



WOLF KING

LINDSEY DEVIN

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WOLVES OF THE NIGHT: BOOK 1

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Try Bounty Collected

Wolf King

“**Y**ou’re not going to believe this,” I said. I leaned towards the map I had spread out on the oak desk. We were in the library, a round stone room with high ceilings and books lining every wall. I loved to read, sure, but the court cartographer had uncovered this map from deep in the archives just for me.

Barion sighed dramatically and looked up from the novel he was thumbing through. He sank deeper into the overstuffed armchair.

“What now?”

His lack of interest didn’t deter me. I was used to this kind of reaction from Barion — he’d been my tutor in sword fighting and strategy since I was knee-high. He’d been the one to first encourage my burgeoning interest in cartography when I was a little girl. Now he had to deal with the consequences. I smoothed out the edge of the parchment and traced the faded ink with the tip of my finger.

The map didn’t look too different from the ones I was familiar with. My country, Frasia, looked similar to its state today. The capital of Efra was still marked in the center. The mountain range between the capital and Starcrest on the northwest side was still immense and imposing, even when sketched out in ink, and the fertile fields of Duskmorn were once apparently forests. Dawnguard on the northeast was marked as flat and dry, a vast prairie one traversed to get to Daybreak and the castle in which I stood now. Daybreak still

had its lush forests and winding coastline, and it already had a port marked on the chart. It was much bigger now, I assumed. But it did thrill me to see that the Daybreak pack was leading coastal trade even hundreds of years ago.

Right now, though, something on the east coast had caught my attention. Instead of the bay that was situated there today, there was a narrow land bridge on the map linking Frasia and nearby continent Askon.

“Look,” I said to Barion as I peered at the map. “Frasia and Askon used to be connected.”

Frasia was the kingdom of wolves. Five packs controlled its various territories and resources. Daybreak was on the coast and focused primarily on trade, so I had some familiarity with the other kingdoms accessible across the seas. Askon was the land of jaguar shifters. Cruora, to the north, housed the kingdom of eagles; close to Osna, of the shark shifters. And to the west was Shianga—the kingdom of dragon shifters. I longed to see it for myself one day though I knew that was a pipe dream.

“Thrilling,” Barion deadpanned. “I’m glad it sank into the sea, we have enough trouble with the wolves alone. Last thing Frasia needs is jaguar shifters on our land.”

I shot him a dark look.

“This is an important discovery,” I said. “If the other continents were more connected than we thought, it’s worth examining. There may be parts of our own shifter culture that feel inherent to our way of life but are just as constructed as...” I floundered for a metaphor. “As our ships.”

Barion sighed and went back to his book. He was used to hearing this rant from me. No one ever cared about my studies, matter how hard I tried to engage people. Meanwhile I couldn’t help but wonder why no one else seemed to get *bored* simply navigating court. There was a whole world out there—one Frasia was once apparently connected to! -and everyone in Daybreak society was happy to just keep up with the routine every day, without question.

“You’re missing the point, Barion,” I insisted. “What if I could get to the west coast and see where this land bridge once was? Maybe I’d be able to—”

The heavy wooden door to the library clattered open, interrupting the scholastic trip I was already crafting in my mind. I sighed when I saw who it was.

“There you are, Lady Reyna,” Vuk, my father’s butler, said curtly as he strode across the stone floor. His boot heels cracked the silence with each step. “I’ve been looking for you.”

He said that as if I didn’t spend nearly every afternoon in the library. “What is it?”

Vuk adjusted the labels of his fine linen jacket. He always acted like his butler’s uniform was the peak of finery.

“The duke has requested your presence in his study,” he said. “Now, please.”

“Right now? What does he want?” I glanced at Barion, as if to ask, *did you know about this?*

Barion only shrugged. He seemed barely interested at all. He was far too big for the armchair he was seated in, wearing his usual plain outfit of a dress shirt and loose trousers, so the functional warrior’s arm muscles were on open display. At least he’d been to the barber recently so his beard was a little more tame than usual. When he had the wild hair and the jagged, faded scar lanced across where his right eye once was, he really got looks out on the streets of Daybreak.

“Lady Reyna, he only asked me to come fetch you,” Vuk said with no small amount of irritation in his voice. “I was not given the specifics.”

Somehow that made me more nervous. I delicately rolled the map up and slid it back into its archival tube.

“Barion, would you take this back to the archivist?” I asked.

Barion raised his eyebrows at me and slowly closed the novel. I met his gaze steadily. He understood my meaning—I

did want to meet with my father alone. The last thing I needed was the duke thinking I needed Barion's presence to steady my nerves in front of him.

Even if that was partially true.

"Certainly, my lady," Barion said.

Vuk cast him a dark look and sniffed. He'd never liked Barion. He found him to be too boorish for the refined Daybreak Court—and he didn't like that Barion had insisted on teaching me swordcraft from a young age.

I paused and glanced at my reflection in the mirror hanging above the fireplace in the library. My father preferred not to look at me at all, but when he did, it was easier if I looked presentable. I tucked the strands of white-blond hair that escaped from my long plait out behind my ears and removed my reading glasses, meeting my own sharp blue eyes in the mirror. There were ink stains on my fingertips, but luckily I hadn't gotten any on my white linen shirt and long brown skirt. My father would've preferred if I'd worn a bit of jewelry to show my rank. But that was his fault for summoning me on a day when I didn't have any court responsibilities scheduled.

Vuk cleared his throat.

"I don't need an escort, Vuk," I said.

"It's my duty to ensure you make this appointment safely," Vuk said. This meant he thought I was going to run off to the market square by the docks instead of to my father's study. Which was, honestly, not an unreasonable assessment. I sighed and followed Vuk out of the library.

Daybreak Manor was a vast, beautiful building, built of stone and wood with vaulted ceilings and windows often flung open to let in the ocean breeze and sunshine. The manor stood high on a hill above the port, just a short ride from the marketplace and the beautiful seafront town. The port was always bustling with ships coming in from all over the world, as well as carts and travelers from all of Frasia.

It was autumn. The rainy season had just ended, and the air was crisp with the promise of cold weather. Cold in Daybreak meant the townspeople would need to wear a shawl alongside their broad-rimmed straw hats to protect from the powerful sunshine. Before I was born, my father's study was on the top floor of the manor. Despite how warm it got in that room in the summer, he'd enjoyed looking out over the sea as he worked.

That had all changed after my birth.

With Vuk behind me, I descended the narrow stone staircase to the lowest level of the manor. My father had moved his study into the basement. He said he preferred the cooler temperature in his old age. I knew it was more than that. He couldn't stand to see life go on in the town below when his own life had ground to such a painful halt. When his wife died while bearing me, his reason for living died as well. I was nothing more than a memory of the woman he'd lost.

It was fine. I'd learned long ago to stop trying to make him actually care about me. We kept our distance from each other, even at court functions. At this point, twenty-five and long past being a lonely little girl, I found it more ridiculous than anything else. What was the point of being in a pack if you still spent all your time alone?

As we approached the wooden door to my father's study, Vuk nudged me aside to knock on the door first. "My lord," Vuk said, "The Lady Reyna, per your request."

"Enter," my father said, muffled through the door.

I scowled at Vuk, then opened the door and marched inside, leaving him in the hall. He could wait for me or, preferably, go lurk around whatever halls he occupied when my father didn't need him running errands.

"You asked for me?" I stood in front of his desk with hands clasped neatly in behind my back.

For a moment, it seemed like my father didn't even hear me. His office looked like a hurricane had swept in off the coast and run through it. His desk was enormous, even bigger

than the table I used in the library, but every inch of it was covered in papers and books and ripped-open envelopes and dried seals and dirty mugs and broken quill pens. The room was dim and without windows. The only light came from the candles peppering the overstuffed bookshelves and a handful on his desk. I liked to keep my spaces organized and well-managed—my father’s tendency toward hoarding and mess always grated my nerves. I was glad I rarely had to spend any time in this cave of a study.

The man behind the desk didn’t look any better. His dark hair was vaguely unkempt, and his complexion, which was usually tan from his duties in town, had paled slightly with the time spent in his study. He looked haggard—and frailer than I’d ever seen him.

“Lady Reyna,” he said, as if I was a random court member instead of his own daughter. “Please, sit.”

It was just a courtesy. We both knew this conversation would move as quickly as possible. I sat down in the straight-backed wooden chair anyway.

He rifled through his papers for a long moment, frustration pinching his features, before he finally uncovered the piece of parchment he was searching for. He smoothed it out and cleared his throat. “I’ve received a notice from the king’s court in Efra.”

Official business then. Some of my nerves eased. Likely we’d have to host a trade convoy or something, and I’d be expected to turn on the charm. Nothing out of the ordinary.

He peered at the paper, then his brow met mine. “King Elias is holding a King’s Choice Tournament to choose a new bride.”

It was only my extensive schooling in etiquette that kept my mouth from dropping open in shock. “A King’s Choice? There hasn’t been a Choice in nearly—”

“A hundred years, yes,” the duke said darkly. “As it happens, the last Choice was held by your grandfather, Constantine.”

“Certainly, they’ve fallen out of fashion,” I said.

“Pack Nightfall continues to revive the old ways,” my father said. “First Drogo takes the throne by force, and now his son is so incapable of diplomacy he resorts to a competition to find a bride. Elias is a fool.” He shook his head with disdain. “Constantine held the Choice because he already had a handful of fine suitors to choose from—the packs were scrambling to join ranks with Daybreak. The Choice was seen as a fair way for the king to choose between them. Elias is attempting to bring back what was a joyous affair for Constantine, but he lacks the Daybreak charm and panache.”

King Elias isn’t the only one lacking that, I thought to myself as I glanced around the dim study.

“The king knows the packs are losing faith in his ability to lead Frasia. If he doesn’t stabilize his court and kingdom, it won’t be long before another pack attempts to take the throne by force, just as Drogo did.”

“He dug his own grave, then,” I said. “I say let him lie in it.”

My father shook his head. “You should realize the opportunity we have at hand.”

“You don’t mean to say we will be participating in this Choice?”

“Of course we are,” my father said. “If we don’t send a suitor to the Choice, we will be openly insulting the king. And you know Elias will be pleased to have any opportunity to punish us.”

I pressed my lips together. Of course. Elias, the Bloody King. He and the beasts he called his pack were hungry for any opportunity to rule by violence. Surely, they’d be delighted to storm Daybreak and take it as their own.

“Of course,” I said. “I can discuss with the court which of the ladies is best prepared to represent Daybreak—”

“Reyna.”

“—and I know we’ve just had a few pups turn eighteen, but I believe we should try to send someone a bit older just to ensure she can hold her own—”

“Reyna.”

“—since diplomatically we want to be sure that Nightfall approves of our submission—”

“Reyna!” my father barked. He slammed his hand on the desk hard enough to send a seal across the floor.

The ferocity in his voice cut my voice off mid-sentence. I straightened up sharply in my chair, breath caught in my throat.

His brown eyes burned gold as he snarled at me, baring his teeth in a display of dominance. His nails lengthened and dug into the surface of the desk. It wasn’t even close to a full shift, but it was a rare display of how close he kept his wolf to the surface. It sent a cold ripple of anxiety down my spine.

I knew my father shifted more than I did—he shifted every full moon, like many wolves in the Daybreak pack. That was the general way in Daybreak. We shifted as a necessity, not for pleasure or play like the animalistic wolves of Nightfall did. I chose to keep my wolf closer to my heart. I didn’t need to shift, not even on the full moon.

But rarely did my father use his wolf to prove a point as he did now.

He sat back. His eyes still gleamed faintly gold, even as his teeth and nails shrank back to normal as if nothing had happened. “You will be participating in the Choice as the suitor from Daybreak.”

“What?” I balked. “But, my lord—”

“No arguments!” he barked again.

I bit my tongue.

“In three days, you will travel to Efra for the Choice.” He slid the letter across the desk and dutifully, I took it. “You will represent Daybreak well. And you will win.” He sat heavily back into his chair and folded his arms over his chest. He

stared off into the middle distance, nodding to himself. “And then Daybreak will return to the throne.”

I swallowed. “My lord—”

“You’re dismissed,” he said.

“Sir, please—”

“Dismissed!” he barked, baring his teeth at me again.

I nearly leaped to my feet, then nodded once and hurried out the door, closing it behind me. I took a moment to gather myself, taking a few steadying breaths in the cool darkness of the hallway. At least there was no Vuk. Thank the gods for small favors. I eased the death grip I had on the letter before I wrinkled it beyond all recognition.

As I hurried back up the stairs, my thoughts turned back to the bright, sunny study that my father had not used in my lifetime.

If I was in Efra, would he finally return to it?

He’d spent my entire life trying to pretend I didn’t exist. I was nothing but a reminder of his regrets: the wife he’d lost, and the male heir he didn’t have. Apparently sending me to the King’s Choice was potentially a two-birds-with-one-stone situation. If I won, I’d live my life in Efra, away from him, and Daybreak would enjoy more power in Frasia by having access to the king’s court. If I lost, he could lower my status in the court without raising any eyebrows. Either way, he’d be rid of me.

If my mother was alive, would he still be sending me away like this? Would he ever want to send his child to the Court of the Bloody King?

I shook off that thought. No point wondering about things that never were. I moved briskly through the halls toward my chambers. My room was near the top of the manor, overlooking the sea. It wasn’t too big, but it was enough for a lady to take care of herself. Despite that, I did spend more time in the library than I did in my chambers.

I sat down at my vanity and, with some trepidation, unfolded the invitation letter.

There was nothing ominous about the letter—nothing that would suggest it had come from the Bloody King himself. It was a simple invitation, requesting that the Daybreak Pack send a suitor to compete in the Choice to become the Queen of Frasia. There wasn't anything in the letter that might've helped me plan for it, like logistics, length, or even the events that would be held as part of the Choice.

If it was anything like King Constantine's, it'd be quite the affair. The Choice wasn't just a way for the king to find a queen—it was a way for him to build a reputation. If the king was wise, he'd make this a spectacle. It'd be a gift to the citizens of Efra and any Frasians who wanted to travel to witness it, with weeks of feasts and dancing and celebrations.

The contesting women would be the center of it. Not only would we be competing for the king's affections—we'd be competing to win the hearts of the pack and all the wolves the king ruled over.

Diplomatically, it *was* a good idea. If I were to take the throne, Daybreak would gain a much-needed boost in power, and my skills would benefit Nightfall in softening their reputation as bloodthirsty, savage wolves.

I huffed and shoved the letter in a drawer. Unfortunately for my father and for the king, I wasn't going to be winning this competition.

Even still, there was a tiny chance that this could work out in my favor. If I went to the King's Choice and lost, without a doubt, my father would lower my status. I'd have substantially less responsibility in the Daybreak Court. One of his advisors would step up and complete the trade-related duties I usually took care of.

I'd no longer be tied to Daybreak. If everything worked out—maybe, possibly, I could leave Frasia and travel the world like I'd always wanted to. I could finally explore the lands I'd admired so extensively on the maps I adored in the

library. I could finally find a place where a shifter like me actually *belonged*.

I wound my plaited hair up onto the crown of my head and then pinned it into a bun. I fit my loose sunhat over it, so most of my blonde hair was hidden beneath the straw. With that and a light linen cloak draped over my shoulders, I looked like one of the normal wolves of Daybreak, instead of the Lady of the Court. There were no other wolves in Daybreak with the white-blond hair I had, courtesy of my mother, of the Starcrest pack.

It was just another way I didn't fit in.

I wondered sometimes how my mother had felt in Daybreak. What she'd been like. Had she felt like a misfit as I did? Or had it been easier for her, somehow? Would she have been able to help me figure out what to do in this competition?

But she *wasn't* here, and there was only one person I was going to let in on this plan. The only person other than Barion that saw me as *me*, instead of as a pawn in the court's games.

When I opened the door, Barion was waiting for me. "Lady Reyna—"

"Sorry, Barion," I said, pushing past him. "I've got to run some errands."

"Reyna, please," Barion said, in the defeated tone of a man who knew this request was going nowhere. "We have a lot of logistics to cover regarding the Choice."

"We can discuss it over dinner," I said, "preferably with a lot of wine."

Barion sighed.

"If you insist," he called from behind me as I hurried down the hall.

It was a gorgeous, sunny afternoon, and I adjusted my sunhat to shade my eyes as I strode down the path from the manor into the main strip of the town. It was crowded, as it usually was in the afternoon, with fisherman coming in from long days on the water and innkeepers opening the doors to

their taverns. I carefully held my skirt so the hem grazed my shins, out of the dirt and dust of the cobbled street. The noise washed over me like a familiar wave as I made my way down a narrow side street to Marco's.

Marco's was already busy, despite the afternoon hour. Outside the door, I palmed a coin to a street boy and asked him to fetch Griffin. There was no way a woman of my standing—dressed as a commoner or not—would be caught in a place like Marco's. Even if Griffin enjoyed spending time there, often to my dismay, I refused to go inside.

I stepped into the alley to wait for him as I usually did. I peeked in through the back door, careful not to rouse any attention. Marco's was busy. Inside, sturdy wooden tables were populated with rough-looking wolves, occasionally baring their teeth at each other over games of dice and cards. I tried not to cringe. I didn't like that Griffin went in establishments like this but at least he didn't get awfully drunk like the wolves already spilling beers on the bar in broad daylight. Small favors.

Griffin was in the far corner, at a darkened table with three other men, all a bit larger than he was. I smiled when I saw him and watched with affection as the boy ran up and whispered into his ear. Griffin nodded, then spoke to the men at the table and levered to his feet. He was without a doubt the most handsome wolf in the room—tall, slender, with his deep red hair pushed rakishly off his forehead and a smattering of freckles on the bridge of his nose.

He was a member of the court as well. Griffin worked under the duke, focused mostly on trade taxation. He was smart, ambitious, and had priorities similar to my own: We both wanted more than the lives we were offered here in Daybreak. Out of everyone in this town, Griffin was the only one who saw me as more than a Lady of the Court—a pretty face and fine manners.

After a moment, Griffin stepped into the alley. He looked a little worse for the wear, with bags under his eyes and his lips turned down into a grimace.

“Not going so well in there, I take it?” I asked.

He sighed and combed his hand through his hair. “Yeah, we’re just getting started. I’ll earn back what I lost.”

“Right,” I said, biting back a smile. That never really went the way Griffin thought, but he enjoyed the game, so I held my tongue.

“What’s up?” he asked. “I thought you had court duties today.”

“I do,” I said. I tugged my hat off and held it at my side, trusting that no one would look down this narrow alley where we were hidden in shadow. “I just... I needed to see you.”

He must’ve seen something in my face, because his expression softened, and he stepped a little closer. I leaned my back against the brick wall of the alley and set my free hand at his hip. Ducking my chin, I gazed down at our feet. His presence always grounded me—made me remember that there was more to life than the political demands of the court.

“What is it?” he asked. “What’s wrong?”

“The duke summoned me to his study today.” I looked up, meeting Griffin’s eyes.

He raised his eyebrows. “The duke? He hasn’t asked for you specifically in... Gods, in *years*.”

“I know,” I said. “He got a dispatch from Efra.”

“From the king?”

I nodded. “He’s holding a King’s Choice.”

Griffin was silent. He set his hand at my waist and squeezed like he knew where this was going. “Reyna... You don’t mean...?”

“Yes.” Somehow saying it to Griffin made it more real. Anxiety curled in cold in my chest. “I’m to go as the representative from Daybreak.”

Griffin stepped back and pushed both hands through his hair. “You can’t. Reyna, you can’t go to the Court of *Nightfall*.”

“I don’t exactly have a choice here,” I said. “I’m a Lady of the Court, and the duke has ordered me to go.”

“Fuck the duke,” Griffin said low, through clenched teeth. “We can talk to him—there has to be *something*—”

“He can barely stand to look at me,” I said with a disbelieving laugh. “Do you really think he’d listen to anything I had to say? I tried to get him to consider other women who could go, but he wouldn’t hear anything.” I frowned. “He even bared his teeth at me.”

Griffin sighed heavily. “Bared his teeth? Immediately?”

“Immediately,” I said.

Griffin swore under his breath. I didn’t love the obscenity, but I understood his anger. I felt the same way. Neither Griffin nor I shifted often, and he also considered brazen shows of one’s wolf to be rude and lacking control. He knew that if my father was revealing his wolf with such little provocation, there would be no getting through to him. He’d made up his mind.

