, I feel every hard ridge of his body.

His tongue explores my mouth before he sucks my bottom lip into his mouth making my toes curl. His mouth does things to mine that have never been done before. Peak kisses like he is making love to me already. It steals my breath away.

Peak backs me up until I feel my legs against the bed. He nudges me slightly until I fall onto the bed. He follows me laying on top of me and his lips meet mine again. He moves his hips grinding them against me and I soar with pleasure.

His mouth moves from mine to my neck, kissing the skin there before sucking it into his mouth. His nose trails along my neck heating my whole body while I feel his hands trail up my side grabbing at my hips. He pushes against me again and his cock hits the right spot between my legs making me wet with need.

His fingers grab handfuls of my hair while his lips move to my hardened nipples sucking them into his mouth. I arch harder into him while he moves to my other nipple tasting every part of me. I haven't felt like this before, every part of me feels like I'm playing with an electric fence.

I watch as he moves his lips across my stomach while his arms wrap underneath my legs parting them further, and the softest growl of pleasure comes from him when he dips his head between my legs is the sexiest thing I have ever heard.

I lean up a little and watch his tongue come out and swipe between my folds before sucking my clit into his mouth. Peak licks and sucks my pussy like he did to my mouth, and I feel the orgasm moving through me like a tidal wave. I lay all the way down and close my eyes, the pressure is intense, and the way he keeps my legs open with his arms is so sexy.

“Cum for me Mira.” His words send me over the edge and I cum hard and before I even come down from it, I feel Peak push inside me sending me higher than I thought possible. He slows his pace as I start coming down and even though I urge him to go faster he doesn't. “I want you to feel every inch of me.”

He pulls his cock all the way out of me before sliding back inside me. I feel every inch of his hard cock. Peak hand comes around my throat and applies pressure. Not enough to hurt but enough to feel his hand there. “I want it faster.” I whisper.

“Look me in the eyes Mira while I fuck you.” My eyes meet his again and the smile he gives me while he slams inside me is intoxicating. I feel the orgasm rising again and the need to cum is right on the edge. “Don't cum yet.” He stills inside me for a moment to allow me to calm back down before he

slides inside me again and his hips make a circle motion hitting everything inside me.

The pressure builds again, and I feel his cock expand. His hand wraps in my hair and forces my head back to look right into his eyes. His mouth meets mine again, his tongue meets mine and he controls every aspect of this kiss.

“Cum on this cock.” He whispers in my ear, and I explode while he cums with me. I feel the warmth inside me and sliding out of me. Peak stays inside me and continues to slide in and out of me while I breathe heavily. Peak finally slows and collapses on me, I wrap my legs around his waist and just enjoy the afterglow. He doesn't pull out of me. He stays inside me until he softens, and it slides out on his own.

I have the most amazing feeling after. I feel sated and my body feels deliciously used in the best possible way. Peak moves slightly off of me looking down at me. He kisses me gently while pushing some of the hair off my forehead that stuck to me.

“That was amazing Peak.” I smile at him and as he rolls off me, I snuggle back against him in the bed enjoying the aftermath.

“It was incredible.” Peak whispers and I can hear the sluggishness of his voice and I start to feel tired myself. Closing my eyes, I enjoy his arms around me, and the warmth of his body pressed against mine. After a minute I hear the light snoring come from him and I relax my mind and let myself fall asleep.

After a while of laying in bed and resting with him I wake up with Peak kissing my shoulder. I roll over and face him and he starts to kiss my neck and my body starts to wake up with passion for this man wanting another round.

He kisses me slowly and I spread my legs letting him enter me again. He again continues to move inside me slowly, Every inch of him hits all the right places inside me. Leaving me begging for more. I grab his hips as he thrusts inside me. I want him to be deeper in me. I want so much from him, but I want to feel his cum fill me.

I grind my hips and use his hips to push him deeper. I want to feel stuffed with him. There is an urgent need inside of me that wants me to feel like there is nothing separating us from each other. His breathing is picking up and the more I rock my hips as he thrusts the deeper, he goes and I watch his mouth clench.

“Cum for me Mira.” His words send me over the edge again. I use my heels to push him as deep as he will go inside my body and as I fly over the edge I hear him curse and drive harder and faster until I again feel him cum and feel it leak out of me.

I grab his chin forcing his face to me and slamming my mouth against his so we can ride out this feeling together. I feel a deeper connection to him as he takes over the kiss using his hand to hold me steady. Peak pulls out of me and drags me against him when he rolls to his side, again cuddling me to him, this time I fall asleep first. Feeling feelings, I haven't felt in so long.

CHAPTER 10

Silvan

She is not out here yet and that is strange since normally Miranda makes it outside before I do for training. I checked Peak's lab and Harland's clinic, and she is not there. Harland was and he said he has not seen her or Peak all morning.

Standing in front of her door I start to sweat. I don't know if I want to go in there or not. She is supposed to be working out and strengthening her awareness and sword skills. I could have went through the door that connects to ours but decided to not.

Taking another minute to decide what to do, I think about the circuit. In reality the queen and the potential queens get dropped in a random location and they have to try and survive whatever is thrown in there with the harsh conditions and the lack of sleep and lack of basic human needs.

I hate it and have hated it but Bianca has made sure that this archaic tradition has lived on. She's a literal ice bitch and thrives on watching others in pain. I have every confidence in Mira but being out there in the snow is something that we are going to have to acclimate her to.

I didn't think about the reason to try and get her to prepare for the weather. While the weather is slowly getting colder it is going to be nothing like the final. They will be dropped at the highest, coldest parts of the mountain and forced to kill one another until there is one standing.

The mountains here are dangerous. We don't even know what is all out there and with the threat from the woodland wilds it makes it that more dangerous. We don't know what they are preparing to do or what the other kingdoms surrounding us are doing.

I talked to Mira, and I know her king is too busy with his own war for him to not be a direct threat to us right now. I should send a team to scout before the circuit. The thought makes me cringe since I would have to talk to Bianca again and listen to her drone on and on about the unfairness of my unit rejecting her and how we would have been perfect.

I turn decide it has been long enough and walk back over to Mira's door and raise my hand to knock when the door opens and Peak is standing there, looking ruffled and sleepy. His eyes meet mine and it looks like he is a deer frozen in front of a predator.

"And what are you doing?" I cross my arms and wait. I know what he was doing it is obvious, but I want him to say it. We all want Mira and I knew that eventually one of us would go all the way with her.

Leaning against the door frame and his hair a mess, Peak looks calm and ruffled at the same time. His eyes shine in the sunlight. He smiles slightly. "You know what I was doing soldier, but we are not women, and we don't gossip."

I snort. I hate it when he calls me a soldier. It drives me crazy. While the rest of them were able to almost completely pull away from psycho bitch, I still remained the closest seeing as I was the one training the soldiers.

"We do need to talk about it Peak, you know we do. We all want her and obviously you and Wilder want her."

Crossing his arms after he shuts the door, he mimics my pose. "Are you saying you don't want her? You know you do?"

"Never said I didn't, but we need to talk. We are jumping into this, and she may get killed in a mere month."

“We love her with everything we got and make sure how loved she is and confident we are in her.” Peak say this like we aren’t losing our minds and our hearts to a virtual stranger.

“We don’t know her that well Peak.”

“We know enough, and I know you have feelings for her and in fact I think you had them first. The day you helped in town.”

I hate how well he can read me sometimes and I slam my mouth closed because he is right, and I know that we will talk to her later and ask her if this is something that she wants. I don’t know how well Mira will handle this. From what I gather her faction is different and has different rules.

“Silvan get out of your head. She is here now.” He steps closer to me and places a hand on my shoulder. “It is okay to love again. She is not a mistake.”

“We thought that once.” I whisper.

“And we also learned from that. Is there anything similar within them? They are completely different women.” He smiles at me. “She also should also get some more sleep before you wake her up.”

I nod and smile at him and decided to follow Peak back to the house, letting Mira sleep. I want to come up with a new plan for her anyway and now we need to talk to the guys and see if everyone is on board with offering us as a unit to her.

A spring of hope flies into my chest and it plants itself making me wish for more when we are not even sure that she will have us. Pushing the door to the house open I see Wilder lounging and Harland in the kitchen.

Walking over to Harland I sit in one of the stools and watch him cook. “What are you making?”

Harland smiles while looking up. “Seasoned potatoes, mushrooms, mozzarella cheese topped with eggs over easy.” My stomach growls with hunger and I look at him.

“Please tell me you’re almost done.”

“That I am. Just making the jelly croissants.” Now my stomach rumbles louder. “And you can help by squeezing some orange juice into the cups.”

Harland never followed the normal standards of what to eat and when to eat it. He would make breakfast for dinner and lunch for breakfast. I don't care because he is one of the best cooks ever.

“We need to talk.” Wilder announces and for some reason I have the feeling that he knows what I know. Wilder stands and comes to the counter with me. Peak moves as well as Harland starts working on the final touches to the food.

“Mira.” Is all Harland says and we all look at one another.

Following the silence, I decided to be the one to break it. “She is not like any one we have ever met. She is intelligent, fierce and brave. She would be perfect for us.”

“Does she want us?” Again, Wilder interrupts.

“I think she does.” I state. Having this conversation would seem so different to others but in this land having this conversation is important part of creating the perfect unit.

“Mira...”

“Mira, what?” All of our heads whip to the door as a very relaxed Mira enters the house through the extra door.

“Come sit and we can talk.” Harland motions to the extra chair and places food on the table. I watch her eyes meet ours before she slowly walks in and sits down. We watch her take a bite of food and savor the flavors while we pick the time to speak to her.

She sets her fork down and looks at us. I don't know how to begin this so I look at Peak who is the one who was just intimate with her. “Mira, I know this may be strange to you but we wanted to talk to you about being with...” He looks at us almost lost on his words.

“All of us.” Wilder says. Her eyes get big like saucers and before she can think anything about what we are trying to say I interrupt.

“We like you Mira, there is feelings on our end for you, and I know in your kingdom being with one person is normal but here we all come as a unit and if you are willing to try we would like to try with you.” Silence follows as we wait for her response. She looks at us and I can see the wheels turning in her head.

Mira stands and moves back a little and my heart sinks not knowing what she will say but having the worst feeling. “I’ve never done this before. I have feelings for you all as well. I don’t know how to describe it but I feel this is exactly where I am supposed to be.” My heart soars with her words and I wait until she finishes. “I would like to try but feel that I should be honest about some things first.”

Mira twists her hands as she stares at us. “What do you need to say Mira. Anything you need to tell us we are here to listen to you.” Wilder says.

She nervously tucks some hair behind her ear and the worry that she is about to tell us she is some psycho murdering machine hits me again and I almost laugh at loud to that.

“I was engaged. I was engaged for a very long time. By the time we were adults I think it was more of being with one another since that is what people expected of us. He was the top tactic master, and I was the most brilliant scientist. The love there was not really there. Being here with you all I know that now.”

“Do you still love him?” Peak says.

“I do, but I love the past him. The man he used to be, the relationship we used to have. Not now. We grew apart and before I fled, I knew we were failing.” I see the look of relief on Peaks face as he processes her answer. “Peak is also the second man I have been with, and Wilder is the first person to do what he did to me.” She flushes and takes a peek at Wilder who is surprisingly blushing too and adjusting himself.

“We won’t rush you into anything, but we wanted you to know our feelings.” I say to her.

“I want to try this. I feel right being here.” Mira moves closer to us, and I can see a spark of happiness in her eyes.

Peak rushes over to her and grabs her by the waist and planting a kiss on her mouth. Stepping back from her he looks her in the eyes. “We need to be honest as well.” For a moment I am confused until it hits me like a ton of bricks. “Being with us is not going to be easy and we can try to keep it a secret, and not because we are ashamed but because of Bianca and her jealous streak.”

“What do you mean by that?” Mira questions.

“Meaning she is a jealous bitch and has been ever since we met her. All she wants is to have us back and she knows that we will never say no so she has threatened to kill whoever we end up with.”

Mira laughs a little and some of the tension releases from my body. “Well, she has already done that to me and will probably try to kill me in the circuit so I think we are good, but we can try to keep it under wraps for now. I don’t want to cause her to have more of a motive to hunt me down and kill me as fast as possible.”

As funny as that sounds she is right. Mira will hunt her down quicker. “I agree.” I remark and then silence falls, so I decide to be the one to stand up and walk over to her. I grab her around the waist and give her a moment to understand what I am about to do.

I lean down and my lips meet hers. I don’t intend to deepen it, but she does by wrapping her arms around my shoulders and pulling me closer. It takes all the discipline that I have learned not to pick her up and carry her to my bed. The thought alone has my cock slowly hardening.

She pulls away and smiles at me before turning to the guys. They each have a wide smile on their faces. Mira walks back to her seat and starts eating. We all go back to normal and this is why I think she will be perfect for us.



Mira

SILVAN KISSED ME. I AM WITH THEM, ALL OF THEM, AND I cannot wait to see where this goes. My mother once told me to love every chance I got, and I am going to. I try and manage my emotions and if I feel any remorse over Clay, and when nothing comes, I know I don't.

I knew there was something these men that felt right, and I am going to love them for as long as I can. The circuit worries me. I remember the women there and I know using my brain I could beat most of them and hide well enough that I wouldn't have to kill them.

Bianca is who has me the most worried. From what I understand Bianca has one every circuit since she was crowned and even though the women this turn don't look like the strongest it couldn't have always been like this.

Bianca is fierce even I know that. She is smart and probably knows this land better than anyone else, except maybe Wilder who hunts daily. Trying to beat her is going to be the hardest. I know if I make it to her and not die before then, I will have to kill her. She won't stop until I am dead, and I know that soon she will find out about me being with the guys, this is a small kingdom and eventually someone will see and report to someone else.

"Tomorrow, I want you to go out by yourself and hunt." My mind comes back to Wilder and it takes a moment for me to realize what he said. "When you catch or hunt something then come back."

I realize what he is trying to do but it doesn't make my nerves any less calmer. "Ok."

"You're nervous, aren't you?" Peak says coming up behind me and placing his hands on my shoulder.

“I am but I know this is the right thing. I need to get used to it and I know that I can do what I need to.” I have to have faith in my own words because soon it will be my life on the line, and I need this opportunity to make myself better.

“I know you can handle this, Mira. I have seen you shoot; you just have to believe in yourself.” Wilder says with so much confidence that it makes me more confident and puts a smile on my face.

“Thank you.” I run through a strategy that I think can work. Obviously, I don’t want to be out there by myself for too long but I also want to avoid dangerous situations with dangerous animals. My best bet is to hunt a rabbit, fox or deer. I can also try and catch a fish.

I smile thinking about how proud he would be if I hunted a fox and caught some fish.

“Whatever you bring back we will make for dinner tomorrow.” Harland says with a smile on his face, we can grab some herbs and greens from the greenhouse.

“That sounds yummy.”

“It will be.” Harland laughs as he looks at me. I need to be thinking a little more seriously about what I am going to do in the circuit. I have been practicing with Silvan, but I also need to gather more information about the surrounding area and what other dangers lurk beyond the circuit.

An idea pops into my mind and I look at the guys. “Are there any stories from the circuit that Bianca may have told you about?” I know she would have been the one to tell the stories since she was obviously the only survivor.