“We’ll run,” Griffin said. “We’ll leave Daybreak. We can leave tonight.”

“Don’t be naïve.” I tugged him closer with my hand on his hip. “You know my father would come for me.”

My pack was a seafaring one, and once upon a time, we’d been a pack of explorers, too. We knew how to travel and how to track. If I ran, my father’s wolves would find me with ease.

“Then what?” Griffin asked. “You just go?”

I nodded. “That’s exactly what I do,” I said. “I’ll go. I’ll compete in the King’s Choice, and I’ll lose.”

“You’ll be disgraced if you do that,” he said. “You won’t be able to show your face in the court.”

“Exactly,” I said. “If I lose, we’ll be able to get out of here—for real. We can start our own lives.”

“You make it sound easy,” Griffin said. “Like you’re not going directly into the Court of the Bloody King himself.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said, even if I only halfway believed it. “I know how to hold my own. Even if it is the Nightfall wolves.”

Again, Griffin sighed. He knew I was stubborn, and he knew he wasn’t going to win me over in this discussion. Not when I’d already made up my mind about how I was going to play this. “You know it’s not as simple as losing. If you offend the king, he’ll do worse than kick you out.”

“I know,” I said. “I can walk that line, Griffin.”

He didn’t look convinced—and honestly, I sounded more confident than I felt.

He was right. I had to remember that the king wasn’t above making an example of a wolf who offended him.

“I trust *you*,” Griffin said, “it’s the *king* that scares me.”

“Me too,” I admitted in a small voice.

Griffin wound his arms around me, pulling me close to his body. I wrapped my arms around his slim waist and rested my cheek against his shoulder, breathing in his familiar scent tinged with the inescapable stale beer smell of Marco’s. He brushed his nose against the crown of my head, careful not to disturb my braid.

“But I won’t let anything happen to you,” Griffin said. “If the king tries anything—I’ll come for you, Reyna.”

I nodded, hugging him a little closer to me. Even if that didn’t seem possible, my heart wanted to believe that. That there was someone in Frasia who cared enough to come for me if the king decided I wasn’t worth keeping alive. And Griffin and I still had so much to do together. We’d been together for a long time, but we’d only kissed once—at the solstice party, on the rare occasion of my being drunk on wine. I wanted to be married before we did anything more than that. I was a lady, after all. I wanted our first time to be special—I wanted it to be the beginning of the rest of our lives together. And I wanted to know that he was the kind of man that would wait until I was ready. A man who would commit to me for *me*.

I had high standards for the company I kept. I knew that to some members of the Daybreak pack, that made me seem

standoffish and cold—and I knew they called me the Ice Princess behind my back because of it. My pale features certainly didn't help, either.

But it was easy to be myself around Griffin. I pulled away and offered him a small smile.

He placed his palm on my cheek. "I mean it. I won't let anything happen to you. The Bloody King won't hurt you." His expression darkened. "And I won't let him marry you, either."

"I'll be back before it snows in Efra," I promised. "Before you've even realized I'm gone."

Griffin shook his head. "Not possible. I miss you already."

Three days passed in a blur. Three days was *not* enough time to prepare for a long-term trip to a different pack, in a different climate. My wardrobe was mostly linen dresses and skirts with a few long jackets for the rainy season. But Efra was much colder, and my father had the tailors work overtime. He insisted that I needed an all-new wardrobe for the weather there and to show my status as a Lady of Daybreak.

Now, I stood at the front gate of the manor. Three trunks were stacked up behind me and a fine brand-new, fur-lined coat hung over my arm. I was dressed simply in a linen skirt and blouse for the travel, but I had a fine silk gown to wear for when I made my entrance at Efra.

Over the past three days, I felt like I'd barely had a chance to breathe. I'd had my hair done, my nails groomed, my skin exfoliated, undergone a brush-up on my etiquette, and a crash course in the history of all five packs. No one knew exactly what to expect from the King's Choice, especially one held by Nightfall after a hundred years. The best I could do was to be prepared in, well, everything.

"You think you brought enough?" Barion asked, eyeballing the three trunks stacked up behind me. He had a simple canvas bag swung over his shoulder and was dressed in his usual workwear of linen pants and boots.

"I wasn't the one who packed them," I huffed as I crossed my arms over my chest. If it was me, I'd be traveling much

lighter and covering as much distance as possible. I'd even map the journey along the way.

Barion grinned. "Figured."

The coach, a fine, sturdy wood structure pulled by two draft horses, approached the manor. Barion gestured, and three servants hopped off the outside of the coach and hurried to load the trunks onto the cargo hold on the back. Barion swung his canvas bag on top of the trunks and fastened the straps of the hold down. Then he glanced over his shoulder at me. "You ready for this, little wolf?"

I huffed at the nickname. He hadn't called me that since I was a girl, barely tall enough to hold a sword on my own. "I'd better be, after all the prep I just went through."

Barion boomed his big laugh, then walked around to check the horses, just in case the stable boys weren't up to his standards.

I glanced at the front door of the manor. My father was nowhere to be seen, and I didn't expect him to come see me off. But part of me still ached that he hadn't. I was his only child. There was a chance I might never return from this journey. And he couldn't even come upstairs to say goodbye. Likely he didn't even want to.

He was just glad to be rid of me.

"Lady Reyna!" a familiar voice called. "Reyna!"

"Oh, here we go," Barion muttered. He shook his head and turned his attention to triple-checking the horses' yokes.

Griffin hurried up the path to the manor, cheeks flushed with exertion. "I was afraid I'd be too late," he said.

Affection swelled in my chest as he hurried closer. I reached for him. He took my hand in his, then smoothed his thumb over my knuckles. I tried to memorize his face: the freckles on his nose, the curve of his lips, his thoughtful green eyes. How long would it be before I saw him again? I could be eliminated after the first trial—or I could be in Efra until the bitter end.

As long as I made it back here, to Daybreak, Griffin and I could start a life far away. That would make it all worth it.

“I brought you something,” Griffin said.

I blinked. “What? Griffin, you didn’t have to—”

“I know,” he said. “I wanted to.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box, then pressed it into my hand.

Inside the velvet-lined box was a pendant. It was big, *really* big, nearly the size of a chestnut. It was set in fine, delicate silver and surrounded by what looked like diamonds. My eyes widened.

“It’s a promise,” Griffin said. “A promise from me to you, that if something goes wrong, I’ll come for you. I won’t lose you to Nightfall.”

I nodded. The pendant was a little ostentatious for my taste—much larger than anything I’d gotten for myself—and part of me itched at the idea that Griffin thought he might have to come rescue me. I wasn’t a damsel in distress getting dragged blindly into the king’s bedroom. I was a noble and a diplomat. I was going to handle this my way, so I could build the life I wanted. Part of me thought Griffin seemed a little too sure that he’d need to rush in sword drawn, but I knew he was just as worried as I was. We both didn’t know what exactly the Choice was going to be like, and we were handling it in different ways.

“Thank you,” I said. “I love it.”

I turned around and let Griffin sweep my plait to the side to fasten the delicate chain around my neck. The pendant rested right at my sternum and caught the sunlight beautifully. It’d look much more in place with a fine gown than the plain linen I wore to travel.

I turned back around and wrapped my arms around his neck. “Take care of yourself,” I said. “Don’t have too much fun while I’m gone.”

“I should be saying that to you,” Griffin murmured. He kissed me gently on the cheek, and that felt like more of a promise than the pendant did.

“We need to head out, my lady,” Barion said, “if we want to make it to our first stop before nightfall.”

“Be safe,” Griffin said, and then with some reluctance he pulled away.

“I will,” I promised. As I climbed into the coach, I couldn’t help the twinge of excitement in my chest. This wasn’t exactly an ideal situation—but I was finally going to be able to explore some of the country with my own eyes. Some of the places I’d traced on maps I would finally get to *see*.

Barion climbed into the coach, rapped his knuckles on the front, and then settled onto the bench across from me with a heavy sigh. The horses nickered and began to pull us away from the manor. I leaned out of the small window of the coach and watched as Griffin shrank in size, until the manor was just a distant structure on the horizon.

“I don’t get what you see in that boy,” Barion muttered. He reached into the basket he’d brought with him and ripped off a chunk of crusty bread, as if we were already hours into our journey instead of just getting started. It was early in the morning, and we’d be riding in this bumpy coach all day. “There’s plenty of other lads in Daybreak that’d be honored to court a lady of your status. I doubt that Griffin could even raise a broadsword over his head.”

“This may shock you, Barion,” I said, “but a man’s ability to wield a sword is not the most important thing to me.”

“I’ve never seen him shift, either,” Barion said. “He could be a sad, mangy dog in there.”

I huffed. “What, like me?”

Barion rolled his eyes. “I’ve seen you shift, my lady, even if you’d prefer it otherwise. Your wolf is lovely. You should let her out more.”

“Griffin and I understand each other,” I said. “And our wolves do, too.”

Not that we'd ever shifted together—but Barion didn't need to know that. That was private.

“Well, I suppose this competition has made those plans a little more complicated,” Barion said. “We'll reach the inn by dusk, then continue on to Efra in the morning. We should arrive at the capital in time for the evening meal tomorrow. I'm curious to see how much superstitious fanfare there will be.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Ah, well, rumor has it the council has mentioned the importance of an old prophecy,” Barion said. “Something about the future queen needing to be of a certain pack.”

“Which one?” I sat up straighter. “He really believes in stuff like that?”

“I don't think the king does at all,” Barion said. “But these councils, they can be old-fashioned. It's just gossip.”

“So who does the prophecy say will be chosen?” I asked.

Barion rolled his eyes. “You're not getting out of this competition so easily,” he said. “I don't know the details of it, anyway.”

I leaned back against the seat. Barion peered at me as if waiting for any more argument, but then, satisfied by my silence, he let his head loll back against the upholstered cushions of the coach and almost immediately began to snore. How he slept in this bumpy carriage, I had no idea. I was too anxious and excited to sleep, so I turned my attention to the window, watching the lush landscape of the Daybreak pack territory fade into open prairie and then skeletal trees. The warm, humid air I was used to grew colder as we traveled, and it wasn't long before I snuggled into my new coat, grateful for its fur lining. I saw now why the tailor had insisted I leave it outside of the trunk.

Barion woke up a few hours later, and we spent the ride mostly in silence. Barion thumbed through novels, miraculously with no nausea, while I gazed out the window

and sketched in my notebook. The sun was dipping below the horizon by the time the coach approached the Peach Inn.

“This is where we’re staying?” I asked as the driver slowed the coach to a halt in front of the building.

“Yep,” Barion said cheerfully. “I love this place. Finest sausage stew within fifty miles. Hell, probably the only decent meal at all within fifty miles.”

He hopped out of the coach and walked around to my side before I could get it open myself. He swung it open and offered his hand to help me down. I was sore all over from being jostled along the road, and somehow tired, even we’d only stopped a few times. Despite my exhaustion, the Peach Inn didn’t look exactly welcoming. It was a stone structure with a thatched roof, three stories tall, with a stable behind it and smoke pouring from the chimney. A faded sign swung over the door. But Barion was right—the inn wasn’t really part of a town. There was nothing surrounding it but forest.

As excited as I was to see new things, I was suddenly intimidated walking inside. This was a place for travelers—people stopping on their way to further destinations. People like Barion, who were used to this life.

“Come, my lady,” Barion said. He swung his bag back over his shoulder. “I’ll have the staff take the coach to the stable and bring your luggage up.”

I followed him through the heavy wooden door of the inn. The scene within nearly made me reel back in disdain. The Peach Inn was like Marco’s, if Marco’s were rowdier, dimmer, and reeked even more of stale beer and undercooked meat. The hearth roared with a fire, and a bard with a lute bounded between tables filled with burly men in thick cloaks, singing filthy songs in a scratchy tenor. All eyes suddenly turned to us, and a shiver ran up my spine.

“Barion!” one of the men at the bar boomed. “Fancy seeing you out in these parts. On your way to the capital, I suppose?”

Barion grinned and clasped the stranger's hand in greeting. "Whatever the work demands."

The stranger's bloodshot eyes fell to me, and he grinned wolfishly. "With precious cargo, I see."

Barion stepped slightly between the stranger and me. Part of me wanted to shove him aside and meet this stranger eye to eye. But this was Barion's turf, not mine.

"Mind your tongue," Barion said.

"Will she be joining us for a few drinks?" the stranger asked. "Errol's just opened a bottle of wine from the Duskmoon vineyards."

"Absolutely not," Barion said before I could even get a word in edgewise. "Keep your paws to yourself, brute."

For a moment I thought teeth and claws were about to be bared, but Barion and the stranger instead both exploded into boisterous laughter. They clasped hands again and then Barion turned to me and picked up my trunk with ease.

"I'll show you to your room, my lady," he said. "These fools won't trouble you at all."

He nodded to the haggard-looking barkeep behind the counter, who sighed and abandoned her post to lead us up the stairs. Barion gave her more than a few coins, which brightened her mood. She unlocked the furthest door in the upstairs hall with a heavy brass key and motioned me inside.

Barion followed me in and set my trunk by the foot of the bed. There was already a hot bath steaming in the room, which I desperately needed after a long day on the dusty road.

"To your liking, my lady?" Barion asked.

"Of course," I said. "We can have our dinner downstairs, if you'd like."

"Oh, certainly not," Barion said. "Those brutes are nothing but trouble. I'll have dinner sent up to your room, and I'll be right next door should you need anything."

I nodded. "If that's best."

“We’ll leave just after dawn tomorrow,” Barion said, “to ensure we make it to the capital in time for the welcome dinner.” He glanced around the room like he half-wanted to check it for traps. Then he simply nodded and patted me on the shoulder. “Get some rest, Reyna.”

When the door closed, I wasted no time settling into the small room, stoking the fire in the hearth before I undressed and climbed into the waiting bath.

The heat immediately soothed my aching muscles. I sighed with pleasure and tipped my head back over the edge of the tub. Even at the far end of the hall, and an entire floor above the bar, I could still faintly hear the loud laughter of the men over the music. I had a feeling that Barion had locked my door and gone down to join them himself.

This place was already so different than the fine courts I was used to. I sank a little deeper into the bath, until the hot water crept over my chin. Was this a preview of what my life would be like while I was in the Nightfall court?

I’d never traveled to Efra, and I’d only ever seen Nightfall wolves from a distance in the Daybreak marketplace. But their reputation loomed large in Frasian history, and among the wolves of Daybreak in particular. Nightfall wolves were more wolf than human. They shifted whenever they liked—or whenever their wilder selves demanded it—sometimes spending more time in their wolf form than their human forms at all. They were an animalistic, savage pack, driven by instinct and violence, not diplomacy.

And the Bloody King Elias encouraged that behavior. He represented it. He ruled through violence, through domination. His father had taken the Frasian crown by force—and then Prince Elias had taken that crown by force, too.

The myth loomed large but silent like a shadow around Frasia: The king had killed his own father.

For as much as I knew about diplomacy and etiquette, I had no idea if that knowledge would serve me in Nightfall. The riotous drunken behavior downstairs was likely just a

preview of what would happen there. I felt out of place here—it would only be worse in Efra.

It wasn't forever, though. I had to keep telling myself that—this competition was temporary. It was a way out of Daybreak.

Unless I was chosen.

The thought was barely a whisper in my mind. I almost had to laugh. The other women participating in the King's Choice would *want* to win, to earn the role of queen and bring their pack into power. Surely, I was the only one dreading that possibility. It'd be a challenging line to walk: bringing honor and recognition to my pack without gaining the king's favor. I was not meant to be a queen, least of all queen to a brute like him.

The noise picked up under me: growing laughter and the clatter of something being dropped. I found part of me ached to be down there with them. Even if I didn't want to participate—I was not a beer drinker, of course, and I had no interest in the bawdy games—I just wanted to witness it all. That was the real appeal of this journey. The chance to see new places, new people. I hated feeling like Barion wanted to keep me sequestered away, but once I was in Efra, I'd be on my own. No Barion to decide what was safe and what wasn't.

I climbed out of the bath and dressed for bed, just in time to hear the brisk knock of the servant at the door. The meal Barion had sent up was nothing fancy, just stew and bread, but it sated my hunger and some of my nerves, too.

This time tomorrow I'd be in the Nightfall court. I tried to enjoy the peace while I still had it.

I slept fitfully, anxiety about the journey and the unknowns of Nightfall circling my mind until the moon was high in the sky. I felt like I'd barely slept an hour before Barion's familiar heavy knock woke me. It was still cold and dark outside.

"My lady?" he asked through the door.

I rose and wrapped the quilt around my shoulders, padding across the cold floor. I opened the door a crack. Barion was

grinning, his eyes red-rimmed, and I could smell the faint scent of beer on him. I wrinkled my nose disdainfully.

“The coach will be out front in a half hour,” he said. “I’ll be back to carry your trunk.”

The ride from the Peach Inn to Efra was even bumpier and dustier than the ride before. Barion snored in the seat across from me as I gazed out the window. The forest landscape became more barren, with skeletal trees and frost dusting the ground. My breath fogged the window. I curled my coat tighter around my shoulders and shivered against the sudden cold.

“Mmf,” Barion grunted as he eased into wakefulness in the afternoon. “Ah, we must be close. There’s that cold weather the Nightfall wolves love so much.”

“It’s too cold,” I huffed. “This coat isn’t enough.”

“I told you to put on the thicker socks this morning,” Barion said.

I sucked my teeth. I was dressed to travel and also to make an entrance at Efra, somewhere between comfort and formality. The simple dark gown and heavy cotton skirt had been uncomfortable earlier in the day but now I was grateful for its warmth. I’d tucked the pendant Griffin had given me into my trunk this morning. I didn’t want anyone in Nightfall to ask about it. Instead, I’d worn my simple silver jewelry, a necklace and rings, just in case anyone doubted my status.

“Here,” Barion said as he rummaged through his canvas bag. “I brought a pair for you.”

I bit back a smile. “You think of everything, don’t you?”

“It’s what your father pays me for,” Barion said with a wink. He handed me a pair of wool socks, and I quickly unfastened my boots to pull them over the thin cotton I’d thought would be adequate. “Really, though, this is the kind of weather your family comes from,” Barion said. “I’d think you’d enjoy it.”

I scoffed. “Why would that be the case? I’ve never even visited the Starcrest pack.”

“Well, likely you will if you’re chosen to be the king’s betrothed,” Barion said. “The pack’s territory is just across that mountain range there.” He pointed out the window, toward the snowy peaks rising just over the horizon. “It’s even colder there.”

“I do enjoy the cold,” I said, “as long as I’m indoors, with a fire and a bath.”

Barion laughed. “Well, I guess you *are* more Daybreak than Starcrest.”

An hour later, we had reached the gates of Efra, after traveling through miles of fields and farms tended by hardy wolves in warm clothing. I’d seen the city on my maps, and I’d seen detailed sketches done by convoys we’d sent over the past two centuries. But the drawings could never have prepared me to see the city up close.

The city was walled in pale stone, shot through with gleaming crystal that caught the sunlight and glittered. The wall itself was low, an added defense against attackers—one that hadn’t stopped King Drogo when he’d come to take the crown—but it didn’t hide the soaring buildings behind it, built in wood and that same pale stone. The wall was patrolled by guards in leather armor and heavy fur cloaks, and two of them pushed the immense wooden gate open at Barion’s booming greeting.

Daybreak was rustic, stone and wood and thatched roof and *heat*, and Efra was its elegant opposite.

The coach rolled through the gates. The hard-packed roads were bustling with activity, taverns and inns and shops and cafes, and they were patrolled by soldiers in that same leather armor. The air smelled cold and smoky. I itched to hop out of the coach and walk on foot, to see the details of the city up close. Barion seemed to realize that, too, and he shot me a look.

“The manor’s in the center of the city,” he said. “Sit tight until then.”

We made our way through the bustling streets, until we reached another low wall with a final gate. This one was gleaming silver and ornately designed, so delicate the bars looked like spider webs. They were wound together to illustrate two wolves with their heads tipped back, howling at the sky.

Barion's expression soured. "The king's not taking care of this property," he said, low. "The state of this place..."

The manor wasn't in disrepair, exactly, but it did look neglected. It was bigger than the Daybreak Manor, built of wood and pale stone, with soaring turrets and massive stained-glass windows like a church—except even through the glass the curtains were visible. Why put curtains over stained glass? The garden was slightly overgrown, and there were no lights in the windows I could see. It was a beautiful structure, just cold, and dark. I pulled my cloak tighter around my shoulders as we approached.

The manor door swung open, and a tall, broad-shouldered woman in an uncomplicated gray dress and heavy black cloak stepped out onto the road. She had a book tucked into the crook of her arm, and her dark hair was streaked with silver, tied into a functional bun at the top of her head.

"Welcome," she called.

Barion shot me a look that said *wait*, and then stepped out of the coach first.

"Lady Glennis," he said warmly, offering her a short bow. "You look beautiful as always."

Lady Glennis rolled her eyes. "Welcome, Barion. I trust you've brought Daybreak's suitor for the King's Choice?"

"Of course," Barion said. He strode to the door of the coach. "May I present the Lady Reyna of the Court of Daybreak."

I stepped out of the coach carefully, still feeling a little achy and restless from the long coach ride. But I wanted to impress the Lady Glennis—I wanted to represent Daybreak

well. I kept my shoulders square and chin up as I approached the lady, and then swept into a careful curtsy.

“Thank you for welcoming us,” I said. “I am honored to be here as the representative of the Court of Daybreak.”

She gave me a once-over, her expression neutral and unreadable. I felt like an animal on display at the marketplace as an experienced farmer decided if the livestock was worth purchasing.

“I’m Lady Glennis,” she said. “I’ll be the matron of the Choice. You may come to me with any questions or concerns as we proceed through the ceremonies.”

“I do hope we haven’t missed the welcoming meal,” Barion said.

She clicked her tongue. “There will be no welcoming meal this evening. We’ll begin with an introductory breakfast tomorrow.”

“Ah,” Barion said, cringing. I pressed my lips together. Not a great first impression.

Lady Glennis flipped open the book in her arms and made a few notes. “The games will be a bit different than the Choices of the past. I trust that won’t be a problem.”

“Not at all,” I said with a smile. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“Lovely,” she said. “Don’t worry, Barion, if the wolves of Nightfall excel at anything, it’s ensuring our guests are well-fed.” She smiled at him, and then gestured at a handful of servants lingering near the front door. They hurried forward to the coach. “My staff will show you to your quarters, Barion. As for you, Lady Reyna, I’ll escort you to your quarters myself. The staff will bring your things.”

“Thank you,” I said with another small curtsy.

I followed Lady Glennis into the manor. The front hall was immense, with vaulted ceilings and polished stone floors; the low heels of her boots echoed through the space. The stained-glass windows were covered, but the room was well-lit with

torches and a huge, roaring hearth, making it feel warm and cozy despite its size. She led me up the immense staircase in the center of the hall, then down a narrower path, to what I assumed must be the guest quarters.

“I hope the journey was kind to you?” Lady Glennis asked.

“Oh, it was lovely,” I said. “I’m thrilled to see more of Frasia.”

“Wonderful,” Lady Glennis said. “We are still waiting on some of the contestants to arrive, hence the lack of welcome meal.”

“Please, I didn’t expect—”

Lady Glennis held up a hand, cutting me off. “The King’s Choice has historically been quite a formal affair.”

“...Yes?” I said.

“Here in the Court of Nightfall, we do things a bit differently. Certainly there will be formalities involved, but the Choice will be a gift both to the king and the people of Efra. We hope to put on a series of events that will be both fun and exciting for all participants and spectators. This week will be full of events, and a final score will be tallied at the end to decide the finalists.”

Fun and exciting. I wasn’t sure what that meant—but I had the sense that all the history cramming I’d done wasn’t going to be the knowledge I leaned on the most in the coming weeks.

“Right this way,” Lady Glennis said. She opened one of the fine wooden doors in the hallway. Somehow the servants had beaten us here; my trunks were already in place.

The room was spacious, with a big window overlooking a dining table, a four-poster bed, and an overstuffed armchair in front of a hearth, surrounded by—

“Oh, my!” I said. “What an incredible collection!” I rushed forward, momentarily forgetting my manners in my excitement. The hearth was surrounded by shelves, filled with books of all kinds, books I hadn’t seen in the library at Daybreak. Novels, history, even poetry—I immediately found

a thin volume of Shiangan seafaring poetry and flipped it open.

“A fan of literature, then?” Lady Glennis asked.

My face flushed. I snapped the book closed and straightened up. “Yes. I’ve always been an avid reader.”

“As am I,” Lady Glennis said. She strode past me to the bookshelves, then pulled out a narrow, plain volume and handed it to me. “Read this alongside the poetry,” she suggested. “It will enhance your appreciation.”

I beamed at her, then hugged both books close to my chest. “Thank you, my lady.”

“I’ll leave you to get settled,” Lady Glennis said. “Your dinner is ready for you” —she nodded to the covered platter on the table— “and tomorrow you will meet your lady servants and hear more about the upcoming Choice.”

I nodded. “That sounds wonderful.”

“Get some rest,” she said. “Tomorrow will be a big day.”

Lady Glennis smiled at me, and her expression was unreadable again. I wasn’t sure what impression I’d made— but it didn’t seem bad. That was a good start and was the balance I was trying to strike. I had to represent my pack well.

Just not well enough to *win*.

She left just as briskly as she’d arrived, and as the door closed behind her, I was left alone in the big room with its crackling fire and waiting dinner. I was anxious, but grateful for the privacy.

A week, Lady Glennis had said. The main events of the Choice would only last a *week*. Anticipation thrilled me as I sat down at the small table for my dinner. I could be back in Daybreak before I even knew it. Back with Griffin—and back to start a life of my own.

“Good morning!” A bright voice cut through my sleep, and I blinked awake. Someone threw open the curtains at the window and sunlight flooded the room. Apparently, it’d snowed in the night, and the light was blindingly bright as it reflected off the landscape outside and into the room. I cringed and squinted.

“Hope you slept well, milady,” the young pup who had thrown open the curtains chirped. She couldn’t have been more than sixteen, with curly auburn hair barely tamed by a strip of fabric, and a bright, buck-toothed smile. “I’m Rue, this is Amity. We’ll be your ladies-in-waiting for the course of the Choice.”

Amity set down an immense platter of food on the cleared table—they must’ve been in here cleaning up my dishes while I was still sleeping. Amity’s hair was long and black, styled in twin braids falling over her shoulders. They both wore simple canvas dresses with white aprons.

“Lovely to meet you,” I mumbled, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes.

With the platter deposited on the table, Amity hurried out of the room, and then back in, this time with her arms laden down with huge, fluffy towels. She went into the ensuite bathroom and I heard the water start to run.

“If you’re hungry, there’s breakfast,” Rue said. “Best to have your strength up at the start of the day, that’s what Lady Glennis says.”

“I agree with her.” I was still half-asleep. In Daybreak, I didn’t see my maids until I’d readied myself. These two teenage balls of energy were different, but not entirely unwelcome. “Smells good.”

Breakfast, Rue revealed, was sausage, eggs, crusty bread, and hot coffee. I was almost relieved—part of me had been expecting a raw leg of deer or something. Maybe that was what the king had but wasn’t going to subject his guests to it quite yet. I swung my legs over the side of the bed and found a plush pair of slippers waiting. As soon as I’d slipped my feet inside, Rue hurried over with a fine robe and pulled it over my shoulders.

“Good, good,” she said. “Eat first then we’ll help you prepare for the day. First impressions are the most important, you know.”

I sat down at the table, and Rue briskly fixed my coffee with fresh milk and a touch of honey.

“Thanks,” I murmured. “Just the way I like it.” After the first sip, my brain started to slowly rouse into wakefulness. “How did you know?”

Rue just winked at me. “In two hours, Lady Glennis has requested your presence in the Solarium. You’ll be introduced to the other suitors of the Choice before all five of you are introduced to the king.”

The easy pleasure of a good breakfast dissipated quickly as reality set back in. “What will that entail?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, Lady Glennis doesn’t provide us with details, milady,” Rue said. “Only what’s necessary for Amity and me to ensure you make the events as scheduled.”

“Right,” I sighed. “Well, that’s better than having to figure it out all on my own, I suppose.”

Rue smiled again. As I ate breakfast, she made the bed and fluffed the pillows, then stoked the hearth, so the room was just as warm and welcoming as it had been when I’d first walked in. Admittedly, I was surprised by the skill and warm demeanor of the maidservants so far. I’d expected things in the

Nightfall court to be a little... rougher. Certainly not completely feral—that wouldn't be good for the king's reputation especially considering what had happened to his father—but I'd certainly thought the place to be a bit more animalistic.

It was a comfort but it didn't make the thought of facing the king any more welcome. If anything, it made me *more* nervous. I was even less sure of how I needed to behave to ensure I was respectful, but not what he desired.

If this was how he was running his court, what exactly *did* he desire?

After breakfast, Rue guided me to the ensuite bathroom. It was a surprisingly large space with a large bathing pool built into the floor and connected to plumbing. There was a large window of pebbled glass which lit the room in warm sunlight, so brightly the torches remained unlit. The large vanity in front of the mirror had an array of bottles and soaps and various bathing tools. A dressing screen decorated with a pack of wolves running through a forest stood in the corner, though I doubted I'd be using it.

As was custom for the Choice, the maidservants undressed me carefully. It was nice to be tended to, but this wasn't just for me—I knew Rue and Amity had been tasked with ensuring I had no physical markings the Lady Glennis and the king should know about before the Choice began. They weren't just helping me look my best to meet the king. They were looking for scars—signs that I'd fought other wolves—or stretch marks that suggested I'd birthed pups before meeting the king. Neither of those applied to me, of course. Rue and Amity were joining a very short list of other wolves that had ever seen me naked. There were no marks or blemishes on my pale complexion, just a smattering of freckles on my shoulders, and a birthmark on my calf.

They guided me into the delightfully warm bath and my skin turned pale pink from the heat almost instantaneously. Amity tied my hair up in a towel, keeping it dry. As I washed, she hummed to herself and picked through the makeup on my vanity.

“How do you typically prefer to present yourself?” she asked.

“With makeup?”

“Yes,” Amity said. “Do you wear a bold look, or more subtle?”

“At home, I rarely wear makeup at all,” I admitted.

Amity clicked her tongue. “Not surprising with a complexion that looks like yours.” She smiled. “We’ll do something subtle.”

“Did you have a gown in mind for the meet and greet?” Rue called from the bedroom.

“Um,” I said. “No? Did you unpack my trunks?”

“Of course, milady,” Amity said. “This morning. You’ll find all your things in the wardrobe.”

“Thanks.” It did feel like a minor invasion of privacy—but that was the way things were done in Nightfall, and I had to adhere to their rules. It was only a week, and then I’d be back home.

Rue hurried back in, then guided me out of the bath and wrapped me in a plush towel. “I recommend the lovely teal gown in your wardrobe. Does that suit you?”

“Sure,” I said. I dried off and stepped into the undergarments and silk slip Rue had brought for me.

“I’ll prepare it,” Rue said to Amity.

These two seemed to work as one. Amity gestured for me to sit down at the vanity and carefully unwound the towel around my hair, sweeping it down over my shoulders with a small, pleased hum. Her delicate but callused hands worked carefully through the fine strands before she picked up a brush from the vanity.

“I think we should leave your hair down for today,” she said as she smoothed the brush over the strands. “Do you typically wear it in a plait?”

I nodded. My hair was long and fine, and the plait kept it from getting tangled or damaged as I went about my day back in humid Daybreak. Loose like this, it fell in white-blond waves nearly to my elbows.

“It’s lovely down like this,” she said. “And the king does love long hair. He likes to have an idea of what a wolf may look like before he actually sees the wolf. Especially for his potential queen.”

I tried not to scowl at my reflection and mostly succeeded. I hated the thought of the king looking at me and imagining my wolf—she was a private part of my soul, and I loathed to share her with the world at all.

“That’s fine,” I said.

To her credit, Amity seemed to understand I wasn’t interested in chatting. Hopefully, she’d just chalk it up to nerves. True to her word, she only put a small amount of makeup on me—a tint to my lips and a blush on my cheeks, making me look a little more doe-eyed and innocent than I wanted to. Then, from the drawer of the vanity, she pulled out a fine silver box.

“You’ll be wearing this today,” she said. “Lady Glennis had them made for all the contestants of the Choice.” She opened the box and revealed a delicate tiara.

It was silver, with delicate white stone cut in the shape of a semicircle, flanked by nine small diamonds. “This stone... Is it...?”

“Moonstone, yes,” Amity confirmed.

“It’s lovely,” I murmured. I’d seen jewelry made with moonstone at the marketplace, but I didn’t wear it myself. It was too valuable as a resource and too important to trade. Even the highest-ranking women of Starcrest, the pack responsible for its mining, only wore it decoratively. Gazing into the stone, I suddenly realized the design was particular to me as well. “This is my coat of arms.”

“Exactly,” Amity said. “Do you like it?”

“It’s gorgeous,” I said. And that was true, even if I didn’t exactly like it. Amity carefully fixed it in my hair, so the gems that represented my pack were centered above my blue eyes. I had to admit it looked nice, and not too ostentatious, tucked into my loose hair. As Amity adjusted the tiara in my hair, I noticed a similar gem, small and gleaming, embedded into a silver ring she wore on her middle finger. “You wear it as well?”

Amity blinked at me in confusion, and then followed the line of my gaze to the ring. “Oh, this?” she asked. “No, this is just a servant’s ring.”

“What do you mean?”

“Moonstone for function, not for beauty,” Amity said with a smile. “The tiara will look even better with your dress. Come with me.”

In the bedroom, Rue and Amity carefully helped me step into one of the gowns my father had commissioned on such short notice. The tailors had done a remarkably good job. The dress fit perfectly: a full teal skirt with an ivory bodice, with full long sleeves and teal embroidery detailing.

I wasn’t used to dressing like this, in heavy layers and long sleeves, but I was grateful for it now. This manor was drafty. Rue fastened the lacing at the back, carefully sweeping my blonde hair out of the way.

“All the women have these tiaras?” I asked.

Rue nodded. “Yes, each fashioned after their coat of arms. It shows your status and illustrates to the king which pack you represent. Four of you are ladies of your packs, and one competitor is a commoner.”

My mood, buoyed by the bath, soured again. Retorts sat sharp on my tongue: *would a nametag be easier? Does he often forget the identities of the women he courts?* But I was used to holding my tongue in my father’s court so I steeled my expression into neutrality. We were just wolves to him, weren’t we? This competition wasn’t about who I was as a person—it was about who I was as a lady and as a wolf.

A lady I could be. A wolf—not like him. Never like him.

“A commoner?” I asked instead. “How was she chosen?”

“Nightfall held a lottery for their representative,” Rue said. “All packs are to be represented in the King’s Choice, of course, but the king wanted to ensure the Choice was fair to all.”

That was an eloquent way of putting it—Rue was good at her job. Obviously, tradition said that all five packs had to participate, but this Choice was mostly to increase Frasian faith in the king. Having the king choose a bride from his own pack would certainly not do that. The council had made a good decision by instituting a lottery. It adhered to tradition, made it clear the king would not be choosing the Nightfall wolf, and would most likely provide a good show for the spectators in Efra.

This Choice was well-planned. To the point that it almost made me a little nervous.

“Ready?” Rue asked.

I nodded.

Then I gasped.

In the middle of my bedroom, Rue and Amity both shifted.

Their turn made the air crackle with magic, and in my chest, a wolf roused into wakefulness, as if she was slowly coming out of a long nap and shaking her fur out. Being near a shift always made my wolf curious—but it was easy to push that desire away.

Rue and Amity were both pups. They stood nearly hip-height to me, and they had the long legs and big paws of still-growing wolves. Both had warm brown coats, Rue’s a shade darker than Amity’s. They tipped their snouts up to me, ears flopping, before padding over to the door. Amity looked back at me expectantly, tail wagging. If they thought I was shifting, they had another thing coming. For one—I’d just gotten dressed!

It was then I realized their dresses and aprons were nowhere to be found.

The servant's rings. Both of them had a thin silver loop around their front left paw. Was that the ring? Did that allow them to shift and stay in uniform?

It seemed like madness. Why waste the magic and the effort to allow the servants to shift? And why let them do so on manor grounds? Were wolves just shifting whenever they wanted to during court functions? I tried to keep my expression neutral as I stepped between the two pups to open the door.

Rue and Amity escorted me through the wide, dark halls of the manor. Their nails clicked on the stone, and they walked briskly, with ears pointed forward and eyes alert, as if looking for threats. Despite my own discomfort, my wolf was awake and preening at the attention. She liked having the wolves at her side, liked feeling protected, and knowing other wolves were close by. The itch to shift was at the base of my skull, but it was a small, familiar sensation, and one I easily ignored.

We made our way to the solarium, which seemed to act like a central courtyard. It was like a gorgeous, domed greenhouse, with the sunlight falling in through the thick glass panels and snow gathered at the rivets where the panels connected, but the space inside was much warmer than the air outside. Still cool enough that my Daybreak-acclimated self needed my long sleeves, but certainly comfortable.

The space was full of plants that seemed to be adequately taken care of. None of the ferns looked particularly happy and some of the flowers were drooping, but it was overall lush and a clear display of wealth and status. Not everyone had the capacity to keep such aesthetic greenery alive in these temperatures. I couldn't help but wonder if these were plants my grandfather, Constantine, had brought to this solarium—if they were here before Nightfall took power, and were kept alive only because they were proof of wealth.

The Bloody King didn't seem like the type to tend flowers. He wasn't the type to put any restraints on wildness.

The relaxing atmosphere was slightly disturbed by the presence of the Nightfall guards flanking the doors in their leather armor and long fur-lined cloaks. Each of those men had the same rings that the servants wore. I wondered if they preferred to fight as wolves or as men.

A small table had been set up in the middle of the solarium, with another tray of coffee. Two women were already seated at the table. One was obviously from Dawnguard, and I didn't need to see her tiara to know it. She was wearing a long, practical skirt with a long-sleeved shirt buttoned to the hollow of her throat, both the deep green of the Frasian military. Dawnguard was responsible for training Frasian soldiers, and this woman had clearly participated. She had sharp green eyes and bright red hair, more orange than Griffin's was, that she wore in a short, functional cut. The style of her shirt made her shoulders look even broader—she looked like her grip could shatter the coffee cup she was holding if she wanted to. My gaze must have lingered too long on her, though, because she caught my eyes and scowled.

The woman at her side looked like a polar opposite. She didn't look weak, *per se*, but she looked... luxurious. Like she should be lounging on a chaise somewhere being fed grapes instead of sipping coffee at this table. Her pale shoulders sloped delicately, leading to the low lace neckline of her lavender gown. She even had a fine white fur stole draped around her against the cold. But the strangest thing was her white-blond hair and her pale blue eyes.

She looked like *me*.

She was curved where I was a bit narrower, but we even had the same nose. She looked like who I might have been if I'd been raised with the Starcrest pack instead of in Daybreak. It was unnerving, and from the expression on her face, she felt the same way.

I cleared my throat and joined the two at the table. "Good morning," I said neatly. "I'm Reyna of Daybreak."

"Adora of Starcrest," the blonde woman said as she offered her hand for a delicate shake. Even her hands were soft, like

she'd never had to do a chore in her life. She didn't say anything about our resemblance so I didn't either. But for some reason, I trusted her tentative smile.

"Wynona of Dawnguard," the other woman said, offering me a curt handshake from across the table. It was much firmer than Adora's, with the telltale calluses that only came from hours and hours and hours of sword-wielding. I had them too but mine weren't nearly as thick. Her attention went almost immediately back to the guards standing by the doors to the solarium, as if she was silently assessing them.

What kind of woman would the king be looking for? Someone strong and capable like Wynona? Or someone more elegant, like Adora?

The door opened again, and the other two competitors walked in. First was a tall, serious-looking girl with dark hair pulled back into a simple, low bun. Her tiara was smaller and lacked moonstone while her gown was simple, dark purple with no embellishments. I stood to greet her, and the other two women followed my lead.

"Rona of Nightfall," she said curtly. Her dark eyes narrowed with suspicion as we made our introductions.

"Hi!" the last competitor chirped from behind Rona, as if the Nightfall candidate hadn't brought a storm cloud into the room. She was taller than me, thin as a whip, with a huge smile on her round, friendly face. Her tiara with the Duskmoon crest was tucked into her dark, tightly curled hair, and her silver gown glowed as bright as the full moon on her rich umber skin. "Fina, of Duskmoon!"