Wilder looks surprised for a moment and then smiles at me. “That my dear is an excellent question.” He looks at the others who also have the same look of happiness. “I don’t think anyone has ever even thought to ask that.”

“Nope not that I know of, not even the soldiers I train think to ask what there might be out there.” Silvan says.

Wilder smile broadens more on his face as he starts to talk. “There is some undiscovered caves at the highest peaks of the

mountains. Should you make it to one you would have to clear out any animals that lurk there like snow cats.”

“Snow cats?”

“Yes, they are cute but dangerous.” Wilder smiles as I listen in rapt attention. “Inside the caves are like mazes but we suspect that the Woodland Wilds have been using some of them to get around and we just haven’t been able to prove it.”

Interrupting him I ask a question. “Have you been inside one of those caves?”

“I have, but we only went scouting in the ones further down the mountains, so the higher up caves have been virtually left alone. You will however be headed that way, and most likely pass a few of those caves, going in them for a night could be the right thing to avoid the elements.”

Trying to take all this information in, I think the caves would be a last resort. I don’t know what I would do if I got trapped up in a cave and ended up having to be cornered by Bianca and a wild animal. I feel this keeps getting worse and worse.

Silvan interrupts my thoughts, clearing his throat. “At the end of the mountains and further into the woods that border the other kingdoms there are traps and not just rope traps. There is bear and snow cat traps, there is larger covered holes that should you fall through is immediate death with spikes. You can look for them by watching the ground.”

“That will be near impossible in the snow.” I am starting to panic. The snow is already on its way and now I am finding I will be walking around murder fucking forest to try and survive homicidal queen crazy.

“Yes but they refresh the traps for the snow and the ground will be more disturbed then fresh fallen snow.” Silvan tries to make it sound not as bad as it really is.

I stand and start pacing. I need a plan and fast. I can’t die in those woods, not when I now have them and want to see where this goes. I need to figure out how to hide. I can hunt and hide. An idea pops into my head.

“What if I don’t kill anyone and still win?”

Harland looks at me with a puzzled expression on his face. “Then someone else would have killed them but love you will have to kill at least Bianca.”

“I meant what if I made friends with someone who knew the woods better.”

“Could you trust them? Could you trust that they won’t kill you.” Harland says again making me rethink this plan.

“I guess you have a point.” I have time, but not much. I need to get a better feel for the land.

CHAPTER 11

Mira

The weather is freezing. I adjust my leather- fur coat that Wilder surprised me with before we left the house. It is brown and doesn't blend well with the surroundings, but it works. I didn't expect such a drop in temperatures overnight.

I have my bow and a plan. I want to get some fish while it is still light and then a fox or bunny. I want to come back and surprise the guys with the food I am bringing back. I want to see the look of pride in their eyes when I show them, but most of all I want to show them I am capable of providing to this unit as well.

It is very intimidating being with all these men and how smart they all are. I know they know I am a scientist but something about them makes me want to be better and strive to be the best I can be.

Wilder dropped me off in the middle of the woods, not very far from where they live but I know I will have to venture further into the woods to be able to hunt. Looking around I can see every breath that I take. It is beautiful here in this land and the silence is calming.

I decide to head towards where I know there may be some fish. I want to catch some of them first before I cannot see anymore. Then I want to hunt and if everything goes right I will be back before the sun darkens and I lose the advantage of the light.

Walking along I think of the best way to cover my tracks in the snow. During the circuit I will have to since I don't want

anyone following me. I could always make multiple tracks but that would take time that I know I won't have.

I could use a stick attached to leaves and drag it behind me as long as I step lightly. It would disguise the tracks enough to make it look natural in the snow without wasting too much time. With that settled I walk further in. I start hearing the settle sounds that tell me I am disturbing the smaller creatures living here in these woods still.

I should risk a shot now before the fish but the thought of trying to carry a bloody animal for a long time still is not something I am wanting to do. Meaning I should do it now. I need to be prepared to do this in the circuit so doing something that I find unpleasant is what needs to happen.

I pull an arrow out of my quiver and load my bow. Walking slower I wait to hear the movements seeing if I can track something. I wait until I hear the rustle through what little leaves are left and I aim my bow at the place I heard the movement.

Waiting seems to take forever until I see a squirrel scurry from the spot. Not what I wanted but I won't always get what I expect so I take aim as the squirrel stops. His eyes meet mine the split second I release my arrow. I watch it sail through the air and right into the squirrel's stomach.

I know he is dead the moment the arrow hit him and the smile that I feel spreading across my face is a feeling of accomplishment. Walking to the squirrel I pick him up, leaving the arrow in him. I figure if I kill something again smaller than I will be able to slide the body across the arrow as well.

Continuing my journey to the water I listen very carefully to the sounds and when I finally reach the water I start to try and fish. There is not many left since the temperature dropped and after only catching one fish, that risked it life for food I call defeat in that area and make note that this will not be an option when I am in the circuit.

As the sun is lowering and I only have one fish and one squirrel I decide to go further into the woods. I need to get

something bigger before I try to come back. Walking at a slightly faster pace I move to where it would be further away from what some would consider a main trail.

I know deer are scattered but I am hoping that I can catch one. With visions of catching an eight-point buck in my head as a goal I grow excited which helps fight the ever-decreasing weather. I need to get back soon. Not long after this newfound enthusiasm I have I hear something rustle in the woods.

Moving slowly while I aim, I listen carefully and wait until I hear a soft cry. Lowering the bow I try to listen again to the noise. When the soft plea comes to my ears clearer I move to the location. Cautiously while being quick. I am praying I am not walking into a trap. As I reach the bush where the cry is coming from I see a hand and it covered in blood.

Gasping out loud I kneel down and carefully pull look under and I see a mess of reddish blonde hair.

“Help, me please.” The eyes meet mine and they are as blue as the ocean. I can tell it is a male and when I go to grab his hand to slide him out I notice he has no clothing on. Quickly standing and removing my coat I get it ready to place over him.

“Tell me where you are hurt.” I pull him up against me trying to keep him steady while I try and maintain his privacy. I place the coat over him noticing that his chest has a gash and his arm has one as well. He clings to me and I start dragging him back to the house.

With what feels like forever I finally see the house and I shout loudly. Wilder is the first one out and he sees me and his face pales before he takes in what I have.

“What happened?” The rest of the guys move to me as Wilder reaches me first.

“I don’t know. I was hunting and I heard him. He has some wounds.” I turn my eyes to Peak while Wilder grabs what I now know must be a young teen male.

“I got him. Follow me.” Wilder takes off to the clinic at a fast paced while keeping the kid steady. We all race behind

him. Peak moves ahead to open the door to the clinic and we follow him in and Wilder places him on the table.

“Well Mira it seems your first excursion out was interesting.” Harland smiles at me and moves closer taking the arrow that I still have.

“I am so glad I heard him.” I look at the helpless boy laying on the table while Peak begins to work on him.

“Wilder, he has the mark.” Everyone freezes and I don’t know what is happening. Peak is moving over so Wilder can look and I watch Harland and Silvan move closer examining the spot that Peak cleaned that was recently covered in blood.

“What is going on?” I move over to them waiting for an answer. Silvan is the one who finally looks up and meets my eyes.

“He’s from the Woodland Wilds. Look at the leaf on his chest.” I move closer to the boy, and I look down at the red leaf on his chest.

Peak sighs and removes his gloves. “It’s your call Silvan, what do we do?”

“You can’t let him die.” I look pleadingly at Peak and Silvan.

They look at one another before they look at me. Silvan moves closer to me and sighs. “Fine but he stays locked in the hut and you move to the house. We will give him time to heal and enough time to find out how he got like he did and what he was doing in our woods.”

Smiling at him I lean up and kiss his lips. “Thank you.” I know that is the best answer and best outcome I am going to get. Peak goes back to working on the male and we watch as he works efficiently and fast. When it feels like forever, I notice that the bleeding has stopped.

“He will make it.” Peak wipes the little sweat from his forehead, and steps back. “Now we wait, and I want answers why he ended up here.”

I hear disdain in his voice, and it strikes a chord with me. “Don’t, he was obviously hurt, and we need to give him time to explain.” The guys all meet mine and I try to convey how I feel. “We don’t know what happened and I want him to tell us. He won’t be able to hurt us being this hurt and locked away”

Wilder smiles and it spreads across his face. “I knew your heart was good. For you we will give him that chance.” They all agree with him and a weight lift from my chest.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank us yet Mira. If we don’t like what we hear from him, we will kill him.” I nod again and I understand that logic completely. I know they have this war with the Woodland Wilds so I can’t expect them to easily put it aside for the feelings that I am feeling. I don’t know what his story is but I want to know his. I want to know how a man so young ended up in the woods.

Letting the guys finish I walk outside and sit down and my mind wanders. The everyday bustle of Sphotes was a sort of comfort and it was a routine that I had come to expect. Being here is constant changes and while they are not all bad, it is a little scary.

“How are you feeling?” Harland comes outside and sits down next to me and bumps my shoulder with his.

“I’m fine.” I am but I know he is worried since he is not sure what all I have experienced except from when they found me.

“Are you?” His eyes are questioning as he looks at me, like he is trying to catch emotion from one look.

“I am, I’m more curious than anything. I want to know how someone that young ended up in the woods, as injured as he is.”

“I have a feeling we are about to hear something we aren’t expecting from him.” Harland looks off into the distance before he stands and holds his hand out for me. “Come on inside it’s late and even though he is injured I want to be careful, we don’t know if whoever hurt him is out there.”

I stand. He has a point and in all honesty I have had enough excitement for the day and I just want to relax.

“You have a point.” I follow him inside and once inside I sit down on the couch.

“Want some tea?” Harland looks at me from the kitchen.

“Yes, please.” I watch him work his way around the house. It is not the biggest, but it is homey and spacious and I love being here. I love that from the living room you can see the kitchen and still have a conversation that can be heard. The shower is down on the bottom floor and while I haven’t ventured upstairs yet I know it has their rooms on that floor.

I like the feeling of home when i walk inside the door. I like that being in here immediately calms me. Sphotes became too much and my future with Clay there would have been a large home that we didn’t need. It would have been expected of us though.

Life here while I find it hard in some ways it actually more comforting than being in Sphotes. Every day I was worried about Clay and if he loved me, here I am the one who may die to be queen and with that knowledge I am trying to live my life to the fullest.

Handing me a mug Harland interrupts my thoughts. “Careful it is hot.”

I lean in and smell the tea. It smells incredible. “What is this?”

“Nightcaide fruit tea. I grow the leaves outside, this is the only tea leaves that grow in harsh weather, they have to be looked after constantly. Too much weather and they die, and to little snow and they die.”

“How do you save them?” This is a different conversation, but it helps to keep my mind off of other things.

“With a lot of work.” Harland chuckles but looks at me. “Want to know a secret?”

“Yes.” I whisper and for a moment I feel like a kid again as I lean closer to him.

“I was only able to keep one alive this time. They all died.” Giggling I pull back from him and smile. He, however, moves closer and his lips meet mine. Hesitantly at first until I press mine against his harder. He sighs against me his hands entwine in my hair deepening the kiss.

I lean into him more and Harland does the same. I feel like a teenager here on the couch. I have the butterflies in my stomach as he explores my mouth. I want run my hands through his hair and pull him on top of me as I allow myself to fall back.

He settles himself between my legs and his tongue dives deeper into my mouth and his moan leaves me wanting more. He reaches under my shirt and runs his hands up my sides and touches my nipples through my bra. I wore a light cotton one today.

“You’re so beautiful.” Harland whispers. He looks at me like I am the only person in the world and it is intoxicating. He pulls the light cotton bra aside and dips his head down and swirls his tongue around my peaked nipple. I sigh and let him touch me, my body flashes with need that is becoming harder to ignore.

I push my hips against him and feel how hard he is against me and I reach my hands down his waist and then further when I grab his ass. He chuckles into my ear and nips my ear. I know that any moment that one of the guys can walk in but I don’t stop it. I want him; I need him in this moment.

“I want you.” I whisper against his lips as they meet mine again.

“I’m going to fuck you on this couch, Mira.” He pushes his hips harder against me sparking the lust higher.

“I want you too.” Harland grabs my pants and yanks them down while pulling my shoes off. I raise slightly up enough to throw my shirt and bra off in one motion and reach for his black shirt that does nothing to hide the muscles that he has.

Standing up he keeps his eyes pinned to mine as he lowers his pants and I catch my first glance of Harland naked. He

looks like someone should paint him and memorize him. His cock is already hard and pointing at me. I watch him run his hand along his length and I see the droplets of cum leaking from him already.

My mouth waters with need and I want so badly to taste him. I crook my finger in his direction letting him know I want him closer. Moving slowly, he stands in front of me and because I'm already the perfect height for him, I grab his ass and pull him close to me.

My tongue comes out and swirls around the tip of his cock, tasting the saltiness which, I find sexy and not at all what I was imagining. His head tilts back and his hand runs through my hair as i explore his cock with my tongue. He is thick and I take my time running my tongue and my hand up to the sides of him.

I see his jaw tense with pleasure, his moan of pleasure is like a siren call to me. Deciding to take him fully into my mouth I move my head back and forth on him loving the way he moans as I taste him.

“Mira, I will cum in your mouth if you keep doing that with your tongue.”

I stop for a moment to look up at him and I give him what I hope is my most seductive smile. “I want you too.” I go back to exploring him and I take him deep in my mouth. I want him to cum hard and lose the control I know he has right now.

He uses his hand to move my head a little faster without actually making me gag and I can feel the way he is losing composure. I feel the urgency in him now and I can feel how close he is to coming. Licking my hand, I use that to start to stroke him faster in time with my mouth until he grips my hair hard and releases my mouth.

The taste of him is not bad, and it makes me feel empowered to be able to bring this strong man to his most vulnerable state. I wipe what spilled out onto my chin and before i can fully stand Harland leans down and grabs me, picking me up and laying me on the couch.

Harland mouth finds my clit immediately sucking me into his mouth sending chills and sparks bouncing around my body. His tongue slides through my folds like i am the best thing he has ever tasted.

Tilting my hips closer to his mouth he pushes his fingers inside me pumping them slowly while curling them inward. My body responds, the feeling of wanting to cum is there wanting to burst from my body.

He keeps pumping inside my body until he feels the start of my orgasm rising and he pulls back and yanks me further towards him and I feel him slide inside me. His cock rock hard again. "You're going to cum on this cock love. Let me feel baby girl."

His words shoot right to my pussy along with his slow deep strokes and I shatter around him loving the way that he grabs me close to him as I lose myself in this feeling and he cums again inside me.

Pulling out of me, Harland collapses on top of me, his breathing heavy and his chest sweaty as it pushes against mine.

"That was incredible Mira."

"Yes, yes it was." I grab his chin and turn his face to mine so I can kiss him deeply, loving the way he smiles right before his tongue clashes with mine. I want him to know he is mine. They all are, and I am going to let them each know it.

CHAPTER 12

Wilder

“**W**hat is your name?” I watch Mira look at the boy who finally woke up after two days in the clinic. He looks tired and worn out and slightly confused, but like any man with a pulse seeing Mira in front of them it completely focused his attention on her. “Your name?”

Mira repeats herself and I see the boy focus again, and he runs a hand over his head. “Daire.”