"Nice to meet you, Fina, I'm Reyna of—oof!" When Fina took my hand to shake, she locked me into a tight hug. It wouldn't do to be rude, so despite my surprise, I gently returned the embrace.

When Fina pulled back, her smile was somehow even bigger.

"It's *so* nice to meet you," she said. "I'm really excited to be here. Did you know it's been nearly a hundred years since

there was a King's Choice? I just think it's so cool that we get to represent all the packs in once place. It's such a moment in history!"

She beamed at the other women and got two stern stares - from Rona and Wynona - and a confused look from Adora directed at her in response. Her smile faded a little.

"Have some coffee," I said, directing her to join us at the table.

We had a cup each and some vaguely awkward chitchat, carried mostly by Fina doing her best to get us all to open up. But the other contestants were either uninterested, or simply anxious, waiting for the official start of the competition.

Luckily for Fina, we didn't have to wait long. The door to the solarium opened. Lady Glennis strode in, her heels cracking on the fine stone floor. Her simple green gown was cinched at the waist, functional, but still elegant. She had a notebook open in her arm and a severe look on her face.

My heart dropped. What could an expression like that mean? If the king was already in a bad mood, I certainly didn't want to be the one to meet him. What happened to make the Lady Glennis look so openly upset?

"Good morning, ladies," Glennis said curtly. "I trust you've enjoyed making your introductions."

She peered at us, brows raised slightly. We all nodded and murmured our affirmatives.

"Good," she said. "Unfortunately, there's been a change of schedules. The king isn't able to meet with you, so you will have the day to yourselves."

"The king won't be at dinner, either?" Adora asked.

"Not this evening," Lady Glennis said. "He has urgent court business."

Wynona stood up briskly. "Does Nightfall maintain a training facility?"

"Of course," Glennis said. "One of the guards will escort you."

Wynona nodded in thanks and went to the door. My wolf perked up with curiosity—was the guard about to shift the way my maidservants had? However, all he did was step across the threshold behind Wynona.

“Lady Glennis,” Fina chirped, “is there a library in the manor?”

“Oh!” I said before I could stop myself. “Yes, milady, is there—”

Lady Glennis shot us both a knowing smile. “Yes, girls, there is a library. I’ll have your maidservants escort you.”

Fina caught my eye, and I couldn’t help but return her grin. It seemed like Fina and I could become fast friends. Wynona certainly wasn’t interested in friendship, nor it seemed was Rona. They wanted to win. I didn’t know what Fina’s goal was, but I had no interest in winning, and having a companion to explore the library sounded like more fun than holing up in my room for the afternoon.

Despite the circumstances, I wanted to enjoy this brief taste of being out from under my father’s thumb. Back home they called me Ice Princess, but here, I could—sometimes—try to be someone different. Someone more like my true self instead of the role I usually had to play.

Amity and Rue escorted us out of the solarium and towards the south wing of the manor. Again, they were in wolf form, and I glanced at Fina to see her reaction, but she seemed to think nothing of it. She’d sent away her own maidservants, saying we didn’t need four escorts, and hadn’t appeared to notice the slightly downcast looks her servants had gotten in return. It was none of my business, though—and I had a library to explore. Fina hooked her arm in mine and chattered away merrily as we strode through the halls.

“I’m so excited to see this library,” she said. “My quarters had a small library of its own, I can’t believe there’s more!”

“Mine as well,” I said. “I hope there are archives, too.”

“Archives!” Fina laughed. “I hope there are *novels*. The good kind.”

“What do you mean by the good kind?”

She lowered her voice. “The romantic kind.”

I gasped in faux-horror and swatted playfully at her wrist. “You devil,” I teased. “You read those things?”

“I’m addicted,” she admitted. “The books in my quarters are too high-brow.”

At the door of the library, Amity and Rue both shifted back into their human forms—dressed in their uniforms, courtesy of the rings, I assumed. They nodded to us and then each pushed open one of the great wooden doors.

“Wow.” I dropped Fina’s arm, eyes widening as I drank in the library.

It was enormous. The ceilings were so tall that there were two staircases on either side of the space, leading to a wraparound balcony with shelves and shelves filled with books. A hearth was already burning in the center of the room, flanked by overstuffed chairs and stacks. There were tables scattered around, well-lit, and everywhere I turned were shelves and shelves and shelves of books.

“I can sense the romance novels,” Fina said. She closed her eyes and placed her forefingers to her temples. “They’re calling me.”

At the higher level of the library, a shelf caught my eye. It wasn’t packed with books—it looked like it was packed with scrolls. “Enjoy them,” I said. “I’ve got some exploring to do.”

I hurried up the narrow staircase to the wraparound balcony. It didn’t look like anyone came up here often—a thin layer of dust had built on the wood shelves, and the lighting was dim. Between the shelves, there was a narrow, closed door. Likely to more archives, I assumed. I tamped down my curiosity about the door. First, scrolls.

And were there ever a lot of scrolls. The shelves were unlabeled, so I pulled one out at random, coughing at the sudden explosion of dust. I pulled it carefully from its leather tube and smoothed it out on the nearby table. Text only—and not in a script I knew. I returned it to its holder. I pulled a

scroll from another shelf—same thing. Unfamiliar text. After pulling the third text-only scroll, I moved to a different shelf, closer to the door in the back.

This shelf was slightly less dusty, but still unlabeled. I pulled a scroll from one of the shelves and removed it from its leather casing.

Finally! I bounced on the balls of my feet with excitement at the first glimpse of the ink on the parchment. I hurried to the table and pulled out the full scroll, delicately smoothing it flat on the table.

My eyes widened as I peered at the map, drinking in the unfamiliar lines and words. It wasn't Frasia—it was a region I'd never seen before. It looked mountainous, riddled with winding rivers and small lakes, with a jagged coastline. A few towns were illustrated and labeled, but I couldn't read the language. Where was this? What kind of people lived here? Were they shifters? Mountainous—maybe dragon shifters? The thought thrilled me. I traced the path of the rivers, imagining I was there charting them myself. I saw it clear as day in my mind, myself in functional pants and heavy boots, standing on the bank of a freezing cold river as I gazed up at the crest of an unfamiliar mountain range. I imagined myself sketching the shapes of the mountains, adding detail to my maps.

“What do you think you're doing?” a rough, unfamiliar voice said behind me.

It surprised me so much I nearly jumped out of my skin. I straightened up and whipped around, and found I was staring directly into a broad, leather-armored chest. The wearer was standing close enough that I could see the detail embossed into the leather, the delicate winding vines running down the sides of the metal and the crescent moon coat of arms right at the solar plexus. Did all the guards have this much detail in their armor? He wasn't wearing one of the fine fur-line cloaks, though, despite the chill in the library, and his bare arms were thick and muscular. I had to tip my chin up to meet his eyes, and his face made my wolf whine with curiosity and a slight edge of anxiety.

This man had dark, thick hair falling loose into his dark eyes, a straight nose, high cheekbones. He would've been handsome if not for the golden flicker breaking through the chocolate-brown of his eyes like lightning strikes. When he smirked at me, I couldn't tell if his teeth were sharpened or always looked like that. His wolf was *close* to the surface. My wolf could sense it—it woke her up, and made my hackles rise. Like this man could shift at any moment. I supposed this was how the guards of Nightfall behaved—like animals.

“I asked you a question, little wolf,” the man said. His voice edged into a growl.

I scoffed. *Little wolf?* “I’m a Lady of the Court Daybreak,” I said curtly. “I’m here at Lady Glennis’ instruction.”

“Lady Glennis instructed you to stick your nose in the court’s private archives?” The man smirked. “I find that a little hard to believe.”

“I have the lady’s permission,” I said. “Is that not enough?” I wasn’t going to let some random guard bully me out of my map exploration—not when I finally had access to such beautiful and unfamiliar ones.

“Hm,” the guard said. He bared his teeth as he watched me, thoughtlessly, like he didn’t realize he was doing it at all. The expression sent a nervous shiver down my spine, and internally my wolf whined and lowered her ears. We were no match for this wolf—that much was obvious.

“I’d appreciate it if you left me to my reading,” I said.

He exhaled a short laugh through his nose. “I have no intention of doing such a thing.” He stepped somehow even closer, and I backed up until I bumped against the table behind me.

“Step back,” I said, low. “Or I’ll scream.”

“And who will come to save you, little wolf?” the guard said. His brown eyes swirled with gold, and I could smell the animal musk on him. He was about to shift, I could feel it crackling around me like an oncoming storm.

My breath caught in my throat. I was frozen with him this close to me, like my wolf was pinned in place by this show of dominance. Part of me wanted to run, part of me wanted to shove him away, part of me wanted to bare my neck in a show of submission. His gaze flickered to my neck, too, like he was thinking the same thing. Like he wanted to set his teeth at the nape and force me to behave. Something low in my gut tightened at the thought. It was so *animal*. Why did it make me so frozen? And why did it make my wolf so *awake*?

But then, the guard just stepped back and laughed. He brushed me aside and briskly rolled the map back up, sliding it back into the leather tube and returning it to its place on the shelf.

The spell he'd held over me suddenly shattered. "Hey!" I said. "I was using that!"

The guard shot me a look. His eyes were brown again, and slightly widened in disbelief. "There are plenty of maps in the public archive," he said. "You're free to peruse any on that shelf there." He pointed to a well-stocked shelf on the other side of the table. "This shelf is off-limits to visitors."

I huffed and crossed my arms over my chest. "Then why is it unmarked?"

"Visitors rarely take interest in the archives," the guard said.

"Who are you to establish these rules, then?" I asked. My wolf was settled again, easy to ignore, and now my irritation was taking the forefront in my mind. "The cartographer?"

"Something like that," he said with a smirk. He flashed his teeth at me again, and a shiver rolled across my skin. It wasn't an entirely unpleasant one though. "Stick to the shelf I showed you and we'll have no trouble."

Before I could argue further, he strode back through the door and closed it behind him. Part of me wanted to pull out the map he'd snatched away, but I knew I'd pushed my luck enough today. I still had to represent Daybreak well, and I didn't want this interaction to make its way back to the king.

So I pulled a few scrolls from the shelf he'd directed me to, and tried not to think about the man behind the locked door.

The richly detailed Frasian maps made it easy to lose the hours. It wasn't until my stomach rumbled demandingly that I finally was able to pull my attention away from the richly detailed representations of cities and coastlines I'd never seen. With some regret, I rolled the maps back up and slipped them into their leather tubes.

Downstairs, I found Fina curled up in an overstuffed chair by the fire, entranced in a novel and already three-quarters of the way through it.

"Hey," I said.

She jolted so hard she nearly toppled out of the chair. "Oh!" She blinked rapidly. "Wow! What time is it?"

I bit back a laugh. "Looks like you're enjoying the book," I said.

She brandished it at me. "It's about a wolf who falls for a dragon shifter," she said. "Very intense."

"Sounds like it."

"And I thought the king was intimidating," she said. "Whew. At least he's a wolf."

"I don't know," I said, "I think I might prefer a dragon. At least then you don't have to deal with the rest of the pack."

"What?" Fina squawked. "The pack is the best part. I can't wait to go on a run with the Nightfall wolves... I've heard

they're some of the fastest and strongest in Frasia, even stronger than the Dawnguard wolves.”

“Don't let Wynona hear you say that,” I teased.

“Can you imagine?” Fina said, laughing. “She'd body slam me before I could finish the sentence.”

“Hey,” I said, “I was going to see about dinner. Would you like to join me?”

Fina's big grin somehow grew even bigger. “I'd love that,” she said. “Should we see if the rest of the girls want to join? Even Wynona?”

I nodded. “I think we should,” I said. “Since we hardly had any time this morning. And we were all a bit on edge. I think it'd do well for us to get to know each other.”

“I agree,” Fina said. “And you know, if I don't end up winning, it can't be a bad idea to be on good terms with the queen.” She shot me a wink.

I laughed and shook my head. Fina wasn't privy to my plan, but she didn't need to be. She was right, though. If Fina won, and it was easy for Daybreak to gain access to the king's ear—that might be the best solution I could imagine.

“Wonderful,” I said. “I'll have my maidservants send invitations to the other women.”

“And I'll ask mine about arranging the smaller dining room,” Fina said. “In two hours, then?”

“Perfect.” I offered Fina a playful curtsy, which made her laugh. “I'll see you then.”

“I have to finish this chapter.” Fina wagged the book again. “I think they're going to kiss.”

Laughing, I made my way back to the front of the library, where Amity and Rue were waiting for me. Both had a book in hand, which made me smile—I knew I liked them. They jumped to their feet as I approached.

“I'd like to invite the other women for dinner this evening, in the small dining room,” I said. “Can one of you extend that

invitation?”

“Certainly!” Rue said brightly. “I’ll do that right away.” She handed her book to Amity then shifted with a goosebump-inducing crackle. Her wolf wagged its tail, then bounded out of the library and down the halls.

Amity set the books they’d been reading back on the stack where they’d found them. She escorted me back to my quarters in human form, which I was oddly grateful for. I’d had quite enough of wolves today—the guard had gotten under my skin.

“Are you enjoying Efra so far, milady?” Amity asked. “Is there anything we can provide to make you feel more welcome?”

“It’s lovely,” I said. To my surprise, I found I meant it. Despite the drafty, dark halls of the manor and the guard that had pushed me around a little, I was excited to make friends. I didn’t have them in Daybreak—just Griffin. Having a friend like Fina, even if it was temporary, was a new and unique joy. I wondered if I could get any of the women to tell me a little more about the landscapes of their cities—maybe that had sketches of their own. I longed to compare the real cities to the maps I’d seen. “I’m very impressed by the library. I can’t say it’s something I expected.”

“The Lady Glennis is an avid reader,” Amity said.

“But not the king?”

“I can’t say I know.” Amity followed me into the room and briskly stoked the fire until it was roaring again. “Will you be changing before dinner?”

“Oh, perhaps, but I can do it on my own,” I said. “I have some personal business to attend to.”

Amity curtsied and left me alone in the room. I opened my trunk and pulled out my stationary kit, still tucked safely in the inner pocket. I smoothed the fine eggshell paper out on the table and set up my pen and inkwell.

Letter-writing always soothed my nerves. It was easy to sink into the ritual of it, the delicate scratch of my pen over the

paper, and the crackle of the fire driving away the draft. “*Dear Griffin,*” I wrote, “*with any luck this letter may reach you just days before I return...*”

By the time I’d laid out the events of the past two days, and my hopes for how I’d make my way home, the fire had started to burn down and the sky outside was darkening. I glanced at the clock, then started—I was going to be late for the dinner I’d planned! I cleaned up in a hurry, briskly changing out of my meet-and-greet dress into a simpler warm gown for dinner. I wrapped my hair into its usual plait and left the tiara on my vanity. For a moment, I considered wearing the pendant Griffin had given me—but I didn’t want anyone to ask about it. Better to keep things simple.

Before I left, I sealed the letter with my family crest ring. I didn’t expect the Nightfall court to go as far as to read my mail—but I still didn’t want to take the chance.

I hurried to the guest dining room, following Amity in her wolf form as she trotted briskly through the darkened halls. When I stepped into the dining room, small and cozy save for the vaulted ceilings and extravagant albeit dusty chandelier, the four women were already seated at the table.

“I’m so sorry,” I said as I hurried in. “I was writing a letter and lost track of time.”

“No worries,” Fina said with a smile. “We only just arrived as well.”

Rona sucked her teeth. “Just like a princess to invite guests and show up late.”

I started. Rona said that with such venom it shocked me. “It’s just as I said, I was only—”

“Evening, ladies,” Lady Glennis said as she strode through the back door of the dining room. I wasn’t expecting to see her but I was grateful for the interruption. I took my seat at the table and took a quick sip of wine, avoiding Rona’s burning gaze. “I heard you had decided to dine together. I hope I’m not intruding.”

“Of course not!” Fina said brightly. “The more the merrier.”

Wynona barely hid a scoff. Glennis didn’t seem to notice—or if she did, she didn’t deign to give it a response.

Glennis took the last remaining seat at the table and cast us all a discerning smile. “I hope everyone enjoyed their day exploring the Nightfall Manor?”

“The library is amazing,” Fina said. “I’ve never seen so many books in one place.”

“And the gallery of portraits!” Adora said. “Stunning. You must have artists from all across Frasia!”

The kitchen staff came in with platters of food: roasted vegetables, a fine ham, roasted duck, crusty bread. It was a little simpler than the meals served at the court of Daybreak, but it smelled incredible. I took another sip of wine.

“And the training facilities, Wynona?” Fina asked. “How were they?”

If I didn’t know better, I would’ve thought Wynona’s eyes were almost sparkling. Somehow Fina could get even Wynona talking.

As we ate and drank more wine, conversation flowed smoothly and easily between us. I even caught myself laughing, hearing tales of Wynona knocking over Nightfall wolves on the training mats, and Adora getting lost in the winding halls of the manor and ending up in the servants’ quarters. Lady Glennis didn’t contribute much. She seemed content to eat and drink wine and watch us interact.

I wondered if this was another way she was testing us—watching us interact at a casual dinner. How much pull did the Lady Glennis have in this competition? I couldn’t bring myself to worry too much about it, though. I was having too much fun chatting and laughing with the other women. No one in the competition knew me as the standoffish Ice Princess of Daybreak—here I was just another lady, another competitor, and maybe, to some of them at least, a friend.

When the night wound down, I'd had enough wine to redden my cheeks. I wasn't drunk—it wouldn't be ladylike to get drunk—but I'd maybe had half a glass too many.

“Get some rest tonight, ladies,” Glennis said as she stood from the table. “You'll meet the king tomorrow morning.”

We all nodded in acknowledgment, though I saw Wynona suppress an eyeroll. Likely she was predicting tomorrow to be a repeat of today. I simply curtsied, then wished everyone good night, with an extra wink to Fina. This dinner had gone remarkably well. I found I wasn't even anxious about tomorrow—I was almost looking forward to it.

Outside the dining room, Amity and Rue were both waiting to escort me, both in their wolf forms. Strangely, I was already getting used to seeing them as their big-pawed gangly wolf selves. Sometimes it was nice not to have to engage in the courteous small talk. Maybe they knew that, too.

I rounded the corner toward my quarters and nearly walked into someone heading my way. “Oh!” I said. “I apologize, I didn't—”

“Fancy seeing you here,” the guard said.

I took a step back. In front of me was the same man from the library—except now, he wasn't wearing the leather armor he'd worn earlier when he was, I assumed, on duty. Instead he was wearing plain dark trousers and a loose white shirt, which was open garishly low, revealing the dark hair on his broad, tan chest. I swallowed. My face was hot, but I was sure that was the wine.

At my side, the two wolves bent their front legs and ducked their heads low, ears back. Then they turned tail and scurried down the hall, back the way we'd just come, and disappeared out of sight. I almost wanted to call for them. Why would they just leave me with this stranger?

“I'm sorry,” I said with much less sincerity than my first apology, “what exactly are you doing in the ladies' quarters?”

“Ah, I was just on a stroll earlier, and thought of our little encounter in the library.” He leaned one shoulder against the

wall casually, like we did this all the time. He'd tied his dark hair back, which was a nice look for him—I shook that thought aside—but he still had on that irritating smirky expression.

I crossed my arms over my chest. The audacity of this man! Not only had he gotten into my business in the library—he was creeping around my quarters! I was prepared for Nightfall to be a bit more barbaric than the court of Daybreak, but this wasn't animal behavior. This was plain old rudeness.

“I'm here for the King's Choice competition,” I said, “and I don't intend to spend my precious time in Efra engaging with rude manor employees.”

I intended to step around him, but my words only made his toothy smile bigger. Strangely, something about that smile kept my feet from moving. Again that prickly feeling ran down my spine, but it wasn't entirely unpleasant.

“Well, I'd only intended to give you this.” He pulled a small sheet of folded parchment from his pocket and offered it to me.

Against my better judgment, I took it from his hand, and inhaled sharply in surprise when I unfolded it. It was a carefully drawn copy of the map he'd snatched from my hand earlier. Smaller, less detailed—but certainly the same. I gaped at it for a moment before I remembered myself, and straightened back up. Yes, I would definitely be spending time reviewing this copy in my room. But that didn't make his behavior any more acceptable.

“Thank you,” I said. “But I would appreciate it if you would refrain from bothering me further.”

“Oh, I didn't realize I was bothering you,” the guard said. He looked *so* damn pleased with himself, with his eyes flashing gold.

“And I won't be here in Efra long,” I said. “Better not to waste your time.”

“And why's that?” he asked. “You just said you were here for the Choice.”

“The king won’t be choosing me,” I said. “I’m here to represent my court well, that’s all. A Lady of Daybreak would never fit in with such a barbaric court as this—with the guards harassing guests in the hall! I will be telling Lady Glennis about this.”

I lifted my chin and stepped around him. My irritation burned in my chest—it really was *so* rude of this man to be lurking around the ladies’ quarters, and it was even worse of my handmaidens to leave me alone with him! What kind of court *was* this? What if this guard had tried to force himself on me? I wouldn’t put it past him, not with the curious, interested way he was watching my every move.

“Besides,” I said, “I have someone waiting for me at home. Someone with manners.”

I strode toward my room, and for some reason, it took all my self-control to not look back over my shoulder to see if the guard was still looking at me. My wolf was still awake and whining, low to herself like she knew it wouldn’t do any good. She wanted to be close to this guard—his presence woke her up. That was a clear sign that this man was bad news. It was nice making friends with the girls, but if the men of the court were like this guard, I needed to get out of Efra sooner rather than later.

I turned the corner and hurried into my quarters, then locked the door behind me. Just in case.

Amity and Rue were inside, tending the fire and turning back the covers to my bed. Mostly, though, they’d seemed to be killing time, like they were waiting for me to return.

“Welcome back, milady,” Amity said with a smile as she smoothed out the comforter. “I trust the conversation went well?”

“What?” I asked. I stepped over to the small table and smoothed out the copy of the map the guard had given me. Had I packed a magnifying glass with me? Even though this copy was less detailed, I still wanted a closer look at the coasts. I turned to look through my trunk. “Why would that

matter to me? That guard harassed me earlier in the library, I firmly suggested he leave me alone.”

“You *what?*” Amity said.

Rue dropped the fireplace poker with a clatter. “Milady!” She clapped a hand over her mouth, but I could still see the corners of her astonished smile.

“What?” I asked again. No magnifying glass. I straightened up. “He’s just a guard... Isn’t he? Or the cartographer? He was very protective of the maps in the library.”

“Help me, gods,” Amity said. She pressed her lips together, clearly holding back laughter. Her eyes sparkled with mirth. “What did you *say* to him?”

“What are you laughing at?” I asked. Anxiety began to creep through me. “Who is that guard?”

“He’s not a guard, milady,” Rue said. “That was the *king*.”

My heart dropped to the floor. I hadn’t just spoken like that to the king himself. That was impossible. Why would the King of Frasia be lurking around the library and the hallways?

“No, it couldn’t have been,” I said. “He had to have been just a guard.”

“Nope,” Amity said. “Definitely His Highness.”

“Oh, gods,” I said. My knees felt weak as my stomach churned. My wolf whined again—she’d known something was off about him. I should’ve heeded her instincts for once. I dropped into the chair at the small table and pressed the heels of my hands to my eyes. “Oh, this can’t be happening.”

“It seems like he was looking for you,” Amity said. “That’s quite interesting. You said you already ran into him once? What did you talk about?”

I hardly processed the questions she was asking. “I was so rude to him. He ought to have my head.”

“Now, that’s a bit dramatic,” Rue said. She resumed stoking the fire. “Our king can be ruthless, but he’s also fair.”

It'd be quite fair to have my head for the disrespectful way I'd spoken to him. *And* I'd told him I was only here to aid the reputation of my pack! My plan to boost Daybreak's influence in Frasia had likely just backfired catastrophically. At least I'd almost certainly be eliminated first. The best-case scenario would be the king sending me back to my pack with my tail between my legs. Even that felt hopeful, though—I had a feeling my punishment would be much worse than simply losing the Choice.

I woke up so early that it was barely dawn. I had hardly slept the night before, tossing and turning in anxiety as I imagined how the king would deign to punish me for my disrespectful behavior. We were due to have our meet and greet this morning. Small blessings from the gods, though—at least I had found out that was the king before I saw him with the rest of the competitors. Surely I would've fainted where I stood otherwise.

The manor was quiet as I made my way to the nearby guest quarters. If I was going to get put in the stocks today, I should tell my escort about it. That was the right thing for a lady to do, wasn't it?

I cringed. Not that I knew a lot about being a lady, apparently. It'd taken me a grand total of two days to ruin my reputation with the court.

"Barion," I whispered as I rapped on the heavy wooden door to his quarters. "Barion, it's me."

From inside the quarters, Barion heaved a great sigh. After a few moments of rustling around, he opened the doors and squinted blearily at me. "What is it?"

"I need your help," I said.

A furrow of concern formed in his brow, and he stepped aside to motion me into his quarters. They were much smaller than mine, but the bed was still huge, and coals glowed in the hearth. I sat down at the small table, and Barion sat across from me. He was still barely awake, in a loose tunic and

slacks. He glanced around the room like he might be able to will some coffee into existence, but instead satisfied himself by packing his pipe with fragrant Efran tobacco and lighting it.

“So, what is it that has you barging in so early in the morning?”

No point in wasting time with Barion. “I may have... I may have run into the king outside of the trials.”

He blew a cloud of smoke toward the rafters. “Okay.”

“I didn’t realize he was the king,” I said. “He approached me in the hallway, and I was alone, and I was—I was rude to him. I was frightened.” A half-truth. I wouldn’t describe what I’d felt as *fright*. But I was certainly afraid now.

“I see,” Barion said.

“I just—if something happens—I just thought you should know.”

Barion took another long pull off his pipe and exhaled the smoke like a sigh. “Nothing’s going to happen,” he said. “He won’t punish you during the Choice. It wouldn’t reflect well on Nightfall—and saving their reputation from *his* choices is the entire purpose of this fiasco.” He shook his head.

“So he’ll just eliminate me?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Barion said. “I’ve never been able to predict what the Bloody King will do, no matter how I try.”

“Shh!” I hushed him. “Don’t call him that here.”

“Well, he earned the title,” Barion said gruffly. Then he sighed. “Don’t worry, pup. If the king tries anything suspicious, I’ll stop it in its tracks.”

“But what about Daybreak—”

“All you need to do to defend Daybreak is perform well in this competition, Reyna,” Barion said.

I nodded, then exhaled to center myself. Barion was right. The best thing I could do now would be to try to fix the mistakes I’d already made.

“Besides,” he said, “you think old Barion would let anything happen to a Lady of the Court?” He grinned. “Relax. Maybe the king will be compelled by a bit of feistiness.”

“Maybe,” I said as I stood to leave. “Thank you, Barion.”

“Good luck,” he said.

I hadn’t even considered that possibility. That the only thing worse than offending the king was piquing his interest.

I made my way back to my room, where Amity and Rue were waiting for me. Amity immediately wrinkled her nose. “Milady!” she gasped. “Were you *smoking*?”

“Of course not,” I said. “I was around it.”

“You can’t attend the meet and greet smelling like that,” Amity said. “Quick, Rue, heat the bathwater!”

I was already running low on time. I sniffed my arm curiously and couldn’t smell a trace of the tobacco. Perhaps the girls had sharper senses than I did due to all their time spent in their wolf shapes. If they could smell the smoke on me, the king would certainly be able to. I didn’t need to offend him any more. What was worse, I wondered as I rushed through a quick bath, smelling of smoke or being late? I dressed in a hurry, wearing a pale blue gown with flowing sleeves, my hair in a plait, and the tiara tucked into it right before we all hurried out the door.

Amity and Rue escorted me to the solarium at a brisk pace. I was the last to arrive, but I wasn’t late, thank the gods—I wanted a moment to speak to Lady Glennis in private, to try to get a quick, private audience with the king. I needed to apologize.

Lady Glennis’ attention was currently being held by Rona, who was speaking to her in a voice so low I couldn’t hear. She looked gorgeous, stunningly elegant in a silk gown of black and deep purple, the same colors of the Nightfall crest. She had perfect posture, and confidence, despite being the only commoner here. I felt a bit frazzled in comparison, with my nape still damp from my brisk bath and my hastily chosen dress feeling a bit plain. Rona glanced over as I walked into

the solarium and narrowed her dark eyes. With a curtsy, she finished her conversation with Glennis and strode back to the table.

“Good morning, Rona,” I said.

She shot me a cold look. “You don’t need to play nice, lady.”

My eyes widened. “Excuse me?”

I glanced toward Lady Glennis, but she was already making her way out of the solarium. So much for asking for my private audience. The three other women were out of earshot, chatting among themselves with delicate porcelain cups of coffee in hand.

“Don’t waste my time,” Rona said. “I’m not interested in playing along with your nice little girl act.”

“Excuse me?” I asked again, rearing back. Rona hadn’t been nice to me, exactly, not even at the dinner last night—but I’d expected her to at least be *cordial*. Her eyes flashed gold at me, and her voice came out low, and rumbling. Internally, my wolf snarled, sensing the threat immediately.

“We all know they call you Ice Princess in Daybreak,” Rona growled. “Cold. Picky. Unfriendly. Unshifting.” She spat the last word like it offended her personally. “The king needs a woman—he needs a *wolf*. A wolf who isn’t afraid to defend what’s hers.” Her dark eyes roved judgmentally over my body. “A wolf who isn’t afraid of sex.”

My wolf urged me to bare my teeth, growl back, show this woman that I was just as capable as she was. For a moment, my wolf surged dangerously close to the surface—my skin prickled and my adrenaline surged with the desire to show dominance. It was close enough that Rona sensed it. She smirked.

But this was exactly the kind of woman I *didn’t* want to be. Angry and conniving, using my wolf to get what I wanted. I was a *lady* and I was going to act like one, even when my wolf wanted otherwise. She was so active internally, more demanding than she’d been in years.

Efra was bringing out the worst in me.

Before I could say anything in response, the door opened, and Lady Glennis stepped back inside. “Ladies,” she said.

The air in the room crackled with anticipation. The three other girls hurried to the table, setting their coffees down, and stood near Rona and me. My wolf settled back down, cowed by the knowledge of what was about to happen.

Lady Glennis stepped aside. The King of Frasia strode into the solarium.

He looked nicer than yesterday. If he’d been dressed like *this*, I would’ve known who he was. He wore fine dark trousers with a plain white shirt, but his full black cloak was gorgeous, lined in dark fur and embroidered in ivory and deep purple. He wore no crown, but his cloak was fastened with a fine silver and moonstone clasp in the shape of the crescent moon crest of Nightfall. His feet were bare on the stone floor.

We all curtsied delicately. When I lifted my gaze, the king’s eyes were on me. There was a small smirk playing on his lips as he watched me. Again my skin prickled under his attention—simultaneously wanting more of it and to get away. He exuded the same easy confidence he had in the hallway, except now I knew why.

“Good morning,” the king said. His voice was deep and rich, like dark chocolate. He removed his cloak and handed it to one of the guards. His white shirt did nothing to hide the curve of his muscles—even less so when he rolled the sleeves up to the forearms like he was about to go out into the stables for chores, instead of breakfast with his potential wives. He took his seat at the head of the table, and once he was seated, we joined him. Lady Glennis took her seat at the foot.

Servants rushed in, summoned the moment we sat down. They moved effortlessly, silently, setting our plates with a luxurious breakfast of eggs, sausage, dried fruit, crusty bread, rich butter, and coffee. We all sat with our hands in our laps, silent, until the king began to eat. Then the Lady Glennis. Only then did we five competitors begin as well.

I felt the tension heavy in the room, like we were eating beneath our own private guillotines. The king seemed as pleased as ever. He ate his food with gusto, and drank coffee from a different mug—which I assumed was because the delicate porcelain we used would shatter in his strong grip. He ate leaning back comfortably in his chair, casting his gaze around the table at the five of us like he was amused. His dark eyes kept darting back to me, over and over. I sipped my coffee. I found it hard to swallow around the tightness of anxiety in my throat.

Adora squared her shoulders, and then cut the silence with her bright, cheerful voice.

“Your Highness,” she said, “I’m so impressed by the royal gardens in Efra. The climate is harsh but the grounds are beautiful. I spent some time with the gardener yesterday learning about Nightfall’s unique cultivation techniques. It’s quite lovely.”

“Did you now?” the king asked, with a small smirk on his face. It was almost patronizing—like he was interacting with a small child instead of a grown woman.

“Yes, he introduced me to your rose hybrids. Even pruned a few myself.”

The king hummed a wordless affirmative. With the silence broken, Wynona found her voice, too, launching into a discussion of the pack’s training grounds. The king regarded her with the same mild interest. None different than the other. At the foot of the table, Lady Glennis looked almost irritated with him.

“And the library, Your Highness!” Fina said with delight. “The library here is amazing. Lady Reyna nearly had to drag me out of there.”

“Did she?” the king asked. His face broke into a wider smile. “Lady Reyna, did you find anything of interest in the library?”

My cheeks heated.

The king took a sip of his coffee. Over the rim of his mug, his eyes gleamed and flashed gold.

What kind of game was he playing here? What reaction did he want? I felt like a butterfly pinned to a board under his eyes. Part of me wanted to make a sharp-tongued remark, while my wolf wanted to roll over and bare her belly. Would it be better to acknowledge what had happened or pretend it never did? What did he want from me? What would be best for my court? I couldn't risk offending the king further—if he wanted to prove a point, he could punish me, or my pack. If the king decided to take over Daybreak, there was no way we could stand against his soldiers. We were a merchant pack. We had soldiers, sure, but nothing like the armored wolves of Nightfall.

My tongue felt too big for my mouth. I'd tried so hard to be *ladylike* through all of this. And now I felt stuck, like I didn't know how to behave at all.

"I spent my day with Duchess Alana," Rona interjected.

The king's eyes widened, then narrowed, but Rona didn't seem to notice. The duchess was the king's mother, who would be stepping down when the king chose a bride.

"She's a lovely woman," Rona said. "We embroidered together and enjoyed some striking conversation. She's even more impressive in person. I was quite honored to be in her presence, and she even invited me to join her for tea again tomorrow."

Rona looked inordinately pleased with herself as she talked up Duchess Alana more—her embroidery skills, her fine tea sets, her knowledge of Frasian civic matters. "The duchess seems to think the Dawnguard pack needs to develop newer training techniques—"

"Speaking of techniques," Wynona interrupted with a cool glare, "Your Highness, how are the affairs of the Nightfall military?"

The king hummed thoughtfully. I realized Wynona was the first contestant to ask the king a question. And it seemed like

she'd asked the right one, from the way the king began to speak casually about his plans for developing the Nightfall troops. Lady Glennis watched him carefully as he did so, as if waiting for him to let some confidential information slip. But the king was a skilled conversationalist himself—he seemed to be discussing the intricacies of the military without actually saying anything of detail. It was hard to focus on. These were matters I had no hand in within the court of Daybreak. I couldn't stop glancing between the king and Lady Glennis, my hands folded in my lap.

I had to get the king alone. I had to apologize. I hated not knowing where I stood with him. I wanted to be on solid ground again—navigating the court in a way I understood, instead of having to see the king's eyes gleam whenever he glanced my way.

Breakfast finally ended and the king stood and took his leave briskly. Before Lady Glennis could say anything to stop me, I stood and hurried to follow him, ignoring the gasps of shock in my wake.

The door to the solarium swung closed behind me. The king strode down the hallway, his bare feet silent on the cold floor, and his cloak sweeping long and luxurious, lined with the dark fur the same color I imagined his wolf's pelt to be. I shook myself internally—why was I imagining his wolf at all?

“Excuse me,” I said as I hurried after him. “Excuse me, Your Highness?”

The king stopped in the middle of the corridor. He turned around and watched me almost curiously, that maddening smirk playing once again on his lips. He said nothing. He just stood there.

I swallowed around the tightness in my throat. Internally, my wolf whined in anxiety—we *had* to make this right.

“Your Highness,” I said, “I wanted to apologize for my behavior yesterday. It was unbecoming of me as Lady of the Court to speak to anyone that way, much less the King of Frasia.”

His smirk only grew, revealing his sharp canines.

“I hope to proceed through the Choice as a better representative—oh!”

The king stalked forward so quickly I hardly saw him move. He moved so quietly, graceful in a way that belied his stature. He stood so close to me he nearly filled my field of vision. I could almost smell the sweat on his skin. Or maybe I was imagining that. My mind told me to reel back, but my wolf told me to step closer. I stood my ground, trying to meet his gaze steadily as he loomed over me.

“What did you think was going to happen, little wolf?” he asked in a voice so low it vibrated through my bones.

“I—” Suddenly, I struggled to find my words. This was not how I expected this interaction to go. “I hoped you wouldn’t be too angry with me. For my disrespect.”

The king laughed, low in his chest, almost like a growl. “You worried I would be angry.” He said this like the idea amused him. Then he reached forward and took a loose lock of my hair between his fingers and smoothed his thumb over it. His eyes flashed briefly golden, and my wolf whined internally.

“If I were angry with you,” he said, “you would not be standing here in my corridors right now.”

My heart pounded hard in my chest. My wolf whined again as my skin prickled with the urge to shift and show submission. Not because he was the King of Frasia—but because his wolf felt so *powerful*. Even standing here in front of me as a human, his power was nearly tangible, heady in the air around me. And it felt strangely good. I had to focus to resist my wolf’s desire to shift. I’d never felt her demand like this, never in my life. The king seemed to notice it, too, if the golden gleam in his eyes was anything to go by.

“If I was angry,” the king said, “your court would be destroyed by now. There would be nothing left of the Daybreak pack—nor your father as their leader. Your wolves would be sworn fealty to Nightfall.”

I swallowed hard again. He was right. I'd been so worried that he would punish me that I hadn't considered what he might do to my pack. He could've sent wolves to Daybreak in the night, for all I knew. He *was* the Bloody King. I couldn't find any words to respond to him. It didn't feel like a threat—it felt like a simple statement of fact.

“You have not earned my anger yet, wolf,” he said. “I trust you enjoyed the map.”

The whiplash made my head spin. “I—yes, Your Highness, I enjoyed studying it greatly.”

“Good,” he said. “I expect you to make the most of your time here in Efra.”

He released the lock of hair between his fingers, then took a step back. Suddenly, I missed the closeness. This conversation made me feel like I understood him even less.

“You mean,” I said, before I could stop myself, “you aren't sending me home?”

“Lady Reyna,” he said with a smile, “the competition hasn't even begun. And besides...” He took a step backward and threw his arms wide, making his cloak splay out. “...Why would I do that when you're the most interesting thing here?”

His smirk turned to a grin, and he raised his eyebrows at me briefly, almost playfully, before he turned and strode away down the hall. He left me dumbfounded, standing in the hallway like my shoes were nailed into the floor.

“The most interesting thing here.” I wasn't sure if that was a compliment or a threat.

The next day, mid-morning, I was seated in a hard-backed chair against the stone wall of a narrow corridor. The ceilings were high, and the stained-glass windows were thankfully uncovered, letting sunlight sluice into the room. It was gorgeous, but so, so quiet, and neither I nor the two other contestants seated next to me were looking forward to what was behind that ornately carved wooden door.

It slammed open. Rona strode out, her hands balled into fists at her side. She swore colorfully as she passed us, eyes blazing with fury.

“Guess it didn’t go well,” Fina murmured next me.

Rona left the hallway and Lady Glennis stepped out of the room with her trademark notebook in the crook of her arm. “Lady Reyna? The council will see you now.”

The council.

The first official trial of the Choice. It was all finally beginning to seem real.

“Good luck,” Fina whispered, and nudged me.

The King’s Choice wasn’t just a method for the king alone to choose between potential suitors. The point of the Choice was to prove to the rest of Frasia that the Bloody King could be trusted to lead diplomatically—that he wouldn’t just rule through violence, despite the way he’d taken the crown. He wanted to ensure his reign was long and well-regarded, lest another pack rush in and try to take the crown for themselves.

The council would help him make his decision—or at least, that’s how Barion had explained it to me. Whoever the king chose had to have the approval of the council in order to become the next Queen of Frasia.

I stepped into the trial room.

I was nervous, but confident. This I could do—be perfectly ladylike, and perfectly dull. All I had to do was be pleasant and nice to look at, like a decoration, so one of the other women would outshine me. I took the seat in the center of the room, smoothing my deep blue gown over my knees. I smiled demurely up at the low dais, where four carved wooden chairs seated four severe-looking council members.