“Nice to meet you, Daire.” The door opens behind me and Silvan walks in and moves next to me and stands there but I nudge him slightly letting him know it is going well so far. Mira asked us to not overwhelm him and to see if she could talk to him first since she felt a woman’s presence would be better to comfort him than a bunch of men questioning him. “My name is Mira. How old are you Daire?”

“Fifteen.” I open my eyes in shock he looks older than that.

“Do you know how you ended up here?” Mira pulls a chair forward and sits in front of him, giving him the impression, they are just talking between the two.

Daire looks at her for a moment before he looks at us and for a split second, I see fear pass through his eyes and the debate on if he should lie.

“Don’t lie kid, I can smell lies.” I growl out. Mira doesn’t flinch, just taps the kids’ knee to bring his attention back to her.

“Can you please tell me?” Mira again asks in the softest voice. He looks at her for a moment assessing her and debating on what he wants to do.

His deep sigh tells me he made his choice. He lowers his eyes and before he looks back at Mira he starts to talk. “I ran because they were going to kill me.”

“What do you mean?” Mira leans in closer, and her full attention is on him now.

“I am not like them, never was. My father is.” He stops and looks at us again with fear in his eyes.

“Don’t worry about them they just want to listen.” Mira again taps him and brings his attention back to her. “Just look at me okay. Right now, you are not in danger.” I don’t miss the way she worded that phrase. Mira knew we could and may kill him if he poses a threat.

“My father is the leader of the Woodland Wilds and was going to wed me off to the daughter from the Covenwin Snowlands. I was not ready for love or marriage, and they are even worse than us. My father was trying to create a treaty with them, and I was the leader’s son, but she was eight. I didn’t want to marry to a child, and I didn’t want to be a part of the horror that is my home.”

“What happened when you said no?”

“They tried to plan the wedding anyway and when I met the bride, she was distraught as well. She did not want to be married so; I helped her escape. Yes, I know she was only eight, but the way of life out there is much harsher than in many parts of the world. She would be fine. As I was escaping, they caught me, and my father was told to do the ceremonial slices of betrayal on me or forfeit his own life and as you can see, he chose himself the selfish bastard.”

The venom in his tone holds no secrets. He is being honest about what is happening. The untrusting part of me is still waiting for the screams to reach the hut while the Woodland Wilds invades our lands, but another part of me is telling me he is telling the truth.

“Were you followed?” Silvan interrupts.

“I don’t know, honestly.” Daire looks at us and his eyes show that he is being as honest as he can. “I ran from the room that they put me in after the maid I had a crush on let me out. I don’t know if they would travel this far, they are not prepared for war.”

Another piece of information given so freely but why would he be so free with this? Could it be he is that angry and doesn’t care or is he trying to weave us into a false sense of safety?

“Why would your father not come for you?” Silvan is the one asking the rough questions, he is the one that Mira is currently trying to not show the dagger eyes out. She wants to stop him from questioning him and I commend her for holding back. She understood the meaning of the war and understands that we need to make sure there is nothing that can harm us.

He sneers in our direction, but I can tell that he is not aiming it at us. “My father.” Daire spits. “Was never a father. He is brutal and unbending. He would sacrifice his children if it meant he got to keep the crown. He probably thinks I bled out and died somewhere and he wouldn’t think I would come here because of being killed.”

He has a point. The father of the leader of the Woodland Wilds had one of Bianca men found him, he would have had a sword through him, but he was blessed when Mira found him. Her heart really is incredible. Hell, I may have even killed him on sight, I would not have thought about it. He was trespassing on our land and to my knowledge his people are our biggest threat.

Daire looks at Mira. “Thank you for everything.” He knows who saved him, the boy is not stupid.

“Don’t thank me. I am glad i found you and that we could help.” She smiles at him giving him a smile.

“Mira, we do need to talk to him, Leo is here and is waiting. Run the drills I taught you please and then do a jog

for two miles and then barefoot in the water bucket for an hour.”

Miranda smiles and stands up. She walks over and hesitantly places a kiss to both of our mouths and when we reciprocated, she relaxes and leaves.



Mira

AFTER THAT WORKOUT THE ICE BUCKETS ALWAYS LOOK amazing, that is until I sink my feet into them. I sit on the stoop outside and remove my jacket and turn to Leo when I again see him doing the same.

“You know Leo, you don’t have to do the ice bucket with me. Silvan never told you that you had to.”

Smiling Leo sits and removes his shoes. “I know but i do everything else and we are in this together, so I want to.” Together we dip our feet into the water and the hiss leaves both our mouths. I understand why Silvan is having me do this. I could end up without shoes and need to be in the snow to survive.

“Do you really think what the kid said was true?” I told Leo what happened when I went out and like the guys he is skeptical. They are blinded by the hate that they hoard for the leader of the Woodland Wilds. I know how that is because we are terrified of king Vespian.

“I saw real fear and real honesty. I think he is angered and torn and heartbroken. He broke when his father didn’t choose him. I move my feet around in the bucket trying not to think about how much time I still have left.

“What do you think they are doing?”

“What is right. For this to work I have to trust them fully.” There cannot be any doubt in relationships because when that happens then it creates mistrust which spirals from there.

“You really fell for them, didn’t you?” Leo chuckles a little and I elbow him. Leo has his hair pulled back and I can see the stubble on his chin. He has become one of my best friends and I am so happy that I have this with them.

“I did, and one day you will feel this.”

“Nah not me. I can’t feel like this. Not for anyone.” He shakes his head rigorously.

“Never say never.” I have a feeling that Leo will find someone. There is someone out there for everyone.

“I don’t know if I could trust myself to love someone like that. Someone so much that we have a soul tie.” Leo sounds so sure, and it dawns on me that there is still so much that we need to learn about one another.

“Why do you say that?” Interest peaks and I find myself forgetting the ice finally melting.

“Because I live with my parents. I feel there are volatile to one another. I think they stopped loving each other after they had the last of their children. I feel my father is getting worse as each day passes and my mother is trying to maintain an image that everyone can see through.”

That was not what I was expecting him to say and the fact that he did has me thinking about the short time I lived in the Faith home.

“I’m sorry that you feel like that.” My parents are not the most PDA friendly people, but they love each other, and it shows in their eyes. Love is something that should be in someone’s life even if it is fleeting.

“No need to be. If it happens, then it does but I won’t chase love ever.” Sitting silently now, both of us thinking of other things the time passes and I pull my feet from the bucket and let them thaw a little before trying to stand.

Once I find my footing both Leo and I head into the house and go sit and get warmer. Harland is of course cooking, and I couldn’t be happier.

“What are you making Harland?” The smells that always come from the kitchen when he is in there is something that can never be replaced.

Looking up at me he smiles warmly. His whole face lights up with a smile. “Soup with squirrel.” My immediate response is to not like the food but then I realize he is using the squirrel that I hunted, and pride flows through me.

“You used my squirrel?”

“Yup” Harland smiles again motioning for me to come over to where he is. “Smell.” I lean forward and once close enough I can smell the meat and spices mingling. It smells heavenly.

“It smells incredible.”

“Thank you.” I go back to sit next to Leo while I watch Harland in the kitchen. Once the door opens again, I see the rest of the guys coming into the house. What surprises me is that Daire is here as well.

Peak comes over to talk to me, I know he can see the surprise in my face. “We came to the conclusion that Daire is telling the truth. We are going to find a home for him or let him have the hut until he can live on his own, which is only a few years off. “

“What made you finally trust him?”

Peak doesn't even look phased as he smiles big. “He was unwavering. Every question we asked, and, in every form, he answered the same. He is not trying to deceive us; he is just a lost soul.”

“I could see that in him too.”

“I need to get home.” Leo stands and walks past me and pats my head. I watch him banter with the guys for a moment before he heads to the door. “By the way Mira. The town is talking about the new mysterious gorgeous outsider who ended up in the circuit. They want to know you; I'm saying this because now Bianca can easily find out what is happening here.”

We told Leo the history with Bianca and the guy's last week. We wanted to see if he could keep an eye out as to what the gossip in the town is. The guys are worried about the queen, and they are hoping that she won't find out that they chose me; they don't want to give her more reason to kill me before the circuit.

“That means we will have to be careful with how we are outside. I know that the queen must not have found out that she was living here yet since Leo is here often enough that it could look like he brings her.” Wilder sits down as well leaning in closer to me.

I want to sniff him and kiss him so badly with him being this close to me. This is so new to me again that i don't know how we all move together so fight the urge and i just enjoy his closeness.

“You can kiss me you know?” I turn my head and find Wilder much closer to me with a smile covering his face.

“Oh, I can huh?” Smirking I lean into him and kiss him on the lips before pulling back and focusing on Leo.”

“I just want to warn you. Bianca seems like one of those women who need the spotlight to remain on them especially with the circuit being so close and it is her that is usually the center of attention this time of year. “Leo waves and leaves on that warning.”

CHAPTER 13

Mira

This is the last week before I begin the circuit, and the nerves are killing me. Silvan has been working me and sometimes even Leo to the point of exhaustion where we can't feel our legs or arms.

I can't blame him. He wants me to live, and I want to live. I dove into this with my whole heart, and I want to see where it goes with them.

"This is our last practice before the circuit." I glance up at Silvan who entered the small hut after me. I don't normally come in here anymore but this was the easiest place to go to once I finished and Daire is not here right now.

I look at him and he is using his shirt to wipe away the sweat from his brow. His skin littered with marks from his time as a guard and from his time training. His body is chiseled from the training he does every day.

He catches me staring at him, and I feel the blush heating my cheeks. What I don't expect is for him to walk over and get close to me to where I am against the wall.

"You will win this Mira, you have too." His forehead meets mine and for a moment he closes his eyes and I close mine listening to his breathing before he kisses my forehead. His mouth touches mine and my body melts.

I let him guide the kiss, which is slow and deep as his hands explore me. He lifts my shirt above my head and unsnaps the bra I had on. His hands entwine in my hair, and he

pulls us chest to chest while his hand grasps my hair tilting my head back.

His mouth moves to my neck and sucks part of my skin into his mouth shooting shivers up my spine. Silvan is not moving fast with anything, he is taking his time to enjoy me, and it makes my body melt against his.

With our bodies pressed so close together I can feel his heartbeat quicker with every kiss and feel my own chest rising and falling as he continues to kiss me.

Silvan lowers his hands to unbutton the leather training pants I wore today and his hands slide inside them and his intake of breath makes me smile. I didn't wear underwear with these today.

“Bare, I like it.” He whispers against my mouth. I watch this man lower himself to his knees and mine almost give out to the sight of him. Silvan looks at me like I am a feast. His hands pull my shoes off before my pants leaving me completely bare to his eyes. Silvan leans in his tongue sliding through my folds. “Keep your hands flat against the wall.”

Breathing heavier, I close my eyes and flatten my hands against the wall not wanting him to stop. His tongue is like magic. Caressing every inch of me inside and out. His hands squeeze my hips and ass as he keeps me from squirming as he works me over.

I feel hip nipping me as he takes pleasure between my legs with his mouth. The orgasm comes hard and is a slow volcano that feels like it forces its way up before releasing the pressure that built inside me.

“Oh Silvan, that was incredible.” My nipples are hard as mountain peaks and before I even come down from the high Silvan has his pants off and he drags me to the bed sitting me on top of him.

“Take your pleasure.” I slide down on his large thick cock and before I start moving, he grabs my hips looking me in the eye. “Slowly love, I want to feel it all.” I nod not being able to really talk with the pleasure of him filling me.

His hands slide down my chest, pulling at a nipple and moving it between his fingers, as I slowly move my hips back and forth on him. Silvan keeps me in a slow pace, and it is the most incredible feeling.

I rock back and forth on him making sure I hit my clit each time loving the way his eyes seer into mine. He looks at me with such intensity that it is piercing my very soul and setting fire to my heart.

I continue the slow pace, getting brave and exploring him myself. I run my hands down his stomach and over his arms. Touching his scars and feeling the ridges underneath my fingertips. This man has been through hell and his body shows it.

Flipping me over he smirks. "My turn love." Wrapping my arms around his shoulder he flips me over onto my back, never pulling out of me. I expect him to go faster but he drags his cock out of me before pushing back inside me slowly. "I like slow. I feel everything."

I let him make my body sing with every stroke of him inside me. His neck is above my mouth, and I lean up and bite him. The urge to mark him is strong and it takes everything inside me not to cum on his cock. I want this to last.

I am clinging onto him, and he looks down at me. "Look me in the eyes, Mira. I want to see you as you cum on this cock." I stare at him, and Silvan tilts my hips slightly up and the feelings I am feeling from him being inside me.

Silvan wraps his arms around me pulling us closer together and the way he works himself I am feeling desperate to cum. "Please Silvan." I don't know what I'm begging for he hasn't stopped but the intensity of the orgasm promised is driving me wild.

He slows even more and I again bite down on his shoulder feeling the saltiness of his skin from the sweat that accumulated while we were making love. I shatter around him and at the same time I feel his cum fill me. Silvan's mouth slams against mine as we shatter around each other, and the intensity is incredible.

He doesn't pull out of me instead he pushes himself inside me further grinding against my clit sending sparks through me. I wrap a leg around him, keeping him still. He lifts on his forearms to look down at me.

"Mira, I love you." His eyes never leave mine as he says this. My heart expands and the air leaves my lungs.

"I love you too." I truly do and even though this is the first time it is being said out loud, the way they make love to me and their actions speak volumes. They all show me every day how much I mean to them and in return I try to show them the same. "Everything you have done for me and giving me time to heal and the chance to love again is something that I can never repay."

"Mira, you also gave us our heart back. It scared each of us to fall and you made it easy." He pulls himself out of me and I feel his cum leaking out of me. "Come on, let's get cleaned up." Silvan stands and reaches out his hand to me and waits for me to grasp it and stand with him.



Silvan

LYING IN BED WITH MIRA ON MY SHOULDER IS INCREDIBLE. The way her hair falls over her shoulder and onto mine is something that I didn't realize I would enjoy so much. The way we made love is going to be forever engrained into my head.

I worry about her. She is going to the circuit at the end of the week and what we have I don't want to lose. I know Mira is strong, every day I see her, but Bianca hasn't won the last few circuits with sheer luck.

Harland was in town, and he was able to overhear that the townspeople seen us all together and that the rumors have officially started. With that in mind i slip from the bed and kiss

her forehead making sure I cover her all the way and I go in search of the guys.

Daire is the first one i see. To me it is still weird that we have him here. He still makes me rethink everything and the feeling of wanting to end his life is still there on the edges.

“Hello.” He nods his head in my direction not making eye contact for too long and that is when i soften. He really has been through shit and the fear is in his eyes, but he is trusting us not to kill him in his sleep.

“Hello Daire. How about today we start to train you?” He is in desperate need of some training, and I want to see how much he knows and by gaging him maybe we can see how the others are trained.

“I would like that. I miss working out the most.” He stands and walks towards the door to the hut. I watch him go with more curiosity as to what he knows. Going to Wilders door I knock lightly, waiting for him to open the door.

When he does, I motion for him to follow me where I know Harland and Peak are. We go to the clinic and I was correct. The two of them are in there and the excitement on their faces tells me they accomplished something that Peak or Harland was stuck on. Sometimes it takes the two of them to figure something out like that.

“What did you two figure out?” I stand in front of them, and their eyes light up when they look at Wilder and I.

“Mira actually figured it out. Her formula she was working on for the Aether Infection only needed a little change and she cured it, and the best part is that we can replicate it.”

“That means we have a viable vaccine.” I know Mira is going to be thrilled to know this, she was so worried about everything.

“Yes, but it will take some time so by the time she comes back from the circuit we can distribute it.” Peak catches what he is saying and pauses but doesn’t voice what he is thinking.

“That is what I came to talk about.” I wait for Harland to look at me before continuing. “We should spend as much time

with her as possible. Harland said that he heard the townspeople talking which means it is only a matter of time now.”

“Are you done with training her now?” Wilder asks.

“I am. There is nothing else we need to train her on besides Bianca, which is just her weak spots.” I know last circuit someone got a huge gash on her and that it took too long for her to grab the crown and come back where it did irreparable damage to her side.

“Let’s make this week incredible for her.” Harland says. “I want to make sure that she knows how much this means to us and how much she means to us.”

Nodding my head, I whisper agreed and watch as Peak and Harland go back to work on whatever they are were doing. This week is going to go by too fast and soon i know that Mira will have to go to the palace the day of the circuit to make sure that she is fitted, and they have a special dinner for the contestants. Almost like a last meal.

Wilder said that the snow this year will be the worse we have had in a while, and that worries me knowing that the Woodland Wilds are trying to create a treaty with an unknown force. We know nothing of the Covenwin Snowlands and the type of people.

Daire said they are much worse than his people which are pretty bad, Daire being the exception. Would they try to infiltrate us during this time? We have had spies before, and we always do the circuit in the snowy weather.

“I talked to Daire and from the information that he gave that unless they made a treaty with another way, the Woodland Wilds are not prepared for war. The warriors there are undertrained, and they lack the weapons to do so.” Wilder has always been on top of things when it involves his woods.

“Have you taught Mira what to look out for when it comes to the traps laid out throughout the mountains?” I could slap myself for not thinking about it until now.

“Of course.” Wilder states. He is sure of himself, which makes me feel better. “I also had Daire describe to her what their traps would look like just in case. She has an idea of both. I also spoke to her on some women in the circuit and what they are like. Really, Bianca will be her worst enemy.”

I thought about that as well. The other women are from pampered homes, and they train. Some of them have little to no training and being taken out will be easy. Bianca or Mira will have no problem with most of them. The only other one that is worth the trouble will be the one who came from the farm.

She will be hard. I know her brothers are in the royal guard, and they are good men so they will have trained her. I can't think of anything else that would help her. We have done everything that we can think of to make sure she is prepared, and we already have her bag packed. Making it light enough to run with gave her everything she will need there.

“Have you mentioned the new development with her land?” Peak whispers.

“No, not yet.” We just found out that New Kings Land has started to move again to the opposing king's land. We only found out because one of our guards ended up in what they call Vulture Bay which is at an edge. The land is poor and there was few people there.

We want to expand our lands and send a small party to find more land that we can safely claim. This land was so poor that it was almost immediately dismissed as not usable. Bianca had me called to the palace since I used to be the head of missions and I told her what I knew of the land making sure i didnt give her any new information that I learned from Mira so as not raise questions.

“We need to tell her.” Harland states.

“We will but not until after. I don't want her worrying about what will happen to her people when she will already be fighting for her life.”

“Tell me what?” Again, Mira has the perfect timing.

Sighing, I look at her. “Tell you about your land Mira. They are advancing again to the opposing king.” She held up her hand halting what I was saying.

“That means Clay will be headed there soon.” Her face is blank and doesn’t betray what she is feeling.

“How do you know?” Wilder asks her.

“They ranked him top battle tactics male in my faction and that won’t change. I know his friends will be chosen too.” She puts her hand on her face for a moment and I can see the wheels turning in her head. “Garrett from Diarmaird West, Orion from Fire Valley and Archer from Golden Isle.”

There is so much I want to ask her about her lands. I know Fire Valley are fire users and i have never seen one up close. I thought that they were actually almost extinct and that was not the case, there is an entire, as Mira calls it, faction of these people and they compete to be the best to go to this school.

“You know these men?” Wilder again speaks what we all want to know.

“Yes, they grew up with Clay and they would take turns coming to our faction and him to theirs. The only ones they never socialize with is Vulture Bay males.”

“What do the women do since they are not chosen for the school?” This is what i want to know the most.

“Hmm, well in Sphotes we are scientists. Fire Valley is full of jewelers and crafters of all sorts of things, Vulture Bay women are farmers and run the lands, Golden Isle is full of doctors i think and Diarmaird West is women who take care of the homes but have many jobs. Now i am not sure how much of this is true, but this is what i have heard.”

That is incredible, and one day I want to see it. “Come one Mira, let’s spend the day together.” I pull her out with me hearing the guys follow. I don’t want to keep talking about this when we are running out of time.

CHAPTER 14

Mira

The day went incredibly fast with the guys. We spent the day eating and laughing and just spending time. It was everything I could have asked for, but it also feels like an unsure goodbye. They are trying to cram this in to the final days before the circuit.

I am no longer nervous just resigned that i will either die and not get to see where this budding feelings I feel in my heart will I win and become queen to a land that i am native too?

Stepping out of the shower, I listen for a moment. I hear the guys down the hall and quickly make my way to Wilders room. We all our sleeping in his bed tonight. He has the largest bed and when I asked if we could spend the last few days together in bed, they all happily agreed.

Rushing to the room I open it and softly click it behind me. I am nervous about tonight. I want to make sure I smell nice and that i am prepared in case something does happen. Dropping my towel I turn towards the bed and run right into a solid male chest.

I gulp looking up to see Wilder standing there. With nothing but a towel on himself. He looks incredible. The hair on his chest that leads to a happy trail down to his vcut is the sexiest thing.

“Oh, Mira you are stunning.”

“I’m sorry.” I am trying not to stare at him but my brain is short circuiting with him standing there and my eyes develop a

mind of their own. His hair is hanging loosely tonight, the curls moving past his shoulders and the sweat from outdoors shines on his solid muscled chest.

“I went out to cut some firewood for tonight.” I barely hear him and my eyes continue their sinful travel and as I land on what the towel is covering the blush heats my cheeks as I watch him harden. “Princess if you keep looking at me like that, I’m going to toss you on the bed and fuck you.” His sentence ends on a growl sending sparks right to my pussy making me wet.

“What if that’s exactly what I want?” I stare right into his eyes not wavering. The smile that crosses his face is enough to make my knees weak with anticipation. He backs me all the way against the door and touches my hair bringing our mouths close together and taking kissing me so slowly and so deep it feels like making love to my mouth.

He pulls back to look me in the eye and his are so brown that and have a hint of gold that they feel like they are looking into my soul. I say nothing to him and just allow him to stare at me. He dips his head back down and slides his tongue along the column of my throat before sucking the skin inside his mouth branding me and a feral part of me wants him to leave his mark. I want him to make me his in every way. Like branding.

I let my head fall back and moan loudly I want him to know, and he chuckles against my neck. “You like this baby girl?”

“Yes.” I hiss out as he does it again much harder before lowering his mouth further and sucking my nipple into his mouth and doing the same to my other one. Wilder picks me up and places me on the side of his bed and stands tall and stares at me. “I’m going to mark you; you will always have me on your soul.”

I get wetter with his words and decide to give him something he won’t forget. I grab him taking his erect cock into my mouth. His head falls back as he grips my hair and slowly rocks his hips back and forth. His deep moan shoots

shivers down my spine and I grab his ass taking him as deep as I can without choking.

Wilder lets me for a little before I find myself on my back. He moves me up the bed and his hands spread my legs as he bends down and licks between my folds shooting pleasure through me. He climbs on top of me and I look down watching him line his cock up with my entrance and slowly slide himself inside me. Filling me and hitting all the right spots.

Wilder puts some of his weight on me letting me adjust before pulling out and slamming inside of me hard. He picks up his pace never not looking at me in the eyes before he flips me over and I find myself on my hands and knees with my ass in the air.

I feel the sharp sting of his hand on my ass before he rubs the head of his cock against me. Teasing me with pleasure that he is withholding. I roll my ass on him teasing him right back. Wilder puts the tip inside me before pulling out and rubbing himself against me again.

When he finally pushes inside me again, I almost cum on the spot but I am able to hold it at bay. Reaching behind me I pull his hand up and put it on my head which forces him forward and deeper inside me. He moves slowly and uses his other hand to rub my clit which sends me over the edge.

I moan out his name and as I sink lower into his mattress; I hear his faster breathing and he whispers. "Mira, I'm going to cum inside you." I feel his push my legs wider getting deeper inside me, and I feel him cum hard inside me and he doesn't pull out, just pushes himself deeper inside me.

The world spins from pleasure and I collapse against the bed when I hear the door open, but I am too sleepy to worry about what he is doing. Moments later I feel a warm rag against me before I am picked up and moved to a pillow and covered. Closing my eyes, I roll over and sleep peacefully.



THE STARS ARE IN THE SKY WHEN I WAKE UP WARMER THAN I feel I should be since I fell asleep nude. Sitting up slowly I see the guys all in bed and I realize I am not naked. One of them threw a shirt on me. Looking at them my body heats again and it doesn't take long for me to touch Peaks chest, trailing my hands down his body, his eyes pop open and he smiles before leaning up and kissing me.

I know all the guys are in bed and right now i want all of them. I want them all. Silvan is on my other side so while Peak is rubbing me, I use my hand and rub down his chest waking him up as well. Silvan sees what is going on and leans up and kisses my shoulders from behind while touching my now hardened nipples. The sensation that the two of them bring me is incredible.

I reach out and run my hand down Harland waking him up and move his hand to my body. I want them all, I want this. I crave them like a drowning person craves air. He moves to the side of me touching Wilder also waking him up. Now I have all of their attention.

They kiss me all over and the feeling of four lips on me and crushed between them is so intense it almost makes me cum on the spot. I am gently laid down on the bed and Wilder is the one I see who pulls my thighs apart before he dips his head down and sucks my clit into his mouth.

Harland and Peak both suck my nipples into their mouth and my eyes meet Silvan's who is stroking himself behind my head. I open my mouth in invitation and he lowers his cock to where I can suck him into my mouth.

Using my hands I reach on either side of me and stroke both Peak and Harland until I feel them hard. Wilder tightens his hold on my thighs diving his tongue as deep inside me as he can go.

“Warm her up Wilder.” I catch Silvan deep voice as he pulls his cock out of my mouth and backs away a little while Peak and Harland lean back. I am leaving this all to them and trusting them to guide me. What I don’t expect is for Wilder to tilt my hips up and use his mouth to explore my ass. It is an incredible, intense feeling and Silvan leans forward and rubs my clit. “Relax love, this will be perfect.”

Wilder starts to rub my hole and get me used to the feeling of something being there. He pushes his thumb inside me after a moment and my body bows up and Peak slams his mouth to mine. I calm down from the intrusion when I feel how incredible it is.

The feelings of pleasure override the feeling of shyness as the guys take turns touching and kissing me while Wilder works me into a frenzy with his mouth.

“Silvan.” I open my eyes to see Wilder and Silvan pass a look between them before looking at me. I know what it means they want to switch positions and from what I have been feeling I’m not as nervous as I was.

“Trust us love.” Peak whispers sitting me up.

“I do.” I allow Silvan to slide under me, and he grabs my hips positioning me on top of him. He slowly pushes his way inside me, using his hips to create a slow pace. Peak leans in and slams his mouth on mine, and kisses me deeply.

“Lean forward, Mira.” Silvan says with a deep voice as he struggles not to move faster. Harland moves behind me and I feel him at my other entrance. I lean down on Silvan as far as possible without his cock coming out of me and Harland uses his thumb to again create the very intense spark of pleasure.

Wilder and Peak move to either side of me and Wilder runs his hands through my hair while Peak runs his hands along my side creating again the feeling of needing to cum.

Harland slowly pushes inside of me and when he is fully seated in me after a few minutes, I feel stuffed and wet with the pleasure I am feeling.

Together they set a pace that shoots sparks through me. I turn my head pulling Wilder closer to me and take his cock into my mouth.

“Fuck baby. That mouth of yours.” Wilder grits out and uses his hand to clench part of my hair into his hand. Not wanting Peak to be left out I use my only free hand to reach out to him and stroke his cock, getting a sense of satisfaction when I hear him hiss out his pleasure.

The low moans and the hisses of pleasure that these men are getting from me sends me over the edge as I cum hard. I hear Silvan curse out before he cums followed by Harland. I don't get a moment before Wilder lifts me up and slams inside me.

He wraps his arms around me slamming inside of me hard and slow. He makes sure that with every thrust he hits my clit. Leaning forward sucking on my neck I feel the mark bruising and it makes me smile knowing that I will have a mark from him come later today.

“Cum for me again, baby.” He whispers as I lean back giving him access to my nipples which he takes the hint and sucks into his mouth. Using my hips to grind on him while he slams into me, I feel the jolts of pleasure again and let it fill me until I cum and squeeze him making him cum inside me.

“My turn love.” Peak whispers pushing me forward. My body is weak but I am not stopping until all my men have filled me with their cum. Peak has me on my knees again and pushes inside me and uses one hand to stick a finger in my ass while his other hand reaches around and plays with my clit.

The urge to cum again presses me and takes my breath away until I feel it so intensely that it is almost impossible to stay still. I lower myself and spread wider for him allowing Peak to control the pleasure as I try to keep awake and not pass out from the feelings.

Shouting I yell out that I am going to cum again. I feel him slow his pace and he pulls his finger out of me and wraps his arm around my shoulders, pulling me back to his chest and his

hand slides up my neck keeping my head resting on his shoulder.

Peak keeps me upright and uses his hand to rub my clit while he continues to fuck me in this position and when I finally cum he follows behind me. I collapse forward and I hear little after I do. I get into the middle of the bed more before my eyes close. I do, however, feel the kisses to my shoulders and back before I am completely passed out.

The knock on the door before it is thrown open is how i wake up only getting a moment to see the four guys jump from the bed naked but in battle mode.

“Grab them.” Is shouted and turning my head I see the distinctive red of the royal guard before I am grabbed, and the guys are held down and cuffed and dragged from the hut.

I look around and I don't see Daire, so I know that he either ran or is hiding. Fucking Bianca is the one behind this and we expected some sort of reaction, but we didn't think that she would do this. Not this public and not take us from the home in such a fashion.

They took the guys as I stare at the guards. One moves forward pushing an envelope into my hand and the royal seal is on it. Again it is from Bianca, and it pisses me off.

“Be there tonight or die before you even get a chance.” The guard says so stiffly that I wonder if he has any feelings at all. Realizing I am not naked, which one of the guys dressed me after I passed out. I try to follow them out when I am shoved so hard that I fall onto my ass.

“Don't fucking touch her again or I will kill you John. You know we are going willingly but that will change.” Silvan shouts and my eyes meet his. I can see the assurance in his eyes and the anger that is not directed at me but at this situation.

“Mira, just listen to them. We don't want this to get worse, and love win, just win.” Harland shouts as they start to drag them again.

“Wait, they are naked.” I try again.

“The queen doesn’t care.” One guard shouts with laughter in his voice.

I can’t do anything now but watch as they are taken from me. Now the anger for this queen fills me. She couldn’t just leave my men alone. The selfish bitch.