Over dinner last night, Lady Glennis had given us names and statuses of the council members. The Duchess Alana was not on the council, though I was certain she held sway. The council members were court members, chosen for their knowledge of the skills a queen should have. Lady Marin, the main judge of this trial, sat on the far left. Her face was lined, and her long dark hair was streaked with silver, hanging loose around her deep purple cloak, the same one all four council members wore. At her side was Lady Oleta, with her sharp, birdlike gaze and gnarled hands. Then there was Lord Nylander, so short his bare feet barely touched the ground beneath the chair, and his head shaved bald. And finally, Lord Elfriede, who looked strikingly young compared to the other three, with dark curly hair cropped close to his skull.

I’d reviewed their names, and what specialties they held in the court of Nightfall, and why they represented the best of the pack. And yet, seated in front of them, all of that information flew from my mind. I felt like a criminal walking to the gallows. All four of them stared at me like they were trying to see all the way to my wolf, locked deep in my soul.

“Good morning, Lady Reyna of Daybreak,” Lady Marin said curtly. “Are you ready to begin?”

“Thank you for having me, Lady Marin,” I said. “Yes, I’m ready.”

She opened a small notebook. “Here is your first question. For the winter solstice celebratory feast, what are the traditional courses?”

“For what region, milady?” I asked.

She raised an eyebrow, impressed.

Yeah. I could do this.

The trial went by in a blur, rapid-fire questions of pack norms and place settings and hypothetical social situations and diplomacy and merchant contracts. By the time Lady Marin dismissed me, I was dizzy with the questioning, but pleased with how I’d done.

I left council with my head held high, and Lady Glennis sent in Fina after me. She grinned at me as she strode in, confident as ever.

I met Adora in the Solarium, where she was having coffee and a light lunch. She still looked a bit pale, having been the first of us to face the council, but the biscuits she was nibbling on seemed to be reviving her. She perked up as I walked in.

“Reyna!” she chirped. “How did it go?”

“I think it went well,” I said with a nod. I’d answered the questions correctly, for the most part, but without too much detail—I’d been polite, but not overly engaging. Effective. Boring. The perfect candidate to be cut from the lineup.

“Rona rushed in here, took a coffee, and left,” Adora said. “I tried to talk to her about the interview, but she just blew me off.”

“Doesn’t surprise me,” I said with a sigh. “She didn’t look happy when she left the council room.”

“Well, it’s not fair to ask a commoner questions of that detail,” Adora said. “These are things we’ve been learning since we were little girls.”

“True,” I said. “What did you think about the question about managing the late payment between the Askon merchant shipper and the distributor? I found it to be a bit convoluted.”

“Oh, a nightmare,” Adora said. “But we’ve actually dealt with that in Starcrest a bit, so here’s what I suggested...”

Over coffee, Adora and I compared notes about the more complicated questions of the trial. By the time we’d finished our coffees, Fina rushed in, her bright eyes a little wild. But her smile was still huge.

“Wow,” she said as she poured a coffee for herself. “They don’t mess around in there.”

“How did it go?” I asked.

“Just fine,” Fina said. “Not my strongest area, of course, but I doubt the council members know how to rotate a field to keep it producing properly all year. We all have our strengths.” She linked an arm through mine. “Listen, we have the rest of the afternoon off while the council is doing their important deliberations, and I want to go into town. I need to see the dressmaker.” She sipped her coffee. “Not want. *Need*. I did *not* bring enough warm clothes for this climate.”

I laughed. “I don’t know, that seems like it might be a bit of an ordeal...”

“Adora, will you go?” Fina asked.

“Of course,” Adora said. “The town square is beautiful in the snow.”

“Come on, Reyna,” Fina said. “There’s a bookstore.” She grinned at me.

That got my attention. Adora must’ve seen it on my face, too, because she broke into a laugh.

“Fine, fine,” I said. “I’ll go. I’d like to see what kind of work the tailors do here, anyway.”

“Right?” Fina said. “We have to learn about our potential new kingdom. Let’s finish our coffees and I’ll have my girls call a coach.”

This would be a welcome distraction—and it wasn’t like I had anything on my schedule other than returning to the library to investigate the map section more. And if I did that, there was always a chance that I’d run into the king again. I

cringed internally at the thought. The last thing I needed was a reason for the king to keep considering me ‘interesting.’ Definitely better to spend my time with one of the women I hoped would be chosen to be his queen.

We made our way into the waiting coach, bundled up in fur-lined cloaks with our fine shoes swapped for sturdier boots. Fina and I were struggling to adjust to the cold, but as fat flakes of snow drifted down from the white clouds overhead, Adora looked like she belonged here. Her cloak was pale blue and lined with white fur, which made her blonde hair look even lighter. She didn’t seem to mind the cold at all, not even when her cheeks and the tip of her nose began to turn pink.

“This will take some serious getting used to,” Fina said. She stumbled a little on a patch of ice. Adora laughed, caught her elbow, and helped her into the coach.

We rode away from the manor, through the elegant gates and back out into the hustle and bustle of the city. I leaned closer to the window as we rumbled over the cobblestone streets. The town was busy with activity, people moving in and out of the shops and residences. Laughter and music rang out from the busy pubs. I pressed my nose to the window. Part of me wanted to leap out of the carriage and join them, to see the places from the inside in ways I never could in Daybreak. But that wouldn’t happen here—at least not today.

There was a clatter from the pub, then a series of barks. Two wolves tumbled out of the front door, their brown pelts gleaming in the sunlight as they snapped their jaws at each other, then lunged in a playful fight and rolled over the street. A passerby huffed in irritation, sidestepping around the wolves’ fight as she hurried to her next destination.

Then one of the wolves suddenly shifted back. She was a young woman, not much older than us contestants. She stood suddenly nude in the street, but none of the passersby seemed to notice or care at all. The woman stuck out her tongue at the other wolf, then laughed and brandished her hands in a clear tease. She turned on her heel and started to bound down the

street, shifting mid-run back into her wolf as her friend made chase.

“Did you see that?” I asked. “They just shifted in the middle of the street!”

“Was it at the pub?” Fina asked.

“I think so,” I said. “Is that common?”

She laughed. “It is in Duskmoon. Usually not until the sun goes down, though. What about in Starcrest, Adora?”

Adora turned her nose up daintily. “No comment.”

“Oh, gods above,” Fina said, leaning forward with a predatory grin. “Have you done it? A little wolf streak after a few too many drinks?”

Adora bit back a smile. “I said no comment.”

“I knew it!” Fina squawked. “I knew you had a wild side!”

We all broke into laughter, then Fina and I relentlessly teased Adora until she was flushed pink. The carriage stopped in front of a small shop, tucked away at the end of an alley in a narrow stone building. The display behind the glass window was gorgeous: elegant fabrics draped artfully over chairs and coat racks, displaying the wealth of options available inside. A small sign hung above the door—Camille’s—but there was no other signage. It seemed one had to know this place existed to shop here at all.

Fina stepped out first. “Oh, I’m so excited about this. My maidservants said this is the finest tailor in all of Efra.”

The shop inside was even more beautiful than the window display suggested. I sighed with pleasure as we stepped over the threshold, simply because it was *warm*. A fire roared in the hearth, blocked by a decorative screen. Gleaming hardwood lay under our boots, dotted with plush rugs tossed artfully around. The back wall was entirely mirrored, with a small platform for clients to stand on for tailoring measurements. The other walls were covered with fabrics, gowns, cloaks, suits, dressing gowns, even towels—anything made of cloth was here.

“Welcome, welcome!” A woman stepped out from behind a plush velvet curtain, leading to the back room, I assumed, with an assistant hot on her heels. She was tall and angular, dressed in a simple and obviously well-fitted green gown that hit just below her knees. The short hem briefly shocked me, but she made it look natural. Her dark hair was pin-straight and cropped her shoulders while her eyes were deep-set over her birdlike nose. “I’m Camille Delacour. This is my assistant, Micah.”

The assistant’s head barely reached Camille’s waist. He swept into a low bow, then disappeared behind the curtain, and reappeared with a bottle and three glasses. He guided us to a low couch by the mirrors, then poured us each a glass of fine red wine.

“Wow,” I said, settling back into the couch. “This is lovely.”

“Thank you,” Camille said. “I received notice from the court that you may be joining me, so I did want to prepare a nice experience for you.”

Fina sipped her wine. “Experience?”

“I’d like to show you some of the designs I have to offer,” she said. “Then we can discuss fabrics, detailing, changes, et cetera, et cetera. All the things that make a lady’s wardrobe her own.”

In Daybreak, the tailors made my clothes for me without much input. I wasn’t given such freedom like this—freedom to choose and make changes. Excitement swelled in my chest.

“The Court of Nightfall will be covering the costs, as well,” Camille said. “So please choose anything you like. The king made that very clear—there is to be no limit on the finery for the contestants.”

My excitement fell like a bird shot out of the sky by an arrow. Of course the king knew we were here—and why was he paying for this? Was he trying to make me feel indebted to him, just like he’d done with the map? I exhaled hard, and the sound came out low and rough.

“Reyna?” Adora asked, with a curious tilt to her head. “Did you just *growl*?”

I snapped my mouth shut, horrified. “No! No, of course not.”

“Kind of sounded like one,” Fina said.

“Is there something wrong, my lady?” Camille asked.

“No, no, no, nothing’s wrong, this is all wonderful,” I said. I took a sip of my wine, and felt my face flush slightly, either from alcohol, heat, embarrassment—probably a little of each. “Just a bit of a frog in my throat from the cold weather. Adjusting to the climate has been a challenge.”

Fina didn’t buy it, but Camille did. “Ah, well, you’re in the right place, then,” she said with a smile. “We’ll get you everything you need to enjoy these Efran winters. Girls, come out, please!”

“What was that about?” Fina whispered to me. “Did something happen?”

“Later,” I muttered.

Fina didn’t have time to argue as five live models sauntered out from behind the curtain, wearing gowns of Camille’s design—some long, some with a shorter hem, varying necklines, and delicate embroidery. They were all beautiful, but my attention was caught on the model at the end. She wore a three-piece ensemble: a white fitted top, a long fur-lined coat with sleeves, and *pants*. They were high-waisted and so loose when the model stood with her feet together that they almost looked like a skirt. But they were *pants*. I’d never worn them as a Lady of Daybreak. If Camille was offering it now, I was not about to turn it down.

“Has something caught your eye, Lady Reyna?” Camille asked with a knowing smile.

“I love this style,” I said. I stood and approached the live model in the pants, who smiled demurely and held out her arm for me to inspect the fabric of the long coat.

“I do believe it’d suit you,” Camille said. “Shall we take your measurements?”

The models stepped aside, making space for me on the dais. In the mirror, Fina and Adora were both grinning with excitement. Micah hurried forward with a long tape measure in hand, and rapidly began taking my measurements, scratching them onto his notepad as he went. Hips, waist, shoulders, bust, inseam, all done quickly and expertly as Camille watched. She tapped one manicured finger to her lower lip.

“I’m thinking navy,” she said. “Silk. With silver detailing to complement the delicacy of your tiara.”

I nodded in agreement, biting back a pleased smile. A competitor of the King’s Choice in *pants*? That had to be more offensive than the snide little comments I’d made in the library. Maybe this was the right way to rebel—it was proof that I was not an adequate lady to be the queen. This, combined with my unwillingness to shift, might be enough to get me released from the competition. The king surely wouldn’t find me interesting if I continued to show myself as slightly boring and very unwilling to follow the Nightfall traditions.

“Wonderful,” Micah said. “I have what I need.”

I stepped off the dais and took my seat back on the couch. Fina hopped up right afterward, gesturing to one of the beautiful off-shoulder gowns on display.

“Lovely choice, Lady Reyna,” Camille said. “We’ll have it ready for you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” I balked. “How is that even possible?”

“Oh, well, my tailors are mostly Fae,” Camille said dismissively.

“What?” That only made me more confused. “*Fae*? In Efra?”

“Well, yes,” Camille said. She peered at me with some confusion. “Do you not have Fae in Daybreak?”

“I’ve read about them,” I said, “but I wasn’t aware they were still in Frasia!”

The books in Daybreak wrote of Fae as if they were long gone, either dead or emigrated.

“Ah,” Camille said. “I suppose there aren’t too many who have returned, yet. Fae just came back to Efra when the king took the throne. His rule further removed many of the prior restrictions on supernatural behavior.”

She glanced at me, as if expecting a response. I said nothing. The last thing I wanted to do was dig myself into a deep hole discussing the policy decisions of my grandfather, Constantine—especially when the king’s father, Drogo, had been the one to kill Constantine in cold blood for the throne. Constantine had led Frasia like my father led Daybreak, with a focus on respectability and diplomacy, not the savagery of the Nightfall wolves. If Frasia was still led by Daybreak, the manor would be in much better shape, and certainly without shifted servants running around.

“The king has continued what his father began,” Camille said. “Returning the land to its natural state and allowing the inhabitants to reveal their true selves without restriction. The freedom has invited the Fae back into Efra. I’m happy to work with them.”

I nodded in understanding. If the Fae had come again, something in the land was changing. But unlike Camille, I wasn’t sure this was a good thing. Drogo’s reign had not ended well for him—I couldn’t imagine that the king’s would, either. The Fae’s return was an omen, but not necessarily a good one.

“Well,” I said, “I’m delighted to hear it.”

Camille smiled politely at me. She seemed almost disappointed that I hadn’t offered her more of a reaction.

As Micah took Fina’s measurements, Adora looked more and more distraught.

“I just can’t decide!” she said. “I love the neckline on this gown, but the hem length on this one. And I’d prefer silk, but

then it must be lined for the cold weather—and what about this fine jacket!”

“We can combine elements, milady,” Camille said. “You have a good eye for this kind of work. What are you envisioning?”

“Pardon me,” I said as I stood up. “Adora, do you mind if I pop over to the bookstore?”

“Oh!” Adora smiled warmly at me. “No, not at all—we’ll meet you there just as soon as we’re finished.”

“Wonderful,” I said. “Excuse me, Camille.”

“Of course. I’ll send your outfit over just as soon as it’s completed.”

I hurried out of the tailor shop with my cloak wrapped tight around my shoulders. The driver escorted me through the busy streets of Efra around the corner to the bookstore. Luckily, it was close, and I avoided eye contact with the wilder residents of the city as best I could. Perhaps it was rude to leave the other two in the tailor shop, but that was the kind of rudeness that would play in my favor—good manners, bad decisions. I had a feeling it’d be quite the process for Adora to build her dream gown.

Besides, Camille’s words had ignited a burning curiosity in me, and I wanted all the time I could get to sate it.

A small bell jingled when I pushed the door to the bookstore open. It was darker than the tailor, dim and cozy, and the smell of paper and ink washed over me like a wave. Immediately, the tension in my shoulders loosened. The store was different than the manor’s library—it was low-ceilinged and packed tightly. It wasn’t designed to impress; it was designed to store as many books as possible in the small space. It felt homey.

“Welcome, welcome,” the bookseller said. He was a short man with a lined face and big ears—perhaps some imp ancestry—and his eyes were immense behind the magnifying glasses. “Can I help you find anything in particular today? The organization system is a bit strange here, I must admit—”

“History,” I said. “Or geography. Particularly of Frasia.”

“Ah,” he said with a smile. “A lady of taste. Come this way, I have just the thing.”

The bookseller led me through the narrow aisles to a section in the back. The shelves were full to bursting, with immense tomes bound in leather and faded titles like *Lord Keva Kavaney’s Travels by Land and Sea* and *A Brief Review Of Livestock Domestication in Starcrest*.

“Is there a certain subject that interests you?” the bookseller asked.

“Would you mind if I took a few minutes to peruse?”

“Not at all,” the seller said. “I’ll be behind the desk if you need anything. Do take your time.”

I carefully examined the shelves of books, passing over books that enticed me (maps, memoirs, historical accounts) until I found what I was looking for.

“*History of Fae in Frasia*,” I murmured as I pulled the slim volume from the shelf. “Hae Blaylock.”

Despite its narrow size, the book upon thumbing through it was filled with detailed maps, both large-scale maps of Frasia and smaller ones of the city and its neighborhoods. I flipped to the first page. “*As our numbers dwindle in Frasia, I wished, as a citizen of Efra with trace Fae heritage, to preserve the history of our people in the city and beyond...*”

Perfect. I didn’t want to be caught with just this book in my possession, though—better not to rouse too much suspicion if I could avoid it—and it wasn’t like I needed a *reason* to buy more books. I found more tomes that interested me: an atlas, a jaguar shifter sailor’s memoir, and a collection of Frasian myth. I was juggling my finds in one arm while kneeling in the back corner of the shop, peering at a poetry collection, when the bell jingled again.

“Oh, I’m just here to find someone,” I heard Fina say to the bookseller. “I believe I’ve misplaced a Lady of the Court in the stacks here?”

The bookseller laughed. I straightened up and hurried out of the corner, and nearly walked directly into Fina. She grinned knowingly at my finds. “Pretty neat shop, isn’t it?”

“Quite,” I said.

“Come on,” Fina said. “Adora’s in the coach outside.”

“Did she finally decide on a dress?”

“It’s going to be very extravagant,” Fina said with a giggle. “We need to get going, though, or else we’ll be late for dinner.”

“Right.” My mood soured a little. The dinner. This wasn’t going to be the fun, competitors-only dinner we’d had—this would have the king, the council members, and some other members of the court as well. It wasn’t technically a trial, but it might as well be one. This little trip was just a brief respite from the manor. Once I returned, it’d be back to my room, getting cleaned up, tied into a fancy gown, and then back to playing my role as a sufficiently forgettable lady. “I’ll be right out.”

I stood in front of the carved wooden doors to the main dining room. This wasn't the smaller room off the guest hall, or the solarium, or the library I'd become familiar with. The dining room was in the main hall of the manor, where it was a little more well-lit, the ceilings soared, and the halls bustled with wolves and humans alike. I was dressed in the finest gown I'd brought: floor-length pale blue with navy detailing, heavy silk, and a fine fur stole draped over my shoulders. Amity had insisted I wear my hair down again, and it was already irritating me, falling into my eyes.

"All right," Rue whispered. "Try to have a little fun."

I swallowed. Amity and Rue had an idea of how nervous I am, but I couldn't really put words to the anxiety itching in my chest as I steeled myself. This wasn't just the other competitors—this was the entire Court of Nightfall.

Amity pushed the door open.

The formal dining room was enormous, with immense stained-glass windows half-covered with plush velvet curtains. It was lit with torches lining the walls, and four crystal chandeliers glimmered overhead. The long table in the center of the room was set with fine porcelain place settings, but the guests were lingering around the room with glasses of wine, while finely dressed servants drifted among them with platters of hors d'oeuvres.

I would've considered this to be a fine dinner, if it weren't for the guards posted at the doors and near the dais at the end

of the hall and pacing around the perimeter. These guards weren't the leather-clad men I'd seen in the solarium and at the gates. These were in their wolf forms, and they were *immense*.

I'd never seen wolves of that size. They were closer in proportion to bears, with dark pelts of browns and grays, their nails clicking on the floor as they paced. Their golden eyes gleamed, but they kept their tails and heads low, attentive but unobtrusive. Still, their mere presence made my wolf rustle into wakefulness in my chest, hackles up and ears back.

I exhaled slowly, trying to calm her.

But then something else caught her attention, and she dragged *my* interest with it.

In the far corner, the king was talking to Fina. Fina looked gorgeous, in an elegant pale-yellow gown, with her hand on the king's forearm.

Was the king's wolf form as big as these guards?

Was it bigger?

I shook that thought aside. The king was dressed in his usual formal wear, slacks and a loose white shirt under his cloak, but this time he'd worn boots. He was laughing at something Fina said, his head thrown back.

My wolf whined at the sight. A cold spike of *something* shot through me. It felt like jealousy—but it couldn't be that. This was exactly what I *wanted* to happen, the king getting close to one of the competitors I considered a friend. It was, of course, the best-case scenario.

My wolf didn't seem to agree, though. Being around all these shifted wolves was getting to me. It was making me lose my grip on my instincts. At least I knew it was happening—it'd be easy to get it back under control once I was in Daybreak.

"Oh, thank the gods," Adora said as she rushed to my side. "Come, get a drink with me, I needed an excuse to get away from one of the Ladies of the Court—she was talking my ear

off about the intricacies of the shipping delays coming from Dawnguard.”

That actually sounded interesting to me, and I glanced around to see where this lady was.

“Of course that piques your interest,” Adora said with a laugh.