CHAPTER 15

Mira

This bitch has nerve. Making me come here the same morning she dragged me away from my men. She had her royal fucking guards snatch me from the bed and arrest all them naked in front of me and then had them give me a summons to be at the palace for a night of celebration before tomorrow.

I fix the dress; it is hideous and gaudy and really makes it uncomfortable to walk. The little crown I was given is another piece of shit that I have to wear. It tangles in my hair and makes me want to snatch the little piece of shit and throw it against the wall.

I looked for Daire after the guards left and I didn't see him. Part of me is concerned but the other part is more pissed about what happened. Three women come into the room and by the looks of them they are here to do something ridiculous.

One of them steps forward. A frumpy looking woman who I can tell is in charge. Standing straighter I look at her not wanting to show her any weakness.

“Ma’am we are here to properly prepare you for dinner.”

“I am already dressed.” I point to the crown and motion to the gown. I watch her eyes travel over me and it is like what you would imagine nails dragging down a body.

“Clearly but you are not prepared.” She steps forward and points to a little stool in front of a mirror. “Please sit so I can fix you. You will also stay here with the rest of the contestants. This room will be where you are escorted to the circle.”

“Circle?”

Huffing and yanking on some of my hair pulling the curls into a delicate twist in the back she glares at me in the mirror. “It is what you walk through to get to the starting point. How else did you think you would get there?”

I thought that I would be walking, but I will not be telling her that. I knew they did something like that at Knightwood.

“There is a magic user here?” I have met no one besides Orion when he would visit Clay.

“Of course.” The maid turns to the other two awkwardly standing there with fear in their eyes. “Looks like she won’t be a threat.” She finishes my hair and even with how pretty it is I don’t say anything to her. The other women rush forward doing my face in blacks and golds with a touch of sky blue. They tint my lips with a black and sky-blue color making them stand but it also makes me feel badass.

“Thank you, ladies.” I look at the women as i place the crown on my head turning to the older woman. “When I win this, I will have you removed for the mouth of yours and the apparent fear you give off to the others.” I turn towards the door with satisfaction that she is standing there with her mouth hanging open. She didn’t expect that.

I see the guard outside of my room who stands tall and moves me in place slightly in front of him. He is my escort to this pathetic dinner and ball. We walk silently and I have time to admire the halls full of photos of the queen’s past and of course the current queen. She loves red seeing as the carpets are a blood red. The walls are a gold and white silver color.

Getting to the hall I see each of the other contestants there. Each with a man beside them. The guard walks me to a vacant seat and moves away from me. I see that there is also a vacant chair next to me. Bianca walks in with her four men and smiles at everyone.

She would be beautiful if it wasn’t for the soulless vacant look behind her eyes. “Ah, Miranda. My husbands have convinced me to allow you the same courtesy that I am giving

to the others. Which of those men would you like to have seated by your side?"

I am thrown off by that but think quickly. "Silvan." Silvan knows most about this place and what is about to happen so if I get a moment alone, I will be able to talk to him. Bianca scowls but waves her hand and a guard leaves. After what feels like forever the guard reappears and brings Silvan with him. They dressed him in a suit and tie which makes me think they were already dressed.

Bianca motions us all to sit and she begins to chat with her husband, so I take the chance to whisper to Silvan when he sits next to me, I lean over and whisper. "That as quick. Are you okay?"

He smiles at me and does not care that the queen is glaring at us. "We are okay, but they forced us all into these suits to see who you would pick." Not wanting to push the queen's anger I watch her and wait to see what she is going to do. Silvan reaches under the table and squeezes my leg reassuringly.

I look at him and smile; the nerves calm down. The queen clears her throat, and it takes everything in me not to try and punch her in her throat when I think about what she did to my guys. "You are here first because I wanted us to get to know one another before tomorrow since we won't be able to really get that chance. I like to know who I am going to kill before I do." Her eyes meet mine and the look is so sinister that if her eyes could kill, I would be dead already. "After this tiny meal we will head to the palace dining hall and eat with the guests and mingle." Turning to Silvan, she smiles, and it turns my stomach. "You will save a dance with me tonight, Silvan."

"Yes, your highness." He bows his head, and I don't miss the tightening of his jaw or the way he takes his time to lift his head clearing the look from his face. The queen points to the farthest female and tells her to introduce herself. I listen to the women and what I can tell about them from what they say.

There are two women here that will be the hardest, they both worked in some capacity with the dangerous knives and

knew how to work a weapon. I need to avoid them the longest. When it comes to me, I know what I stand and introduce myself and notice the same critical looks and calculating me like I did to them. One is a librarian which tells me she has read tons of books and while she may not be good with weapons, she will be smarter and more dangerous in other areas.

I reveal little which in terms makes me more of a threat. I don't want them to be able to have anything on me they can use to hunt me down faster. Sitting back down I wait until the soup is placed in front of me. When Bianca starts to eat, I do the same. I don't think she would poison me not when her chance to kill me is so close.

I listen to some conversations of the women amongst themselves not participating and hoping to pick up something from them. I notice Bianca doing the same. She is smart I know that, and she is calculating who will be the easiest which makes her the most dangerous. Once the bowls are cleared Bianca stands and informs us it is time to join the guests for dinner and a night of merriment.



Silvan

THIS NIGHT IS DRAGGING ON, BUT I GET TO SEE MIRA. SHE IS smart and taking in all the women and making her plans in her head. Earlier that night the guards had come down and told us to get dressed. We were starving and hungry and after they kicked the shit out of us in pain.

I am glad Mira picked me because the other guys looked worse for wear. The guards barely touched me for fear that I would retaliate. I watch Bianca and Mira watching everyone as they go. Both are smart women and I know unless one of them makes a mistake it will come down to them two.

Bianca has always been ruthless and even though I know that she wants to kill Mira she will try to kill the easiest women off. When the dancing begins, I am quick to grab Mira and make sure that she is in my arms.

“They will split us up and we will have to dance with the others.” I whisper to her as we spin around. The ones who bother me is Bianca’s husband’s. I don’t know which one will try to dance with her. The things that could go wrong tonight and scare her before tomorrow is a scary thought.

I want to make her calm. I want to make sure she doesn’t panic. “Do you think she will let me say goodbye to all of you?” Mira looks up at me as we spin and the moment she sees my face she knows her answer. “I didn’t think so.”

“I’m sorry Mira. I will tell them whatever you want me too, i just wish that they could see you tonight you look stunning.”

“Thank you and so do you.” We spin again, and that is when I catch the violet eyes. She is here. Every circuit some magical witch as I call her comes here, and she is the one that opens the circle. She sees me looking at her and nods before she turns and whispers something to the queen.

The song ends and I feel a tap on my shoulder. Turning I see Raid and Bianca. Gritting my teeth I pull away from Mira while Raid steps in and Bianca steps into my arms.

I spin her away and try to touch her as little as possible. Bianca grips my arms as she smiles up at me. “You all choose her, huh?” Before I answer her she smiles. “I will bring you her head back.”

Anger surges through me, and I yank her against me. Leaning down to speak into her ear I whisper. “She will kill you and I will celebrate the defeat of the evil bitch with a drink over your dead body.”

Her face morphs into anger but she doesn’t make a scene. I know she is full of rage but the fact that she thinks I will stand to let her say those things to me is obscene. We continue to move around the floor while she maintains her anger.

“What are you going to do when I come back and not her?” Bianca whispers. “Will you hate me for winning?”

Bianca I know has always loved us and it is a curse for her since we moved on and have never felt that way again for her. “Bianca you’re married for one and secondly even if you weren’t there would be not a chance.” I look at her and for a split second she lets her heart bleed into her eyes.

“You will join my men one day Silvan, the want to have kids will weigh on you, and every time you find someone I will add her to the circuit and she will be the first person I kill and make sure to bring her head back.”

“You would be so evil wouldn’t you? That is why Mira will win this and I won’t ever have to deal with you again.” Dipping her low like the song calls for I make sure she sees how serious I am before bringing her back to the top and twirling her before the song ends. I catch a glance at Mira and Raid and to my surprise they are smiling at one another and she looks pleasantly happy.

Bianca looks over to and her face turns into a scowl. Before she can storm off I yank her back to me.

“What are you doing?” She hisses.

“One more dance Bianca.” Whatever is happening over there I don’t want them to be interrupted. Raid has always been the one different male of her men and whatever they are talking about is something beneficial for her.

“Fine.” She pulls away and bows before stepping back into my arms. We start the dance again and the anger coming from her is palpable. Bianca smiles at everyone as she sees them looking at her.

“You don’t have to keep being this way. You still have time to stop this and let the people choose their next queen.” Bianca eyes meet mine again and she scowls.

“I will do no such thing. This kingdom is mine and will remain mine.” I have worked too hard to be here.” for a moment her feelings leak through again. Bianca wasn’t always like this, but she remains this cold-hearted woman who just

wants to dominate. I know she worked hard to be here, and that is why she wants to keep being in the position that she is in.

When the song ends, Bianca flies out of my arms and moves to her husband Raid. He looks at me and nods and somehow, I feel better knowing that he was the one to dance with Mira.

“He said he is going to allow me to say goodbye to all of you.” Light and happiness spreads across her face and for a moment.

“That is incredible.” Relief fills me. I know the others will be happy to hear this and I know that Raid will keep his word. I finish dancing with her and by the time the night comes anticipation is in the air.

I know Raid told Bianca what he told Mira by the time the ball is over when I am escorted to her room with her, and I see the rest of the guys in there. Everyone looks happy to see her but at the same time I see how solum everyone is. She doesn't need this right before the circuit.

“Cheer up guys, she needs to relax.”

Mira looks at me with gratefulness and I smile at her. Tonight, is all about us and showing her how much she means to us.

CHAPTER 16

Mira

Waking up surrounded by my men is the most incredible feeling. Raid told me while we danced, he was going to allow me the same courtesy to say goodbye to my men, like the other women have time to say goodbye to their loved ones.

The moment he told Bianca I saw the change in her. She was not happy about this. She glared at me most of the night, but I didn't care. They were waiting in my room when Silvan and I got there. They made my night incredible.

Through their lovemaking they expressed and said so much that I feel complete going into the circuit. I know that whatever happens that they truly love me. A knock on the door has the guys moving around and sitting up and looking around. My nerves drop and the nervousness that I didn't feel, flies right into me.

The guys look to the door before looking at me. Someone bangs on the door again and Wilder is the one to leave the bed and answer the door wearing only a pair of boxers. The guard at the door takes a moment to look over him before clearing his throat and looking past him and meeting my eyes.

“You are expected to meet in fifteen outside to meet the witch.” He nods and turns and walks away. The heaviness in the air settles and I get up from the bed being the one to put on the brave face. This is happening and there is nothing I can do to change it.

I feel Peak come up from behind me and he kisses my shoulder. Silvan walks around the front of me and his hand reaches up and wipes a tear from my eyes that I didn't know had worked its way to my eye.

"We will be waiting at the end for you." Harland says beside me.

"You're brilliant and ready for this. We have every faith in you." Wilder says and this time I feel the tears streaming down my face. I don't want to leave them. I don't want to walk out the door.

"I need to go." I need to leave before I break down and have to be carried out. I turn and grab my clothing that I need to wear for the day. We were given the suits at the end of the dance. Mine is pure black like the others. The queens is white with a spot of red on her chest.

The feeling of my heart breaking as I get dressed is too much and I let the tears fall. That would be my luck, I find amazing men who love me and want to be with me only to be basically walking away to my possible death.

"I love you." Silvan whispers to me.

"I love you to." I lean into his chest and let him wrap me in his arms. Pulling back I meet each of the guys eyes and take in their faces and how they are looking at me right now. "I love you all so much and if I don't make it out alive, please know that this is the most incredible love I have ever experienced.

I leave the room and I hear them following me. Making my way outside I see a blonde woman waiting for me. Her back is turned to me, so I don't see her features. The guard blocks the men from moving any further with me.

"You are to go no further. You know this Silvan." I turn and smile at him. Trying to keep a brave face. Wilder hands me my bag and I accept it gratefully knowing that they packed my bag full of everything I would need. "Please move to the witch."

I nod and move forward. When I stand next to the woman, she turns her head and smiles at me. The air leaves my lungs

as I look at her. Her eyes are violet, and they seem to look straight through me. Her smile leaves me feeling strangely calm.

“You must be Mira?” Her voice even sounds like a melody.

“Yes.” That is all I manage to say as I look at her.

“My name is Adora.” She puts out her hand to me and when I reach for it, she places it on my cheek instead. Her eyes were getting bigger. “Oh, my darling, your story won’t end here. We will meet again, if you follow the path laid for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Meaning trust in yourself. Your story begins here dove, and if you care for yourself, you will come back to those men.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I want to believe her, and I want to think that what she is saying is right that I won’t die, but how would she know?

Adora looks back at my men and smiles. “Your men love you and the love you have for them gives the power to either guide you or hinder you. Make sure that the lessons taught to you by a past lover are not forgotten.”

My mind immediately flicks to Clay and everything that he taught me. The knowledge that him and the guys taught me will help me greatly and I will need it all to make sure that I survive.

“Thank you.” I pause a moment looking over her and her smile is stunning. “Adora.”

“Come, we must get you in position.” She whispers some words that I cannot hear and waves her arms. I turn and take one last look at my men and turn back to the portal that is now open. Adora touches my shoulder one more time before I step through. Stepping through is like walking through a door. The only difference is this is a little more disorienting. I step out into a mountain and the snow covers everywhere.

I don’t know where I am, but I find a corner and move to that, ducking down so I can look through my bag. Once I

know what I have, I feel more confident that I will be okay. The first order of business will be to gather what food I can, which means hunting.

I know most of the women were positioned somewhere so they may be doing the same. I know with this uniform I will stand out so I need to move quicker but take more hidden paths if I can help it and try to make my way to a more wooded area. Every decision I make from here on out will impact my life and what will happen.



Harland

WATCHING HER STEP THROUGH THE PORTAL WAS HARDER THAN I thought. When she stopped to talk to the witch, the emotions that crossed her face when she listened to the words calmed me. Whatever was said calmed her and made her more confident to continue.

I watch the witch close the portal and turn to us. Her smile focuses on us as she walks over to us. “Hello gentleman.” She stops and pauses in front of us. “Ask me what you want.”

How she knows we want to ask her anything is beyond me but I break the silence. “What did you say to her?”

Her smile takes over her face. “I told her to follow her teachings and she and I will meet again.”

“You can see in the future?” Hope echoes in my voice.

“I can see possibilities in the future.” Her violet eyes meet mine before looking to the guys. “You all will be vital to the future of this land and that of other lands. You need to prepare for the worst but realize that the ending will work out for the best.”

“What do you mean the worst?” Silvan asks. I hear the defensiveness coming out in his tone. He is worried about

what is coming and hearing it from the witch is not what Silvan approves of.

“Calm yourself soldier. It is not like you are thinking. I will say that you will make new allies and discover new lands, and all this change will happen sooner rather than later.” She turns and walks away, leaving us speechless.

We as one start walking to our home in silence. I hate not knowing what is happening with Mira and how she is managing. I look to the mountains knowing that she is somewhere out there fighting to survive. I know that she has the brain and the strength to make it but I also know that Bianca is also as strong.

Once we reach the house we all go in and Wilder is the one who starts the conversation. “I wonder what the witch meant.”

Silvan starts pacing and the look of concentration is on his face. “I don’t know, but I won’t take it lightly. We need to stay focused on the future.” He paces until I put my foot out to stop him. He looks at me before sitting down. I know him and when he starts to think his mind won’t stop until he thinks of a solution.

Wilder is silent and keeps looking out the window. His need to hunt is eating at him. During the circuit he is not allowed in the woods. I know if he was, he would be trying to find Mira. He would want to make sure that she is safe and that she had everything that she needed.

“How do you think she is?” Peak whispers. I know in his head he is coming up with the worst possible scenarios and the injuries that she may have.

“Peak she just started I think she is fine.” I tell him not really sounding as convinced as I try to sound to him. “She is probably trying to find some shelter and her food options. She also has to take inventory on what she has in her bag.”

Peak looks up at me and look lets me know that I succeeded in easing some of his frustrations. I know that until we see her again she will be a constant on our minds. We need

to see her here and be with us to be calm and know that she is okay.

I know it in my heart she will be okay. I just am worried about how okay she will be. She will come back bruised and her whole personality will be changed, I just hope that it is for the greater good and not for the worse like Bianca.

“We need to find Daire.” Wilder jumps up suddenly. I had forgotten that he was even here with everything happening and he must have left when he heard the guards coming.

“Agreed.” Maybe we can find out what he knows and more about his lands run. We can begin to prepare a plan to make sure that we are not taken by surprise.

We all head over to the little hut not really expecting him to be there but to have a clue as to when he will return. Once there we notice that anything that was his, is now gone. I knew that was a possibility but I didn't think I would find a note there.

I walk over to the table. The guys noticing at the same time walk over. I grab the note and skim through it. “He left us everything he knew about his land.” I also continue reading and see that he has been having dreams since he got here that he needs to follow. Something about a lost land and feeling the urge to go there and investigate.

He said something about a land that is pulling him towards it. I don't know what he means but I wish him the best.

“What does he mean about a land that is pulling him?” Peak says after looking over the note himself. “He says this land has been sending him visions and that it has been keeping him up at night.” The confusion in his voice is exactly how I'm sure the rest of us are feeling.

“He did mention that his father was trying to gather enough people to cross to here. He also said that it should be awhile before he gathers the forces since the last bit of men were killed in a raid from another land that he doesn't know of.” Silvan is going over the note.

The note also specifies specific routines and how they work at night and how they are gathering their intel. It gives us enough time to try and stop some of them and have something to occupy our mind while we wait for the outcome of the circuit.

“Where Daire talked about, I know the area. It is close enough to where I won’t be in violation, but damn near close.” Wilder states as he looks out at the surrounding land. “It would be easy to get there, but we have to make sure we don’t run into contestants.”

Nodding I start to stand. “I have some people coming in today with their animals that I need to attend to.” I make my way to the clinic and start to grab some common tools that I will need for the day.

The door opening has me lifting my head and I smile at the elderly woman coming in with her gigantic dog. It is a Mastiff, and he loves this woman. He makes sure that she is settled before he calmly walks over to me.

I take help him onto the table and check him over. Smiling when I make sure he is still in good health I smile at Molly. “He looks good Molly; he needs to come back in about six months so I can do another check.”

Molly stands and smiles. She pays me and thanks me. “You’re a good man Harland and I hope your woman comes back to you.” It is common knowledge now that we choose Mira.

“Me to Molly.” I walk around and pet her big dog just as the next person comes in. The day seems to fly by quickly. When night hits and I close the clinic, I am grateful for the distraction of the day.

CHAPTER 17

Mira

If I wasn't being hunted by other women, I would really enjoy this view. The mountains are peaked with white snow and the air is crisp. The expanse of the mountains feels like it goes on for forever.

I have already made a few stops and have slept in the worst positions I have ever slept. I was able to hunt and cook a rabbit but had to leave most of the meat, when I heard someone moving closer to my area.

The snow has gotten stronger and falls heavier now that the circuit began and I not having any sense of purpose other than to kill the other contestants is not appealing. I also have no idea what lives out here and what kind of creatures will be out here with us. I know it will be some hungry frightened ones that will also kill to survive.

Those are the ones I am more frightened of. Hefting my sack to a more comfortable position I start walking towards what I feel is a trail. I have been going around the mountain and making my way down. I keep the witches words in my head trying to follow my head and not make drastic moves without thinking about it.

I work through the possible outcomes and seem to be able to avoid anyone. I know the point is to fight to the death so the portals would have put us closer to each other. The queen is the one I am worried about, she has a better chance of staying camouflaged.

I again try and think about anything and everything that will take my mind off the fact that my feet are freezing. I wonder if Clay was given the notice yet that he would be going to Knightwood Academy.

I know he is going to be chosen, I just wonder when he will get the notice. Men in my faction prepare for it and they also help the current soldiers with battle defensives when they need them. Our faction is known for being the most sought-after faction for medicine and knowledge.

In a way the factions all work together and for a long time I wondered what we could accomplish if we were allowed to be move into the other factions. I have secretly always wanted to visit Vulture Bay and Diamaird West.

Vulture Bay is poorer, but they grow some of the strongest men and the best food. We often trade with them for their crops because it seems that even with all the knowledge that we have we are still unable to produce the crops or gain the right meat.

We tried for one year and failed miserably. We were near starving before we were forced to trade. I went with Clay and our parents when we were younger and got to meet the head of Vulture Bay. A Tavish. I can't recall his name but him and his wife are forever ingrained in my head. Their love shined in their eyes when they looked at one another.

The women fascinated me. The ones I could see from the faction borders. They were out in the fields on these machines, and they were the ones making sure that the food was cared for. I seen some men in the distance practicing with swords and seen kids laughing and playing near their parents and the swordsmen.

It resonated with me so much because while I didn't have a bad childhood, I am stuck in the classroom learning the basics of scientific theories. I want to one day study the different factions and see how they live differently than what my faction does.

A sound to my left catches me off guard and I realize too late that I see a girl come charging me. She is the librarian that

is smart. She hits me from my side, and we both come crashing down on our sides. I only have a moment to adjust the bag and get out of the hold.

She is on top of me struggling to try and pin my arms down and I am doing my best to try and knock her off of me.

“I cannot die out here.” She is shrieking and I manage to get a look at her face and see that she is badly bruised and that she has already lost some blood. She is in a panic and trying to survive but that is also something that I need to do.

Hating what I am about to do I wait until she pulls her fist back and before she swings again, I pull my arm back and punch her in the face. Knocking her to the side and I watch her grab her nose.

“Stop, stay away from me. I don’t want to fight you.” I am trying to keep my voice down not knowing who else may have followed her or if she just killed another contestant. Her eyes slice to mine, and I catch fear, panic, pain and hate. She doesn’t want to be here anymore and hates that I am not as injured as her. I can see her weighing her options.

I take a peek at my bag behind me knowing I have a small dagger off to the side that if I did it right, I could make it to it and kill her. I don’t want to but the look of desperation in her face is alarming, and I don’t know what to do about it.

Inching back towards the bag while she slowly stands, I keep my full attention on her. The blood is dripping down her face and onto her uniform, I do notice that while mine is all black hers has a slight purple to it, it hugs every curve like mine does and while it allows to keep warmth the uniform itself is hard to move in when you’re cold.

“What the fuck did you think would happen if you came into the circuit? If you want to stand there and let me, take your life, that is fine with me. I want to be queen.”

I can hear how heavily she is breathing, and she won’t make it very far and especially not with the other women out there.

“I didn’t ask to be here. I was forced in, and no I don’t want to die here either so look at this logically. I don’t have a scratch on me, and you are bruised. Please just walk away. Don’t make me be the one.” The person I know I won’t have a problem with will be Bianca. She is ruthless and she wants to kill more than anything else in this world.

“I can’t walk away. I know she is looking for me and she will make it brutal. I have better odds with you.” She again moves closer in my direction forcing me to step back and circle her. Keeping my eyes on her but I don’t like the position I am in. She came from the way my back is turned to now and I don’t know who was following her.

Trying to keep us moving in a circle I push forward forcing her back. She launches at me again and this time her hands come out and wrap around my neck and knocking both of us back onto the snow. The pain from the blow shoots up my spine but it is not bad enough to keep me from fighting.

Grabbing her hair, I yank her head to the side and use my other hand to again punch her in the face and not seeing a way out of this, I know I have to kill her. Struggling to reach my bag while I try to push her to the ground and gain the top position is hard.

I manage to get a few face hits in, and she does the same, screaming like a banshee and probably drawing the other contestants this way. Panic seizes me and urgency takes over as I realize the position I am. I cannot afford another fight so quickly after this one.

I use my knee to knee her in the crotch and while it doesn’t hurt as badly as it would a man, I see the pain hit her eyes and her release her hold a little that she has on me. I take advantage and I move her to the side, climbing on top of her and using my hands to keep her down.

A tear comes from my eyes as I continue to strangle her. Her eyes are bulging, and she is fighting trying to claw her way from under me. I know she is losing air and dying when her motions start to slow. I hate being in this position and I hate not knowing if I am about to be attacked again.

When her hands try to claw my face, I pull back and I try to keep my grip on her. Squeezing harder I feel her trachea starting to break. I know you need thirty-three pounds or more on the throat to have occlusion to damage the trachea and thirty-five pounds to fracture the tracheal cartilage. I also know that within another minute she will be dead, since this is fatal in about one minute to five minutes.

I push harder using my weight to squeeze her neck and as her motions slow even more I wait until her eyes look dead and to be sure I cover her mouth and nose with my hand for three minutes also making sure she is dead.

Once I check and find no pulse, I climb off her. I was horrified about what I did. I didn't think I could take someone else's life, but I did and now it will forever be ingrained in my head. Like a nightmare on repeat.

I now know why the guys were worried that this would change me. I can feel a shift in myself happening to try and cover up that I just murdered someone. I grabbed my bag and started to walk away from her, trying not to look down at the now lifeless eyes.

Did she have dreams, kids, a family? I know she must have had dreams to petition for the circuit. I was the only one that was forced to enroll. I start back down my path not wanting to go in the direction she went.

I keep walking and listening to my surroundings. I am headed back up the mountain which I learned is scarce on food. Stopping, I try to figure out a better solution on how to handle the situation and see if I am in more pain.

Finding a small clearing I hide myself away and take inventory of my body. It looks like a few bruises and some cuts. Nothing as bad as it could have been and that is due to this hideous suit. My arms and neck should be clawed but it is not.

Knowing that I am fine I start to look for an alternative path then headed down the way I was going to. I cannot afford to run into another contestant so quickly and not be better prepared. I pull the dagger from my bag and grip it. I start

walking again keeping my eye on another path that could be hidden.

When I see a worn trail I stop looking down at it. It seems like there is snow all over the trail and it looks fresh like nobody has walked on it. It could also be deceit but the path ahead looks like it would be a pain to walk through. Slowly sure it would work and that is exactly what I am going to do.

Again, I let my mind wander, wondering what the guys are doing and if they are wondering what is happening with me. I cannot believe I found these men and that they want me. I haven't felt this way in so long that I know Clay was not the one for me. He would have married me since it was expected but I think we would have ended up hating one another.

This does give me a chance to be friends with him one day, I just hope he finds the one or ones that makes his heart beat as fast as mine does when I'm with my guys. Love like this is hard to find and I know I need to fight to get back to their arms.

The path that I had picked is full of debris and other traps that if I didn't look properly would have fallen through. This world is larger than even I knew. It is amazing that I am part of a faction that holds the most brilliant minds on the planet, and I didn't even think about what would be happening in other parts of the world.

So focused on ourselves and the inability to want to be a part of something bigger is astounding. How the world could change if someone was brave enough to start the change. If I happen to win this circuit without too much damage, I will be changing things here in this land and not letting people do the same shit.

This circuit will also be the first to go. I don't think people should be fighting for their lives to try and win the approval of the people to rule. I think people would hate that I would not be doing the circuit, but I would want the world to move to a better place.

This path is so silent that with every step I can hear the snow crunching under my boots and the sticks breaking. It is

hard but I also know that it is for the better so if anyone sneaks up on me, I will know right away.

Once i get to a clearing I sit down. Using my hands, I cup some snow hoping that it melts right away so I can have a drink. I can feel how dry my throat is and I need something to drink.

Once I drink it, I start to walk again not knowing where I am going but following my head to lead me in the right place. I don't know how far I walk when I hear a fight ahead of me.

Creeping closer, my mouth drops when I see Bianca. She is using her sword against another contestant. I remember her. She is the one that was trained with Silvan and the guards. She is said to be one of the toughest contestants.

Bianca is not even breaking a sweat as they attack one another. Her sword is apart of her and she moves like water as she drives the sword forward only to be blocked.

I look at the other female and watch how incredibly she fights but also notice Bianca is watching her intently. She is looking for this woman's weak spot. I noticed it right away; the contestant favors her left side. A lot of her attacks are from the right side which Bianca slowly notices and the moment she guesses it I watch her move to the perfect position on the left.

She is patient enough to swing and slice the woman before shoving her sword through her. I watch the shock cross her face as the blood pours from her mouth. She is terrified. Bianca does a spin and slams the sword through this woman's neck before laughing manically.

Not wanting to get caught I back up as silently as possible hoping I am not making much noise. I am not ready for Bianca. She is losing her mind and she will be a hard one to beat.

CHAPTER 18

Wilder

I hate being without her. The world feels much smaller and with the snowstorm that we had last night I have been restless.

I know that at least three of the contestants are dead. The witch portaled the guards to the spot and they were able to grab the bodies of the fallen women and report them back to their families. Each time the portal opened everyone in town was waiting and each time the guys and I held our breath waiting for the inevitable.

Each time we were relieved, but it left me feeling sick. I didn't even realize that I would care so much for someone as I do Mira. She takes my breath away with the simplest smile and the kindest words. After everything she has been through, she still open for love.

I have been wandering the outskirts of the woods, trying my hardest to keep myself busy. This feeling of worry is foreign to me, it is accompanied with worry. I never worried about the guys when they went out. I was always grateful that they returned from whatever endeavor they were on, and we dealt with the injuries.

I have been trying new ways to cook and smoke the meat that I loaded up, learning new ways to preserve the meat. Deciding I need to get to town, I start heading that way knowing that I don't really need anything but that I want to be close in case the portal opens.

“Are you headed back to town?” Turning I see Peak dressed up in his winter gear with a paper in his hand.

“I am.” I nod towards his paper. “You need supplies?”

“Yeah. I am actually getting Harland some things too, and Silvan and we need food for the house.”

“Well we can go together.” I wait for Peak to move over to my side and together we start the walk into town. It is silent both of us lost in thought. The cold beating against our face is also a nice distraction and it keeps us from trying to talk.

When we finally reach town, we didn't see many people in the square and I let out a breath of relief. That means no one has been killed and the portal is staying close. I look at Peak and also see the relief wash over his face.

I grab Peaks list seeing what he needs and what route would be the most effective for us. I know he needs food to restock so that will be last, and Harland's needs is closer to the edge of town. We should head to the medicine shop and grab what you need.

Agreeing with me he moves with me and as we start to pass the town hub a man is being pushed out of the door and the owner is standing there shouting and pointing for the man to leave his business. Michael is a good man. He worked his whole life and finally caught a break when he was able to restore this old building.