She tugged me away from the door and my wolf settled a little. Having Adora chattering away in my ear did make me feel a little calmer, and a little more in control. We each got a glass of fine, fruity wine from one of the servants. The wine was smooth but with a kick that made me widen my eyes.

“I know,” Adora said. “It’s strong.”

“Not bad,” I murmured.

We were only halfway through our drinks when the servants emerged from the side doors with trays and trays of food. The king took his seat at the head of the table, and all the guests hurried to follow to their assigned places—as they were marked with placards. I was seated between Rona and Wynona, with Fina and Adora across from me. We were near the head of the table, but the council members and Duchess Alana sat between us and the king.

The duchess looked bored already, gazing at us with her dark eyes cool and assessing. She was a beautiful woman, with a narrow, lined face, wearing a high-necked black dress with brown hair in a plait worn like a crown around her head. Rona looked inordinately pleased to be seated so close to the duchess, but the woman didn’t seem to return her enthusiasm. The mood was pleasant, but muted. I wished I had been seated next to Fina instead.

The court members filled the rest of the table, all in a bit higher spirit than the rest of us. The stakes of this dinner weren’t as high for them, I assumed.

Dinner was pig—entire suckling pigs, roasted and brought out whole. There were vegetables too, and whole pheasants, quail, too, but the pigs were the centerpieces. Seeing the entire animal like this made my skin itch a little, despite the fragrant,

enticing smell. It was another way the Nightfall wolves seemed to be a bit too close to their animal selves. It was as if they couldn't even throw a feast without having it feel like a successful hunt. I swallowed and folded my hands into my lap as the servants deftly carved the meat.

Then, for some reason, my nape prickled.

The sensation was strong, so intense that I had to fight the urge to flatten my palm defensively over my neck. I balled my hands into fists in my lap, then carefully, slowly, glanced up. Trying my absolute hardest to not get anyone's attention.

At the head of the table, the king was staring at me.

He was still mid-conversation with a council member, clearly, from the way he was nodding his head in acknowledgment and even responding to the short man's animated gestures. But his gaze was on me. I swallowed. Even as he spoke, that smirk played on his lips, like we were having a private conversation amid the noise. It made my blood rush in my ears, my skin buzzing. My wolf loved the attention—she wanted more. Wanted to be closer.

Under the table, Fina kicked my ankle.

“Milady?” someone was asking from a few seats down.
“Lady Reyna?”

“Yes?”

The man speaking tilted his head curiously. “I was asking you about the well-being of your Lord in Daybreak,” he said. “Since I am the ambassador to Daybreak and know him well myself.”

“Oh!” The whiplash made my head spin. “Of course. You're Lord...”

“Skorupski,” he said. “Niles Skorupski.”

“Of course!” I said again. “Lord Skorupski. It's wonderful to see you again.”

The Lord looked put-out. It was clear I hadn't recognized him at all—even though we'd almost certainly done business in the Daybreak court.

“Ice Princess,” Rona hissed under her breath.

A scowl flickered over my features before I was able to steel my face back into neutrality. I felt so frazzled and rough around the edges, so unlike the carefully self-managed lady I was used to being in Daybreak. Something about being in Efra was making me too sensitive, too reactive. I had to get myself under control.

The rest of dinner passed in a pleasant haze. The food was good, the wine delicious, and the conversation boring but still somewhat unnerving. The Nightfall wolves were boisterous, and at the far end of the table, there was laughter and raunchy jokes, even a flash of teeth here and there. Barion was among them, as were the other competitors’ escorts, but he was holding his own just fine. Rona watched that end of the table with envy. The king went back to his conversations with his council members, but throughout the dinner, I kept feeling his eyes on me, returning to me over and over and over.

After the meal, the servants guided us into the small ballroom just off the dining room. A band was already playing high-energy strings and drums in the corner. The servants quickly refilled wine glasses where necessary, and a few of the more inebriated court members began to dance a quick-footed jig to the music. It was so different than Daybreak—going straight from a fine meal to dance like *this*? I’d expected some waltzing, something elegant, but these rapid movements were like something I’d see at Marco’s Tavern in the late-night hours.

I took a sip of my fresh wine glass and beelined for Fina and Adora, deftly avoiding Lord Skorupski heading towards me with a look like he wanted to dance.

“Hey,” Fina said as I approached. They were standing near the edge of the room, watching the dance with the same curiosity I felt.

“Have you ever seen a dance like this?” Adora asked. “It’s so *fast*. Do you think they do it as wolves, too?”

The thought made my eyes widen. “Do *you*?”

“Hey,” Fina repeated, and swatted my shoulder. “What is going on with you? You were being so weird at dinner.”

I cringed. “Was it that obvious?”

“Definitely,” Fina said.

“A little,” Adora said.

I leaned against the wall behind me. Maybe that wasn’t perfectly ladylike behavior, but I was so tired. “Rona called me Ice Princess,” I muttered.

“Isn’t that me?” Adora asked, half-teasing and half-confused.

“It’s a nickname from Daybreak,” I admitted. “I don’t know how she knows it. I don’t have a lot of—or really, any—friends in Daybreak. I just do my duties as a lady. My father—he’s not so...”

“He keeps a tight leash,” Fina provided.

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s one way of putting it.”

“What do they mean by that?” Adora asked.

“That I’m cold,” I said. “Off-putting.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Fina said. “You’ve been nothing but kind to us.”

Yeah, I thought, you didn’t see how I spoke to the king. It was men I repelled. Sometimes on purpose, and sometimes not. I didn’t trust them—they always wanted something from me, either sex, or court favors.

“I’ve just...” I swallowed, fighting back a sudden prickle of tears behind my eyes. “I just don’t have any friends like you two at home. I never have. So, just, whatever happens with this Choice, I hope... I just hope we can stay in touch.”

“Oh, Reyna,” Fina said. “Of course we will.” She pulled me into a hug and smoothed her hand up and down my back.

“Of course!” Adora said. She tugged me away from Fina to give me a hug, which made me laugh, breaking the tension building in my chest. “You can’t get rid of us now.”

I pulled back. “Thanks. Both of you. Really.”

“Do you need me to fight Rona for you?” Adora asked.

“She would kill you,” Fina deadpanned. “Like, she’d kick your head off in one move.”

“I can hold my own,” Adora huffed.

I laughed. “No, no, no one needs to do anything. I’ll be fine. This will all be over soon, anyway.”

“Yeah, once I marry the king,” Fina said with a grin.

“Not if I get to him first,” Adora teased.

I laughed again, feeling a little dizzy, like the bubbles in my wine were fizzing around in my chest. At home, Griffin was my only comfort, and my sole supporter. He was the closest thing I had to a friend, but it was only now that I realized how different it was to be friends with other women. I hadn’t known this was what I was missing out on.

Then my wolf snapped into sudden alertness, like a scent had caught her attention.

“Funny,” a deep voice rumbled, “I thought this competition was about *competing*. I didn’t expect to see you three spending time with each other instead of the council members.”

We all turned to face the king.

My heart pounded hard in my chest. Even though Fina and Adora were flanking me, the king’s dark gaze only landed on me. It was like he was able to erase the rest of the world with his attention.

There was such an effortless handsomeness about him—he wasn’t dressed as elegantly as the other council members, but his mere presence was overwhelming and confident and strangely attractive. My wolf longed to show submission. Not that I would ever do that—not until I absolutely had to. And that would be hopefully never.

“I expected,” the king continued, “that you might behave more like those two. Meeting people. Learning how things

work in my pack.”

Over his shoulder, Rona and Wynona were sneering at each other. Rona had a court member on her arm, headed to the dance floor, and Wynona, despite standing next to a councilmember, looked like she was a breath away from shifting and lunging at Rona.

“Ah, Your Highness,” Fina said, “we were only—”

“Your Highness,” I cut in as my irritation grew, “would you rather we posture for dominance on the dance floor like those two?”

“Perhaps I would,” the king said.

“To think that Ladies of the Court would behave so childishly would be to insult our lineage,” I said curtly.

At my side, Adora inhaled sharply through her nose. My wolf whined internally, as my instincts fought my mind yet again.

The king made a low sound in his chest, somewhere between a growl and a laugh. The hair on my arms stood on end. He leaned closer and his eyes flashed gold—for a moment I thought he would shift right there and force me to show submission.

But then his face broke into that strangely familiar wolfish grin, showing his sharp canines. “My apologies, my lady,” he said as he straightened up. “Next time I’ll be sure to mind my business.”

He turned on his heel and strode away.

“What in the gods’ names!” Fina hissed. “Are you crazy?”

Adora stood there with her hands clapped over her mouth.

I blinked. I was still shot through with a strange mix of adrenaline and defiance and—something else I couldn’t quantify, heat stirring low in my gut. My wolf was confused. What was that reaction from the king? I’d intended to make him dislike me—had it backfired?

“I can’t believe you just had the King of Frasia *apologize* to you,” Fina said. “Oh, my days.”

“I need fresh air,” Adora said. She hurried toward the small balcony just off the ballroom, and Fina dragged me along, as well. As she tugged me across the ballroom, Barion caught my eye, then tipped his chin in wordless question. I shook my head. It made me feel better to know he’d had an eye on me while the king had spoken to us, even though I doubted there was anything he could’ve done if the king had decided to make his displeasure known.

But what would the king have done? Even before I knew who he was, when I’d been rude to him, he’d only responded with that smirky teasing. He’d been almost playful. I kept waiting for some kind of punishment to come down, and nothing happened. He just seemed... Curious. Amused. He’d intimidated me, but so far I hadn’t felt threatened at all. It was just his reputation that threatened me more than anything else.

Adora pushed open the glass doors to the balcony. The small balcony overlooked the solarium, its glass panels reflecting the endless stars overhead and the moon, peeking out from behind a cloud. The cold air shocked me, nearly burning my nostrils after the comfortable heat of the ballroom. Adora took a deep, cleansing breath, then exhaled dramatically and braced her hands on the railing of the balcony.

“What were you thinking?” Fina asked sharply. “Speaking to the king like that! That’s going to reflect poorly on all three of us, you know.”

“Oh, don’t say that,” Adora said, distraught.

“He would’ve been well within his rights to smack you,” Fina said. “Or worse.”

I sank onto the narrow bench of the balcony and pulled my stole tight around my shoulders. “It’s strange,” I said. “People keep saying that.”

“What,” Fina said, “that you’re crazy?”

“That he’s dangerous,” I said. I thought back to our previous encounters and my brow furrowed. “But I haven’t

seen him behave like that at all. Or anything even suggesting that.”

“Well, they don’t call him the Bloody King for nothing,” Adora said. “I wouldn’t push your luck.”

“I’m not pushing my luck, I’m just...” I pressed my lips together. What exactly *was* I doing? Trying to reconcile the man with his reputation? Trying to figure out what exactly *he* wanted to get out of the Choice? What did that amused expression on his face mean?

Before I could explain myself, a loud clatter rang out from the ballroom, then shouts and gasps. My wolf jolted to attention, and the three of us rushed back inside.

The sight that greeted us made me stop dead in my tracks. The band had ceased playing, and the room was still. At the doors, two guards in their wolf forms stood with hackles raised and long teeth bared in a snarl. The guests stood still. A woman dropped her glass of wine, and it shattered on the tiles, spilling red across the floor. In the center of the room the king gripped a court member by the throat. It was one of the men who had been seated at the end of the table, laughing riotously during the fine dinner.

The king’s hand was immense on the man’s scrawny neck, tan against his pale flesh, his nails digging into the skin. The man gripped the king’s wrist desperately, tugging at it helplessly. He didn’t even seem to notice.

“Let this be a reminder to you all,” he boomed. His deep voice echoed around the room, effortlessly commanding attention, even with his gaze fixed firmly on the court member’s face. “I may be entertaining this Choice for the benefit of my pack and the Kingdom of Frasia, but my participation in these traditions does not mean I have gone soft.” He bared his teeth in a frightful expression that was half-smile and half-snarl. His eyes glowed golden—he was closer to wolf than man. “I will not tolerate traitors such as Lord Cazzell in my court. Treason will not be met with trials or imprisonment as in courts past. To betray Nightfall is to forfeit your life.”

“Your Highness,” the man gasped. His red face was swiftly turning blue. “Please—no—”

“How dare you speak,” the king snarled. He gripped the man’s neck tighter and lifted him up. His toes now barely touched the floor. The man writhed in his hold, twitching desperately and clawing at his arm.

Then, with a simple snap of his wrist, the king broke his neck.

I gasped in horror, disbelief and disgust racing down my spine like ice.

The man went limp. The king tossed him aside like cleaned chicken bones. The body hit the stone floor with a sick *thump*, and the king didn’t even grant him a second look. He nodded at two nearby servants, who quickly shifted into small brown wolves. They trotted forward and dragged the corpse out of the ballroom. Every hair on my body was standing on end, and my heart raced.

When I finally tore my eyes away, the king was staring at me.

This wasn’t the curious look I’d felt at dinner, or the amused gaze when I’d spoken with some rudeness. I’d seen his eyes flash gold before, but never so completely. This wasn’t the man looking at me—this was the wolf.

I felt the shift before it happened.

The air in the room crackled with energy. My wolf whined in my chest, and my nape ached. I felt frozen in place, pinned by his gaze.

Then, like a rippling wave, he shifted. He didn’t wear the moonstone rings like the servants did—as his wolf rushed forward, his fine clothes ripped at the seams, falling like autumn leaves. His immense paws hit the stone floor almost soundlessly, and he jerked up and down like he was shaking water from his inky-dark pelt. I’d never seen a wolf so dark. There was no brown in his fur at all, it was all rich black, so deep it looked almost purple in the low light, not dissimilar from the colors of the Nightfall crest. He was the biggest wolf

I'd ever seen, bear-like in his immensity, muscles shifting with every breath.

The wolf stalked toward me, his tail low and ears pricked forward.

Fina and Adora took a step back. But me? I couldn't move.

Then the wolf growled. The sound was so low and so loud it seemed to vibrate into my very bones. I couldn't help it—I whimpered quietly, lower lip quivering. My wolf whined in my chest, begging me to let her out—to shift, and cower, and show submission in my wolf form. I could feel the desire tugging at me, burning behind my eyes. As much as my wolf wanted to appease the king, I wasn't going to shift. Not here—not in front of all these strangers. I shifted so rarely, only when I absolutely had to, when I'd skipped too many moon-shifts that I started to get sick. That wasn't going to change now. My instincts were going crazy. I had no idea what would happen if I *did* shift.

The king's wolf was so big that he was nearly as tall as I was standing up straight in human form. He stalked closer until I could feel the rough, hard exhale of each breath through his nose, and smell the wild animal scent of his pelt. My wolf whined again. She wanted to be free so badly—she wanted to make this right, to connect.

His golden eyes bored into me. His jaw dropped open, revealing his sharp teeth. He wasn't snarling, but such an expression didn't seem far off.

Even in his wolf form, I wasn't getting any more answers. He was just *looking* at me. What did he *want*?

A brusque laugh cut through the silence of the room. Rona was doing a terrible job of hiding her smile behind her hand, watching this encounter like it was the funniest thing she'd ever seen in her life. The sound caught the king's attention, too, and he swiveled his head, peering over his shoulder to find the source. This close I could reach out and bury my hands in the thick fur of his hackles or run my finger down the velvety-looking fur of his big, pointed ear.

I could. I wouldn't—but I could.

Rona didn't seem to capture the king's interest, though. He turned back to me, and this time, he moved even closer. He tucked his snout right into the crook of my neck and *sniffed*. I could feel the small inhalations and exhalations as he explored my neck and shoulder, pushing the fur stole out of the way to better access the bare skin. I closed my eyes tightly and tipped my chin up, just barely, and prayed to whatever gods were listening that the king didn't decide to tear out my throat for my earlier insolence.

His fur brushed my jawline as he moved. It was softer than I'd imagined. I was too afraid to move or think or even breathe.

Then the wolf stepped back. I risked opening my eyes. His ears flicked, and his golden eyes burned into mine for a long moment—and then he turned and bounded out of the ballroom.

I staggered backward. Only Fina's hand on my shoulder kept my knees from buckling.

"Music, please!" Lady Glennis crowed, gesturing at the band. With some confusion and effort, they picked up their instruments and began playing again. A strange tension rippled through the crowd as people began to speak again, and the servants cleaned the spilled wine.

"Was that 'Bloody' enough for you?" Fina hissed in my ear.

I swallowed. Even with the king gone, the sensation of his breath on my neck still lingered.

“He’s completely out of control,” I said furiously as I rapidly braided my hair into a plait. After a somewhat fitful night of sleep, I’d woken up not shocked by the king’s behavior, but angry. “I’d known the Nightfall wolves were keen on shifting, but that display last night was sickening!”

Barion had joined me in my room for coffee before I headed to the solarium for breakfast. Amity and Rue had brought my clothes from the tailor earlier that morning, but I’d requested privacy to get ready. The next trial was right after breakfast and I needed to get on my head on straight before I went into the arena.

“It’s how he rules,” Barion said. “Cazzell drunkenly revealed that he’d been embezzling some of Nightfall’s moonstone and cutting under-the-table deals with the traders from Shianga.”

“And that’s cause for execution?” I demanded. “It’s a trade dispute!”

“It’s like he said.” Barion sipped his coffee. “He wanted to make an example of it, to prevent anyone else from trying anything similar.”

“I bet he’s just pissed he has to hold this Choice at all,” I huffed. “He’d probably be happier running around in the woods slaughtering deer.”

“Oh, I’m sure he makes time for that,” Barion said.

I gaped at him.

“I’m kidding,” Barion said, laughing. “He’s busy with his kindly duties. Is it just the execution that’s got you so wound up? I thought you’d be expecting behavior like that, what with how worried you were about your imagined punishment.”

I sighed and stepped behind the dressing screen. The tailor had sent four outfits, including the one I’d requested at the shop. Two were gowns and two had trousers. For today’s trial, I decided on one of the outfits with trousers—a different fit than the one I’d tried on in the shop. It was a simple dark teal bodice, embroidered with light blue, and matching dark, fitted trousers more similar to menswear than womens. Over that I wore a knee-length skirt, except the skirt opened in the front, allowing full freedom of movement while still maintaining my modesty.

I’d never worn anything like this. My father never would’ve allowed me to wear trousers, not even when sparring with Barion.

“Speak up, pup,” Barion prompted.

“Ugh,” I said as I tugged the trousers on. “You saw him.”

“What part?”

“He *sniffed* me.”

Barion chuckled. “Indeed he did.”

“That’s so invasive!” I tugged the bodice on over my head and fastened the clasps on the front. Camille had really thought of everything—I didn’t need a handmaiden to put this on. “And embarrassing! Right in front of all the court members? Why would he do such a thing? It was so disorienting.”

“Hm,” Barion said. “Maybe he likes you.”

I said nothing. Barion knew this was not my ideal situation, but he didn’t know I was actively trying to lose. He probably said that to quell my nerves. Yet all it did was send a bolt of terror through me. Any curiosity I’d started to develop about the king had swiftly gone out the window after last

night. His amusement and playfulness were clearly just a front to get the contestants to let down their guard.

“Well, that’s one way of showing it,” I muttered.

I stepped out from behind the dressing screen. “What do you think?”

Barion raised his eyebrows but then nodded. “Quite functional. How does it feel?”

I spun on one foot then kicked in the air. “Functional,” I said with a grin. “I think it’ll help me today.”

“I doubt you’ll need help,” Barion said. “Not with the training I’ve given you.”

“Usually, I’d agree with you, but we’ve both seen Wynona’s arms,” I said.

“Hmm. Good point.”

I sighed and smoothed down the skirt over my thighs, then joined Barion at the table to sip my coffee. “It just put me off-balance,” I admitted. “Being so close to the king in that form...”

“Your wolf was interested?” Barion asked.

I nodded, even as my face flushed. “You know I don’t like to feel out of control.”

“You need a shift,” Barion said. “A run would do you a world of good. You’re dealing with a lot of stress.”

Out of the question, I didn’t say. Gods know where my wolf would end up taking me.

“Just keep an eye on the king for me, please,” I said. “I’m worried about him losing control again.”

Barion watched me carefully for a long moment, then nodded. “You know I’m always looking out for you, milady. I’ve brought something for you.”

I blinked. “A gift? From Barion himself? The man who is even vehemently against celebrating birthdays?”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s not a gift. It’s a tool.” He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and pulled out a long, thin knife, sheathed in a dark leather scabbard. The hilt was small, with a narrow guard inlaid with moonstone. He withdrew the blade from the sheath.