He is also a friend of mine, and I won't allow anyone to destroy his establishment. I wait a moment to hear the context of the situation.

“I told you to leave here and stop interrogating my customers.” Michael shouts at the blond man.

The blond looks pissed and dusts himself off. I watch him run a hand through his hair and fix his glasses.

“I heard you; you prick. I know she is here, and I don't know why you assholes are lying to me about her being in this land.” This piques my interest, and I move over to the pair with Peak on my heels. I am getting a bad feeling from this, and I am moving cautiously.

Michael sees me and he nods his head my way, drawing the other man's attention to me. I look to him and see that he looks flustered and angry.

“Everything okay Michael?”

“Yes, he was just leaving.” He again makes his point that the man is not welcome in his establishment.

“I don't understand what the fuck your problem is, this land is so out of fashion, its like stepping into a time warp to a place that is less than.” The man huffs before turning to Peak and I. “What are you this man's bodyguard here to beat me up?”

I smile and make sure it is not a nice smile. “If you don't leave, I will be.”

The man huffs again and turns to walk away but stops turning back to me. “Do you know a woman with dark hair, she goes by the name Miranda?”

Every cell in my body freezes as I process what he just said to me. I turn to Peak and his eyes are round, and I know he is processing what is being said as well. Peak is the one to ask the question since my mind is trying to keep me calm.

“What is your name?” Peak grits out. The male looks between the two of us before responding.

“You know her, don't you?” He moves closer to us and eyes us. He thinks he is intimidating but he has no idea how close to the fire he really is getting.

“Yes, yes we do.” Peak smiles friendly and anyone who doesn't know him would think he is being open and friendly, but I see the true meaning behind the smile.

“Good, the name is Fredrick. I am trying to bring her back to the lab she is needed there.” He moves closer to us and the fact that he is bold enough to come searching for her pisses me off to no end.

“Well Fredrick you ran into the right people. She is renting a room from us.” Michael looks at me with hope in his eyes

that he is closer to finding his prize. We forget the list and start walking back our home.

An hour goes by and with every word he says it makes my blood boil. He is saying horrendous things saying that she lost her memory, how she is his betrothed and that he needed to get her back so they can finish the breakthrough medicine that will save the lives of everyone.

As we get closer to the house Harland comes out waving. “Hey that was quick, but I don’t see anything on yo..” He cuts off as he finally notices the man with us. “Who is this?”

I tap his shoulder harder than I should while smiling at Harland. “This here is a wonderful scientist that we met in town named Fredrick. He is looking for Mira and I told him that she is renting a room. How happy she will be that her fiancé is looking for her.” I wait until I see the understanding cross his features.

Harland smiles at him as well. “Well nice to meet you, let me go ask Silvan when Mira will be back and let him know to start gathering her belongings.” Harland takes off back into the house and we give him a minute to tell Silvan what is happening.

“She lives here with you all?” The disgust is not hidden in his voice, and it pisses me off that he is judging her based on his rapist behavior.

“No, she lives there.” I point to the hut and wait for him to look it over. When he does I turn back to the house and I smile, leading him inside. “You’re from Sphotes? Mira has told me what you all do there, and I find that it is fascinating.”

I let Fredrick step in front of me and it makes me smile. This man may be smart in a lab but stupid in life. He has no concern that he is about to meet another unknown male and is being followed by two more males. He is that confident in his ability that his story is that believable.

Once inside I see him taking in the surroundings and from the look in his eyes he doesn’t like what he is seeing.

“What do you all do for a living?” He asks us in general trying to keep the disgust out of his voice and barely concealing it.

“We do random work.” I say before anyone else says anything. This man does not need to know anything about us.

Harland comes back with Silvan and the barely contained rage is hard to miss, but again this asshole thinks that he is slick and that he is believable. I see that he has a bottle of water in his hand and so does Harland.

“She should be back soon; she had some errands to run.” We all sit, and Silvan slides the bottle of water over to Fredrick while Harland opens his bottle drinking it. Fredrick looks at the bottle, the suspicion is really getting to him and before he thinks about it I again cut in to distract him.

“When are you and Mira getting married?” The smile that crosses his face makes me want to punch him in the face until his teeth fall out of his head.

“We are getting married in the fall. We have to go back to Sphotes first to make the medicine and so both of us can receive an award.” He takes a drink from the bottle and then another. “We are fighting a deadly illness called Aether Infection that is fatal to children and combined we may have just figured it out.” He sits back and takes a larger sip of the drink.

I hate having to listen to his shit and I can see the guys hate it too. Whatever they put in the drink starts to work after about thirty minutes when his words get slurry.

“What did you do to me?” He says before his eyes fall shut and a snore so loud leaves his mouth.

Smiling, I look at Harland. “Did you add a tranquilizer to his water?”

“Yes, one that would not smell and is not traceable. Can you believe this prick coming here looking for the woman he raped thinking she would not remember what happened.”

What piques my interest is how did he know to look here. “How do you think he knew she was here and alive? From

what Mira said, he left her for dead.”

Silvan leans back and I can see the wheels turning. “Either he is not really back in Sphotes and is associated with someone here or he could have been watching her and realized that she was here.”

“What are we planning on doing with him?” Peak asks.

Silvan smiles and I know he is thinking exactly what I am. “We are going to hunt him like he hunted her, and then we are going to kill him.”

“Perfect. I know of a back wood trail that is close to the border where he came from which won’t be in violation of the circuit. It is not a huge expanse, and it borders quickly to the circuit area which means we have to be quick.” I get up and grab the map we keep in the kitchen, and I line the path for them so they can see it.

“Well, that shit won’t keep him out long we need to move now.” Harland says standing and moving over to the sleeping prick.

“Can we just suffocate him?” I have never felt such hate for someone that I am just meeting but knowing what he did to Mira really pisses me off.

“No hunting him will be a lot more fulfilling.” Silvan says yanking the man’s boots off and grabbing his pants. I don’t really want to be touching this slime ball, but this will be worth it. I yank on his top and watch as Silvan removes the last bit of his clothing leaving him bare.

“Shame he came in the coldest month here.” Harland laughs and I can see the frenzy in him. He is getting as pumped as we are to fucking kill this man.

“Here there is one more thing I want to do.” Peak moves closer with a needle he must have gone and got while we were undressing him. “This is a sterile shot, it’s called Aquarix Tessine. Should he live through this his small cock will never get hard again nor will it ever work again. He will be able to still get blue balls, but it will forever be painful.” Peak leans in

and shots the medicine into his cock and I have to even cover myself.

“Tie his hands behind his back and put some cloth over his mouth so he won’t be able to scream.” Silvan instructs and we all move to do it. “Now we move him.”

We take him outside and gather a horse and put him over the horse with a blanket. We don’t want him waking up before we get to where we need to be. Silvan grabs the bows and the arrows and makes sure we each have one.

“To make it fair.” I lean over and slice some of his foot very quickly and I see him twitch but again he doesn’t wake.

Peak raises his eyebrow at me “Why?”

“Because Mira was hurting when he did what he did, and I am going to make sure we kill this waste of space.” I don’t care how we do it but we will do it.

Moving the edge of the wood opening facing back where he came from, we wait until finally he struggles. Ripping the blanket off I step in front of him.

“Hello there Fredrick. Now before you try and scream, no one will hear you and even if they do they won’t care because they would choose us over you any day.” His eyes grow large with fear. Secondly you are extremely dumb and to think we would believe a single word of what you say.”

He continues to struggle and when I lower the cloth he tries to plead for his life. Peak moves into view with his bow strapped to him. “Why would we let you live?”

“I know something about the Woodland Wilds and the Lost Kingdom.” He wheezes out. “I will tell you if you let me free.”

“You can tell us now and we can see if your information is valuable.” Silvan grits out.

“I will do part. The other half I will tell you when you release me. The Woodland Wilds have gained a treaty and they are gathering forces to move to lands further south and gain more followers.”

“What lands do you speak of?” I ask.

“Let me go and I will tell you.”

“No.” I know we can figure this out ourselves and I am done with this man. “Here is what’s going to happen. We know you hunted Mira, we decided to give you the same choice.” I pat my bow and make sure he understands what I mean when I say that.

“You...you are going to hunt me?” He is stuttering now and falls off the horse and Peak sets him upright again.

“Hopefully kill you, that’s my goal. I am a very good shot, but I feel some shots in other areas will benefit you.” I laugh right in his face as he pisses on himself.

“Oh, Peak why don’t you tell him what you did.”

Peaks turn to laugh as he tells him what he did to his pathetic cock. The tears well in this man’s eyes and I know that he is battling the need to want to live and now the need to die since his cock will no longer work. “Oh, and there is no cure for it.” Peak says as a finishing statement.

“I am scientist and there has to be.” Fredrick insists.

“I’m a doctor and I am telling you I overdosed you and there is no way that your little cock will work again.” Peak says through laughter.

“Let’s do this I still want to be back for dinner.” Silvan moves in front of him and looks him in the eyes. “You will have a slight start but whatever Wilder did to your foot you will have to figure out how to work that.” Fredrick lifts his foot and sees the deep gash and because of the shit already done to him he didn’t feel it.

“You’re all monsters.” He whispers.

I yank his head and glare at him. “No that is you. You raped her and left her for dead and then have the audacity to come here and look for her like she would ever go with you.”

“She is ours now and we are paying it back for her since she is currently occupied. Peak, who isn’t normally a violent person, moves Silvan over a bit. “I want a souvenir to give her

to let her know that we got her revenge for her.” Peak cuts some of his hair off his head and pockets it. “Now run bitch.”

Fredrick takes off running the best he can right now, and I watch. I know I am the first one to shoot but I will be the at because I shoot better than the others and I will be the kill shot. I let an arrow fly and watch as it lands in his calf. He stumbles but surprisingly doesn’t go down.

Peak and then Harland are next, each hitting him and making him slow. Silvan fires one and it lands in his back taking him down. He made it about five hundred yards from us or more and the fact that we have front row seats watching him bleed out is amazing to us. I move forward and smile. He turns to face me knowing that this is his last breath.

I pull the arrow out and I aim at his face. I let the arrow fly and watch it go straight through his face. I feel like I honored my woman by avenging her even if she doesn’t know it. I run ahead and grab the arrow from the man and wrap it in cloth. “This will also be given to her.” No one says anything as we turn and head home. Each of us feels complete.

CHAPTER 19

Bianca

I know I am getting weaker. Every year having to conserve my strength and train all year-round weighs heavily on me.

My body is not holding up like it used to and the snow makes everything in me ache. I should have just given up the throne, but pride prevents me from doing that. I am a young queen and I want to remain queen.

I know that eventually someone will kill me and when that time comes, I want to be old. I want to allow them to kill me. It will be someone as ruthless as me and someone who will carry on tradition.

I killed four of the women already and I am looking for her. The dark-haired bitch has the most important people to me. I have a bad feeling about this woman. She is not meek nor is she stupid. I know she will be one of the final women that I have to face and while I am confident, she makes me stumble a little when I think about fighting her.

She is smart and I can see she was training. I know she trained with Silvan and Leo and that he would make sure she is absolutely ready for anything to come. I would know since he used to train me once upon a time when I was lucky enough to have his heart.

I always see myself with that unit. I wanted them and they should have wanted me. The reality is I didn't favor Wilder. I wanted to keep all the men but him and add in Raid. I never told them that, but they felt it.

They said I had changed and that the circuit made me bitter, and maybe it did but for them my heart always beat rapidly. I would have burned the world down for them. Again, not Wilder and there lies my problem.

The day of the ball I watched Silvan look at her. He looked obsessed and like he wanted to marry her right then on the spot, so even if I would offer to give up the throne, they wouldn't have me. I ruined it and it is a tough pill to swallow.

I just murder the women they may be attracted to. I know it is petty but there is a satisfaction seeing them break like they broke my heart. I will really bring back the head of their new one. Moving the cave I found, I start to settle and look at the bruises that shine so brightly when the light hits.

My overall assessment is that I was hit a few times, nothing fatal. The last one fought hard and she was quick. The problem was is that she relied a little to much on what she seen me practicing. People tend to make rash decisions based on what they see in that current time frame.

I know that my guards and even my husbands have knocked me out, but they make me stronger, and I know what I am doing. I know they want me to be the person that will rule with her people in mind but I crave the darkness that being feared does to you.

Getting sleepy I know I need the sleep. I cannot be caught off guard sleeping. They will kill me surely. I would do the same and it would be quick and I wouldn't second guess it. The food I managed to kill was a bitch and I am eating squirrel for the first time.

I eat and clean my wounds wondering what my competition is doing. Would they be brave enough to come here and explore back enough to find me. I don't know how much longer I can continue this and the thought of the next year handing the crown off to someone voted for is an idea.

I lost myself in this circuit, I have lost so much that I don't remember life before it. I love being queen and the thought that I won't be one day is enough to suffocate me and make it seem like I am losing a loved one. I don't even know if I

would feel like this if I lost one of my husbands. *Well maybe I would for Raid.*

I start making a fire in the cave. I am back far enough that no one would see the smoke from the outside. I start tearing chunks of meat from the bunny I stole from the last contestant that I killed. I have been so hungry lately.

The snow is easy to have since the snow melts quickly. I had created a mud bowl and was able to drink from it after it dried. I hate how I smell, and I hate that I am unable to wash myself, but I don't want to risk me being caught naked and without my weapons.

Trying to keep my mind off of things, I start to think about the plans I need to do when I come back crowned again. The Woodland Wilds need to be dealt with and with us not having allies, I need to send a party to King Blaine's land and try and get him to align with us.

I need to expand the land and allow more resources to come through. The people aren't aware of the problem that we will be facing next year. The crops are not going to be good, and even though my husbands are looking for a solution it may not help any.

We are becoming a poorer land and without the support from other kingdoms we won't make it to the next circuit. I have cut expenses and tried to send out scouts to look for support, but they either came back with a no or not at all.

All of this can be tiring, and it makes me think about how nice it would be to not have to deal with the shit. I secretly used to think about what life would be like if I could disappear into a countryside with my men and live out the rest of my life.

I know they want children but unfortunately last circuit I was injured to where my ability to have children was taken from me. We tried and the guys looked for a cure and even called the witch and she even said that there is no future for me that she sees with kids.

It hurt. I can't lie to myself here when I am alone. For them I put on a brave face and acted like I didn't care but inside I felt a little piece of me die a little inside. Everything hurt for weeks and knowing that I can't reproduce is horrible to me.

Getting sleepy I lay down next to the fire and start to close my eyes making sure that I am fully aware and not hearing anything before I shut my eyes.

Waking up hours later I see the fire died. I don't move fast making sure I am listening to the world around me. When I hear nothing, I start checking myself and my belongings, making sure that I have everything.

Once I am satisfied, I slowly start to move toward the entrance of the cave. I need to do some recon and see who is left. I have a feeling that bitch is not dead. I want to be the one to kill her. I start to make my way down the mountain again seeing a woman run across the bottom of the small slope and disappear into the woods. Smiling I start to hunt her. I know who this one is and she is going to be one of the harder ones.



Mira

I HAVE BEEN WALKING FOR LIKE WHAT FEELS LIKE FOREVER, and I am tired. I want this to end and be able to go home. I want to go home and be cuddled under blankets. I am not a person who likes to be out in the cold and especially not at night. I am not built for this.

Surviving is the hardest thing that I have done. Being out here has taught me a lot about myself, what I can do to survive and what I can do to make it. I have killed and hunted and slept in some weird positions in the middle of winter to make sure that I survive.

These men are my happy place and I want to make it back to them. I hear some noise and it brings me back to the current

situation. Ducking around some trees, I notice that the noise is coming from a little up the mountain.

Moving slowly to where I can see whoever it is without them seeing me takes a minute, but eventually I'm able to see what is going on. I see Bianca and the woman who was trained by the soldiers in the royal guard. They are circling each other.

"I'm going to be a better queen than you ever were." I can see the blood dripping from the soldier's eye and the marks on Bianca. She is injured as well. "You hurt your people and you care for no one other than yourself."

"You stupid woman, you do not know what is actually happening, which is why you won't make a fitting queen." I watch Bianca move forward with her sword and strike out at the other woman. She misses and stumbles back, but I can see the purposeful step. She is playing a game, and the other is going to learn it the hard way.

"I hate you Bianca, I always have and when I kill you, I am going to find the last contestant and take a souvenir from the two of you, and then bitch, I am going to marry your men." The confidence in this woman is astronomical. She does not know that all her movements are tiring her out, and she is so sure that she will win this that she isn't paying attention to the way Bianca is actually studying her.

"You stupid cow, you really think my men would marry you? I know you had a think for Raid for forever, but he won't ever stoop as low as you." The venom drips from her voice, making her sound evil. When the other woman strikes again, she slices Bianca, but Bianca steps forward into the swing at the same time, allowing the cut and stabs her through the stomach.

Bianca shoves forward more and drills the sword further into the stomach of the other woman, watching the life drain from her face. She never looks away and neither do I. I see the exact moment when the other woman's eyes lose their shine.

I wait with my breath held when Bianca steps back, dragging the knife from her body and then cutting her head off. It is gruesome and not something that I would ever want to

see again. I must have made a sound, because Bianca's head whips up and her eyes meet mine before she smiles.

"Good, you came to me." For someone who is injured, she runs fast as she bolts over to me, and I turn and run. I need a moment to think and process what I saw.

I ran back the way I came, hoping to lose her since I have a little more speed than she does. I know I am being a coward right now, but as I am running, I think of a plan. There were some traps back the way that I came and if I can try to distract her long enough to where she falls in one killing herself.

Once in the clearing, I see the snow that looks disturbed and I run around the trap, realizing Bianca is right behind me, never losing her eyes on me. Spinning, I see her on the other side, smiling.

"Did you think that I would fall into one of the traps? These are my woods and I know everything that goes on in the woods."

Not thinking about this all the way through I nod and prepare myself mentally for a fight. This is it, I know it and there is no turning back. The one thing that works in my advantage is that she is tired.

"I am going to win this and then I am going to force your group of men into the palace dungeons." The venom that she spits out of her pisses me off they have nothing to do with this and the fact she wants to punish them for loving me is spiteful.

"I am going to be the one to walk out of here." I brace myself and let my mind settle that I am about to kill the queen. No one touches the people I love.

"There's the fire." She laughs and for a moment I think that was her intention, it was to get me riled up enough to want to fight her.

I move towards her, and I strike out with the dagger which she blocks. Bianca swings and I am able to move but I feel the slice of her blade Knick my skin. Hissing I move back and wait to see an opening in her.

She charges me and I hit her wrist and manage to punch her in the face which makes her back pedal and swing again. I need to get the sword away from her. I try charging her again thinking I would catch her off balance.

She swings both her sword and her arms, and it catches my back and her fist hits me in my face. Seeing stars and now getting desperate I spin and charge Bianca again. She does not have enough time to stop me and we both hit the ground hard.

Rolling we both are winded, but the sword is closer to me now. I start to move my way there on my stomach and Bianca grabs my ankle and starts to try to climb over me to grab her sword. Together we struggle and when she slams the side of my face into the ground, I roll trying to my back and wrap my legs around her.

She looks down at me with disbelief that she is stuck between my leg's and can't move. Bianca starts to try to hit me and I manage to block while striking her. She tries to roll us again and when she does, I strike out at her again leaving her gasping and bloody.

I feel my eye closing and getting puffy from how many times I was punched in the face. Standing up I see her doing the same thing. The weapon is not a current option for either of us, we charge each other.

I catch her on the side of the face, and she hits me in the side, not letting her get the weapon I grab a handful of her hair yanking her back from reaching the weapon. I wrap my arms around her and pull her back by her neck cutting off circulation. I know I need to end this I am losing strength and I won't make it.

“You bitch” Bianca wheezes out between trying to hit me with her elbows. I am going to have to strangle her or try to suffocate her. I don't like the thought of either of those options but at this point I have no choice.

We fall to our knees together when she is passing out, and her fight is leaving her body. I make sure to keep pressure on her throat and I keep squeezing. Bianca lurches forward, and

she is now clawing at me and thankful for the suit that protects me from some of the damage that she could be doing.

As I feel life leaving her, I reach for my dagger knowing that I am changing here right now. I feel a darkness entering me that wasn't there before. I don't like this one bit. I flip her over seeing her bloody face as she can barely look at me.

"Do it." I am holding the dagger above her knowing this is where a part of me will break. She is weak and not going to fight me anymore, but the fear she will kill me and the selfish part of me wants her dead. I know I can't wait for her to make the decision for me.

I slam the dagger through her and the blood spurts up and comes from her mouth. The look of hate never leaves her eyes as the life leaves them. I wait until her breathing stops and get off her and limp my way over to her sword and I pick it up.

The portal opens and I step through. I hear the disbelief of the people who are on the other side but it's getting harder for me to stay upright. I touch my side realizing I am losing more blood than I thought.

I continue to step forward knowing I need to reach Peak and that he can help. I don't know the extent of the damage but if I can make it to him, he will be able to fix me. I step forward again and the dizziness sets in and the world starts to spin.

My name being called in the background is the last thing I hear before I fall and when I expect to hit the solid ground, I am caught and lifted. Not having the energy to care I close my eyes and allow whatever is going to happen, happen.

Waking up however later I look around and realize I am in bed. Sitting up I feel the sting from where I was sliced and my face hurts like hell.

"Mira, don't move too much." Peak... smiling I look for him and finally he comes into focus. "Hey love thank you for making it back to us." He moves closer to me and kisses me on the forehead. "I am going to get the guys they will want to know you are awake."

He disappears and I lean back and enjoy that I am alive and that I am with my men. I made it out. Images of what I did to Bianca come back to me and I take a moment to clear my mind and tell myself that what I did was to survive, that it had to be done.

The door opening distracts me from my thoughts, and I see four sets of eyes meet mine and slowly they smile at me. I sit up and open my arms. I need to touch them, feel them and their love. Each one takes a turn in my arms and gently kisses me.

“Mira, you will be crowned in the next two days, and we will all be moving to the palace.” Silvan states. “That is if you want us still.” The hesitancy in his voice is so sweet and I smile at him.

“I want you forever, all of you, but do we have to move to the palace, I love it here and will miss the peace it brings.”

Peak laughs and nods his head. “We do have to move but we can keep this place and come here whenever we want.” That calms me a little. I like being able to have the option of escape and not having to be in the palace every day.

Harland disappears and not too long after brings me a hot bowl of soup and tells me to eat it slowly. Peak explains my injuries and what happened. The most concerning is the fact that they couldn't find Bianca body. They looked, and the witch told them where she saw I killed her, but something was blocking her from seeing what happened.

They think that the snow buried her too deeply and or an animal got to her. The portal wouldn't have opened if she was not dead and for now it is not something that I need to worry about. Settling back into the bed I listen to everything they did to Fredrick, and it feels like the last fear I had on this earth has vanished with hearing what they did.

CHAPTER 20

Mira

3 YEARS LATER

“**Y**ou were right, he is a Knightwood Academy and the male from Vulture Bay is being crowned.” Peak looks over the map on the table with me. We have heard of the war happening, but we had a small one on our hands that we thought we demolished but now it is gaining traction to try and attack again.

“Are you sure they will help?” We have been trying to get in touch with King Vespian for over a year now and we have had no luck.

“I’m not sure Mira which is why we need to just go there. Clay is there as well.” Peak again looks me in the eyes, never breaking eye contact with me. I haven’t seen Clay in years and they worry about me seeing him for the first time.

“I know Peak. I just hate dropping this in their laps when he probably thinks I died.” That is my fault. I had years to reach out to him and never did.

“My love, just tell them what happened and why you never reached out. He will understand and from the information gathered from the runner, he was busy himself in Knightwood Academy.” Silvan kisses me before allowing me to answer.

“I will and I know Clay. He will think about this logically.” There are no lingering feelings for him inside me, just guilt that I never told him that I was okay. Clay deserved to know that I was alive. Looking back at the map, I try to go over the options.

The Woodland Wilds are moving to surround all of us and Knightwood. Vespins land may be clear, but that is still impossible to determine. There was a treaty that happened that we are unaware of and it doubled the numbers the Woodland Wilds had three years ago.

“Have you talked to Raid?” Wilder asks almost hesitantly. Raid is the only husband of Bianca who stayed. The others left and even one remarried. Raid asked to stay on and be an advisor. It hasn’t escaped my notice, nor the guys notice that in the last six months he has been getting friendlier with me and been trying to make moves towards being in a relationship.

We all talked about it and while they think he would be a wonderful fit, there is something that is stopping me from diving headfirst into this. He has more than proven his worth to me and that he won’t betray me, but the thought of how long he was with Bianca.

“I haven’t, not yet.” I look at Wilder sheepishly. They know I am avoiding him because of how he has been acting and I am not ready to come to a decision about him yet.

“You can’t keep avoiding him, Mira.” Harland chides and I smile at him. He smiles back with slight annoyance in his eyes. He says my smiles are killer and that he cannot ever be angry with me.

“I won’t, Harland.” I know eventually that I will have to talk to the man but that it will be on my terms and after we come back from Knightwood. “If we take the path to NorthEast from here, we will be able to cut across to Vespin’s land without being stopped.”

“Thats a good idea.” Wilder moves some of the pieces to the side. I miss the battle maps from Sphotes, but I am currently having one made and if need be, get Clay’s input on how to make it work and run.

“Excuse me, your highness.” My scout comes to the doorway and waits there for me to respond. I still need to get used to being called your highness. I have tried to get people to call me Mira or Miranda, and no one would. I have been able to change tradition, though. No more circuit.

I opened voting in the land and so far no one has put in for the queen spot. Wilder thinks it is because I am one of the best this land has ever had and they won't vote against me. I like the thought that I will be queen until I die and maybe even pass the crown to one of my children in the future, if we get so blessed to have a baby.

I worked hard these last three years, moving this land forward. When I took the crown, Bianca's husbands especially Raid, informed us of all the problems they were working on. The food source was the first problem we fixed. The crops were thriving when they came back in season.

"Yes, please come in." I wait for the scout to come in.

"The horses are ready for departure now." The scout bows and leaves. A nervous flutter runs through me. I am leaving on a horse with my men and little army behind me. I know it will take a couple of days to get there, but it will give me time to practice how I am going to handle this situation while asking for help.

I take one last look before Wilder packs it up and we take it with us in a bag. I am hoping that I can gain the support and gain help from them, so that we can quickly end this senseless war and move forward with life in our lands.

I want children and now I have to deal with how I feel about Raid and how that would work. I have visions of having a family with my men, but I am too worried about bringing a baby into this world before I know I took away the biggest threat that there is to us.

Walking outside, I see the horses ready and my men behind me we climb on the horses. I let them move into a position with Silvan in the front, Peak riding behind me, Harland and Wilder on either side with an Army behind us and the Royal guard in front of Silvan and one on either side of my other three men.

As the journey starts, it gives me time to reflect on myself and how I changed in the years I have been queen. Depending on who you talk to, I can be called vicious, but fair. Cold-hearted but kind or warm and bubbly. I don't tolerate

murderers or thieves in my land. There have been a few in the last couple of years and even a rapist, and what I did to them would make someone believe I need a priest for my unbridled hate.

I want to protect what my family is doing and the fact when I have gotten everything that I have now there is an attack seems almost cruel. I also take the time to think about Daire. We have heard from him a few times by mysterious messenger but we haven't seen him in so long.



THE PALACE IS COMING INTO VIEW. MY NERVES SHATTER WHEN I am near it. I am a strong woman, but the thought of me asking for help and meeting the woman who claimed Clay is surreal.

“We have made the guards aware. They were about to crown the new king.” Silvan shouts. They know I am coming, but he doesn't realize he is about to see me again for the first time.

“Silvan, can we slow down a little, please?” I ask him, and he pulls his horse to slow a little and looks back at me.

“Are you okay, my love?” He moves closer to me without our horses colliding and looks me in the eye.

“I am. I just thought I would be ready for today more than I am. I don't want you to think that it has anything to do with lingering feelings. It is more for the fact of guilt. I never reached out, and I never told him what happened.”

“He will understand Mira, I promise, and my love, I know you love me through and through, the guys know that too.” I lean closer and I kiss him. He smiles and pulls back ahead of me and my mind settles.

By now, they are aware that we are coming and are probably wondering who we are and why we are taking so

long to get there. Pulling my horse to a stop, Harland and Wilder each move to my side and help me down. I take a moment to brush my dress to make sure there isn't too much dirt on it.

This is one of my favorite dresses, one that makes me really feel like a queen. It plunges low showing some cleavage and it is all black silk with silver sequins. When I walk and the lighting is right the dress changes colors and shifts with the light. The black silk cape compliments the dress and makes me feel magical.

“You look simple ravishing my love.” Wilder whispers as Peak fixes the silver crown on top of my head. My hair hangs down my back and curls neatly. Moving forward I step in front of my men and shove the doors open.

His eyes meet mine immediately and I smile at him. Clay is sitting and he turns to face me. I walk forward my eyes taking in the surroundings and while I realize just how shitty my time is, I needed this moment. My eyes meet his again when he looks up at me.

“Hello Clay, it's been a long time hasn't it?” Clay stands and towers over me. His smile is slow to form on his face. In that moment I know we will get the help. I can see the happiness in his face and know that the woman of his dreams is cherishing his heart the right way.

“Miranda.” A simple word but it is all I wanted to hear and I sigh. “I believe we have so much to discuss.”

“That we do.” I go to turn and introduce myself when I see a woman move very swiftly to the door while my eyes then meet those of a very angry looking male that is still kneeling to be crowned.

“You better have a good reason why you decided to show up here and then make that amazing woman sad.” I meet another face and it is an older gentleman.

“I am so sorry I came at this time but I promise I have reason to be here.” his eyes soften as Clay moves away from me to move in the general direction that the woman went. “My

name is Miranda, queen of Vriven Kingdom and we need your help.”

The End

Miranda and her men will be back along with Raven and her men in Freed book four of the Knightwood Series!

Pre order

Freed

Acknowledgments

I want to thank all my amazing readers who are still on this crazy ride with me and my characters. We took some turns and landed in a new kingdom and now have more problems.. (lol)

I hope you all continue this journey with me.

About the Author

Rowen Black is an author of Dystopian Reverse harem and loves to create her own worlds to live in. Her type is tall dark haired blue eyed walking red flags and she indulges her fur babies in all the love and treats they can have

Follow her to stay up to date.



Also by Rowen Black

Survival

Fight