“Wow.” I leaned closer to peer at the thin, gleaming weapon. “That’s gorgeous—the craftsmanship is so delicate.”

He nodded. “Had it made special.” I reached out and he snatched it away. “Don’t touch the blade.”

“Why not?” I asked. “Enchanted?”

“No,” he said. “Just sharp. Trust me, and keep it sheathed when you don’t need it. I only wanted you to have something to protect yourself, ever since you mentioned what happened with the king.”

Barion didn’t pull the ‘trust me’ card often. When he did, I knew he meant it. So I nodded in agreement, and only then did he hand the knife over hilt-first.

“Thank you,” I said softly. Barion did always look out for me. If he thought there was a reason I needed to keep a knife around, it wasn’t unfounded. Even if I thought he was being paranoid, it was better to be too paranoid than not careful enough.

And the conversation did make me feel better—less like I was running blindly into the wolf’s jaws, for lack of a better term. I couldn’t go on a shifted run, and I didn’t have anyone to attack with the knife, but surely I’d feel better after this trial. I always felt better after I got to swing a sword around.

I arrived at the solarium for breakfast in slightly better spirits. The coffee had helped, as had Barion’s promise that he’d keep an eye on things. It just made me feel better to know I wasn’t dealing with all this alone.

Fina raised her eyebrows at my outfit, but Adora just grinned from where she was seated. They were both wearing simpler gowns, too, Adora in tan cotton and Fina in elegant greens. Rona was seated at the table with them too, but she just scoffed at my outfit like it was the dumbest thing she’d

ever seen. Her own dress was made for function as well, a brown skirt hitting just under her knees, and a black bodice with long fitted sleeves.

“Good morning,” I said as I joined them and made myself a plate of breakfast from the spread at the table. Wynona was still absent, though not late yet.

“How’d you sleep?” Rona asked with a half-smirk. “Any nightmares about the big bad wolf?”

I poured myself a coffee. “I slept fine.”

“I’ve never seen someone look so frightened around a wolf before,” Rona continued. “If I didn’t know better, I wouldn’t think you were a shifter at all. You looked like a scared little girl in front of the king.”

“Rona!” Adora said.

“I’m just stating the obvious,” Rona said. “A queen shouldn’t have been so spooked by something as simple as the king’s wolf. She should be honored to be in his presence.”

Irritation boiled over in my chest. What was Rona’s problem with me? I hadn’t done anything against her, but every opportunity she had, she was throwing cruel, childish barbs at me. I was already sleep-deprived and shaken up, and I was sick of having to sit here and listen to her judge me.

“It was not his wolf that disturbed me,” I shot back, even though it was only half-true. “But his savage behavior beforehand. Snapping a lord’s neck like that? At dinner? That’s not the behavior of a leader—it’s the behavior of a bully. A true king should manage such affairs in private, through the proper legal channels.” I sniffed. “And a respectable shifter keeps her wolf under control.”

The king strode into the dining hall.

I snapped my mouth closed. Rona looked inordinately pleased, like a cat who’d just caught a long-hunted bird.

He was grinning as he dropped unceremoniously into the seat at the head of the table, looking well-rested and full of energy. What had he been doing last night? Had he run

through the woods outside the city and slept as his wolf? Is that why his feet were still bare on the floor?

“I hope you don’t mind having a savage join you for breakfast,” he said with a grin as he fixed himself a plate of eggs and sausage. “I promise to use my utensils.”

My cheeks burned as I stared into my coffee cup. This had to stop happening. I had to stop *saying* things like that—even when I thought it was safe, it never really was. There was no excuse for my behavior. Conversational barbs like that worked when I was riposting with the Court of Daybreak, where my reputation was established, but here it was only getting me into trouble. My wolf was clouding my judgment. Being in Efra—being around the *king*—was making her far too active.

We returned to our meals as an uneasy silence fell over the table. I knew everyone was thinking about last night. About the king’s wolf. About how he’d sniffed me like we were packmates. The skin on my neck and shoulders prickled with the memory, but the sensation wasn’t entirely unpleasant. Though that had to be my wolf’s influence.

“Your Highness,” Fina asked delicately, “we seem to be missing Wynona.”

“Ah,” the king said. He sat back in his chair and kicked his feet out under the table, crossing them at the ankle. I pulled my own legs back under my chair to avoid him. “Wynona has been sent home.”

I nearly dropped my fork. The other three girls looked equally shocked.

“She was not my match,” the king said. “And so she was dismissed.”

“Of course,” Fina said. She took a sip of her coffee.

Nothing more was said about the subject. Adora easily filled in the conversation with light discussion about the upcoming trial, but I struggled to focus on her words. I was disappointed—I’d hoped I would be the first one dismissed. And why was Wynona dismissed privately? I’d thought there’d be more pomp and circumstance to the Choice. More

ceremony, more showmanship. The king had wanted this Choice to boost his reputation in Efra, hadn't he? How did dismissing competitors in private help that?

And, I realized suddenly, with Wynona gone, I'd have no one to lose to in our matches today.

Fina was strong, but not trained in combat, as far as I knew. Rona was likely a brawler. Adora—well, I'd be shocked if Adora had ever picked up a sword in her life.

My appetite dissipated. This was going to complicate things. And from the way the king was watching me, I had the feeling he might know that, too.

After breakfast, the king wished us luck and left the solarium just as briskly as we'd arrived. Lady Glennis strode in afterward, as elegant as ever with her notebook in hand and a small pair of silver glasses resting at the tip of her nose. "Ladies," she said, "are you prepared for today's trial?"

"Yes, milady," we said in unison.

"Good," Lady Glennis said. "Today's trial will not be held here in the manor. Come with me."

As it turned out, *not in the manor* was an understatement. Glennis had us pile into coaches, and then head into town. I had no idea where we were going, only that Rona was getting more and more excited as we headed west through the narrow streets.

"The arena?" she asked Lady Glennis. "We're doing this at the arena?"

Lady Glennis nodded demurely. "The king suggested we invite the citizens to spectate," she said as she reviewed her notebook. "The arena seemed to be the best venue."

When we stepped out of the coach outside the arena, the crowd was already hooting and hollering. The structure wasn't anything fancy, just large wooden stands built around a playing field of packed dirt, dotted with booths of food and drink sellers. Above the stands flew flags bearing the Nightfall crest.

“Typically, the arena is used for jousting and boxing matches,” Lady Glennis said. She sounded somewhere between bored and resigned. “This event has certainly garnered some attention, so you’ll be happy to know the stands are full.”

“Happy?” Adora nearly wailed. “This will be my worst event!”

“Well, perhaps you should’ve trained more,” Lady Glennis said. “This way, please, ladies.”

We followed her through a small door at the side of the arena into a staging area built beneath the stands. The crowd noise was shockingly loud, even with no one on the playing field. Our escorts awaited us in the staging area, and I rushed toward Barion. He grinned at me and squeezed my shoulder reassuringly.

“This is your moment, Reyna,” he said, quietly enough that it was only for me. “With the Dawnguard girl gone, there is no one here who can beat you.”

I nodded and tried to swallow. I hated to disappoint Barion—but I’d have to if I wanted to be eliminated from this contest. I’d make it up to him when we were back in Daybreak. He’d understand. The dinner last night had only proven that I could *not* be a part of the Nightfall pack. Not now. Not ever.

“Ladies!” A short, severe-looking woman dressed in the leather armor of the Nightfall guards strode in and clapped once to get our attention. “We will be beginning shortly! I will be assigning pairs. You will step into the arena at my word. You will be using blunted swords. The people of Efra expect a show, and the King of Frasia expects a demonstration of mastery. You will be sparring to submission. I do not expect any major wounds” —she glanced around at the four of us— “though of course you all acknowledge the risks.”

Rona bared her teeth in a grin.

“Starcrest will spar Duskmoon,” the woman said, “and Daybreak will spar Nightfall.”

I didn't have to look at Rona to know her grin had only grown larger. Despite my intentions to get eliminated, I couldn't help the flare of excitement that burned within me. I'd finally have a chance to work out some of my aggression on Rona herself. Maybe I could beat her and then lose to Fina. That seemed like a good idea. It'd make Fina look even better too. A win-win, really.

The woman then strode out of the staging area and into the arena itself. I hurried to the doorway to peek out and watch her.

The sun was shining on the hard-packed dirt, and the stands were completely full. In the center of the stands, higher than the commoners, the king, Duchess Alana, and the four council members sat in a shaded box with servants already pouring glasses of red wine. The king looked exceedingly comfortable in his cloak with his bare feet kicked up onto the rail of the box.

"Your Highness," the woman called, "Duchess, and all the fine citizens of Efra." The crowd roared. "I, Rose of Nightfall, Weapons Keeper, am honored to welcome you to this trial of the King's Choice." Stomping joined the roaring. Rose looked around, grinning, until it died down. "Our first match-up will be the lovely Lady Adora of Starcrest, and Lady Fina of Duskmoon!"

"What?" Adora squeaked. "We're doing this *right now*?"

"Right now," Fina said. "Come on, it'll be fine. You know how to hold a sword."

"I assure you I do not," Adora said meekly. Adora's escort nearly had to shove her out of the staging area and into the arena.

Barion tugged me away from the entrance to the arena. "Don't get distracted," he said. "You know how that one will go. Focus on warming up."

I glanced over my shoulder. Rona was in the doorway, grinning as she watched Fina and Adora stalk into the arena.

“Focus,” Barion snapped. “You’re not going to have a lot of time to warm up.”

I nodded and started doing jumping jacks on his count. I focused on Barion’s instruction even as the crowd noise increased around overhead, falling over me like a wave. The crowd roared then broke into laughter.

“I don’t think you’re going to have a lot of time to warm up,” Barion muttered. “Pick up the pace.”

I jumped and stretched at his instruction, until my blood was rushing hot through my veins and sweat began to bead on my forehead and temples. The laughter turned to roaring again, with scattered applause and the thundering of feet on the stands. It’d only been a few minutes, but Fina strode in grinning, and Adora staggered in after her with her face red and an expression dangerously close to tears.

“Nice job,” Rona said with a smirk.

“It was humiliating,” Adora moaned. The back of her dress was covered in dirt. I bit back a grin of my own.

“Sorry,” Fina said, though she didn’t really sound it. “I tried to go easy on you.”

“You certainly did not,” Adora said. Her voice wavered slightly. “I’m usually not so awful. The crowd really got to me.”

Rona laughed coldly, but no one acknowledged her. I pressed my lips together. I really wanted to kick the shit out of her—but I’d have to make sure I didn’t reveal my true skill level. Not if I wanted my loss to Fina to be believable.

“Reyna, Rona,” Lady Glennis said. “You’re up.”

Barion grinned at me. “Show them what you’ve got.”

I nodded, and then Rona and I strode out into the arena.

“May I introduce,” Rose bellowed, “Lady Reyna of Daybreak... and Rona of Nightfall!”

The crowd exploded into noise. Rona grinned, waving gleefully at the stands as the crowd shouted and stamped their

feet in delight. Then, someone in the crowd howled, a long, low sound. It ripped through the crowd like a contagion, until all the spectators in the stand, despite their human forms, were tipping their heads back and howling in support.

The sound sent a shiver down my spine. In the stands, the king smiled at the howling, but didn't join in.

“Ladies,” Rose said. “Choose your weapons.”

She gestured to the various axes, swords, and blades laid out on a table under the king's stand. We approached side by side. I expected Rona to make some snide remark or threat, but she was focused now, prickly, and her eyes flashed gold as she picked up a Frasian broadsword. Had the howling made her want to shift? Even my wolf was attentive to the charge in the air.

I chose a Shiangan single-edged sword, with a tapered blade that narrowed at the hilt and widened slightly toward the top. It wasn't made quite as finely as the ones I was used to training with in Daybreak, purchased directly from the traders at the port, but it was familiar in my hand and the right size and weight for parrying. I swung it in a few careful arcs, testing the weight and balance as I walked back toward the center of the arena.

When I glanced up, the king was watching my testing moves with a curious tilt to his head. Shit. I'd already fallen into my muscle memory.

There was a large white circle drawn on the dirt. I took my place at one end and fell naturally into my fighting stance, with my left foot forward and the sword in my right hand. Ten yards away, Rona stood in a similar stance, with the sword gripped so tightly her knuckles were white. Anger and anticipation radiated off her, and she didn't hesitate to bare her teeth in a snarl intended to intimidate.

I took a slow inhale and a long exhale. I turned my focus to Rona and let the roar of the crowd become white noise. My heart beat fast and steady. Rona was a brawler. She'd be fast, impulsive, sloppy. She might even drop her sword and use her fists instead. All I had to do was stay on my feet and let her

wear herself out. Maybe get a few good hits in of my own, if the openings appeared.

“Begin!” Rose bellowed.

I expected Rona to lunge forward immediately, but she lingered in place, nostrils flaring as she watched me.

“Come on,” I said, just loud enough for her to hear. “I’ll go easy on you.”

That made Rona bare her teeth and growl. She dropped into a lower stance, took the hilt of her sword in both hands, and charged at me.

I sidestepped it easily, and Rona nearly fell out of the marked circle. She caught her balance at the last moment, staggered to her feet, and then swung the sword in a wide, arc right at my head. I blocked it easily and bounced to the center of the ring. I heard Barion’s voice in my head. *Control the space, he said. Let your opponent wear themselves out.*

Rona whirled, eyes blazing, and lunged at me again. This time she swung her sword at my gut; I stepped back and to the side, then smacked her flank with the flat of my sword. The crowd boomed, but the *thwack* sound made me grin. She growled again—yes, that had embarrassed her, just as I intended.

Again, she moved toward me, swinging her sword violently, only for me to block or parry, then step in close and tap her with the flat of the blade. I could’ve hurt her, using the blunted edge to bruise or even break bone if I really wanted to, but it felt more effective to dodge. Get her riled up. She was getting so frustrated—her attacks got even sloppier, and her rage was visible in her glowing yellow eyes. Her face reddened with frustration and exertion, and her breaths came in great heaves. I felt fine—I’d hardly broken a sweat.

The next time she swung her blade at my face, I dropped down and elegantly swept her feet out from under her. Rona squawked in surprise and toppled backward, landing flat on her ass in the dirt, while I stood back up into my casual fighting stance. She snarled and clawed her way backward as

the crowd was split between loud boos and drunken laughter. She glanced around furiously at the stands, then narrowed her eyes at me and shifted. The crowd went ballistic.

Her fine dress split down the back as her wolf emerged, bigger than I would've expected, colored the same chocolate-brown as the servants' wolves. I took a step back, eyes wide as my grip tightened on the hilt of my sword. What did she think she was doing? This was a *sparring match*—but from the way her lip curled back, exposing her sharp teeth, she'd forgotten that minor detail. Her hackles lifted. She growled through her teeth.

“Enough!” the king roared from his box in the stands. He stood up and braced both hands on the railing.

A tense silence fell over the crowd. I kept my sword in hand as I turned to face the king, and Rona turned too, her ears flattened back to her head.

“You disappoint me.” The king glanced between us. “Both of you. This was intended to be a well-matched spar. Lady Reyna refuses to engage, and Rona of Nightfall brings out her wolf. Are these the behaviors of potential queens?” He raised his eyebrows.

I bit back a sneer, but the king had a keen eye for my expressions at this point. “An explanation, Lady Reyna?” he asked.

I swallowed. “Apologies, Your Majesty.” I ducked my chin in deference.

“The explanation,” Barion boomed as he strode out of the staging area with a very distraught-looking Lady Glennis behind him, “is that Lady Reyna of Daybreak has not been faced with an adequate challenger.”

“Oh?” the king asked. “A soldier of Daybreak questions my Choice?”

I stared at Barion, willing him with all my might to shut up and keep whatever crazy idea he had to himself. Of course, it didn't work. When Barion got an idea in his head, he was just as stubborn as I was.

“Not at all, Your Highness,” Barion said. “But if you wish to see what the Lady Reyna is capable of, you must provide her with a well-matched opponent.”

“And who would you suggest, soldier?” the king asked. “I trust you don’t mean yourself.”

“No, King of Nightfall,” Barion said. “I meant *you*.”

The crowd exploded into cheers at the suggestion. The duchess leaned back in her chair and pinched the bridge of her nose.

The king grinned. He spread his arms wide to the arena. “Well, my subjects?” he asked. “Would you like to see if this soldier speaks the truth?”

The cheers only increased in volume, mixed with the thunderous stamping of feet and sporadic wild howls. Rona’s head only dipped lower, her tail tucked between her legs. Lady Glennis looked just as irritated as the duchess as she summoned Rona off the field and back into the staging area.

Then I was alone, standing in the middle of the arena with my sword in hand, as I looked up at the king.

This could not be happening. I felt like I was standing slightly outside my body. Like at any moment I’d wake up from a terrible nightmare. Spar the king? Was Barion mad?

Barion just winked at me. He stood just in the doorway to the staging area, arms crossed over his chest, grinning like he’d just pulled off the greatest scheme of all time. If I had actually wanted to win this contest, I would’ve agreed. But now—now I wouldn’t be losing to Fina as I expected.

What did the king want out of this? Would he want to prove something to me? Or was this just a show for his subjects? Fear gripped my heart.

So much for trying to downplay my abilities. At close range, the king would see right through that.

“Nightfall has spoken,” the king said. “We will see if Lady Reyna is as skilled as her escort suggests.”

The box in the stands was just over a story off the ground. The king stood and pulled off his cloak, draping it over his chair as he ignored whatever quiet, angry words the duchess was throwing at him. I expected the king to disappear into a doorway and spend a few minutes coming down the stairs, like a normal leader might, but he simply gripped the railing and sprang over the bars, agile as a cat. He landed in a low crouch. The gesture was effortless.

I swallowed hard. I wanted to step back, to put more distance between us—maybe that would help me ignore the sudden tight curl in my gut. Anxiety, or something else, I wasn’t sure. This wasn’t going to be easy, what with the way my wolf already wanted to show deference to the king.

My mind wanted to fight him, and my instincts wanted to run.

But I was used to controlling my instincts. Barion was right about one thing—he had trained me well.

The king stood up. He rolled the sleeves of his fine white dress shirt up over the corded muscle of his forearms. He picked up a broadsword from the armory table without looking and twirled it in hand, effortless. Like it weighed no more than a feather.

Then a hush fell over the crowd as he stepped into the white ring.

Without thinking, I fell into a defensive stance, similar to the way I’d faced Rona. Left foot forward. Sword in right hand. But this time, I kept my blade high, defensively ahead of me instead of low and teasing by my hip. The king was using a dulled sword, but that didn’t mean a thing if he brought it down full power onto my head.

Rose stepped forward, looking newly interested in the affair.

“Lady Reyna of Daybreak,” she said, and nodded at me. “Your Majesty.” She nodded at the king.

She raised one hand and said, “Begin.”

The king advanced without hesitation, moving straight toward me like the predator he was. I felt small and terrified, like a rabbit spotted on the open plain. Not like a wolf at all. He raised his sword high over his head, an obvious show of fearlessness and ferocity—exposing his belly to me, were I brave enough to lunge for it. I wasn’t. I hesitated. He grinned and brought his blade down in a high arc. His style was not dissimilar to Rona, but where Rona was wild and angry, the king was fluid, controlled, even amused.

I ducked to the left, avoiding his blade so it slammed into the dirt with a thunk. The pants were doing wonders for my flexibility—I moved with ease, without having to worry about stepping on a hem. I stayed low, blade in front of me as I moved to the center of the ring. Then I darted forward, swinging my sword in an arc toward the king’s back, but with animal swiftness he whirled around and blocked my blade. The steel clanged together with a sound that resonated into my bones as I struggled to keep a hold on the hilt against the king’s powerful strike. He grinned at me as he pushed forward.

“Nice block, little wolf,” he growled.

I wrenched my blade away and darted to the side and back toward the center of the ring. He had more strength than I did—that much was obvious. But I was fast. Fast and dexterous. I didn’t need to match him strike for strike. I just needed one good opportunity. One opening. He was fast too, though, and moved with measured elegance, leaving no obvious openings as he strode forward again.

Clang, clang, clang. I blocked his strikes, not countering, still trying to read his style. He tried to push me to the edges of the ring, but I kept turning on my heel, staying near the center, watching the arc of his shoulders for the most minor hints of planned movement.

And then—there. He raised his blade and lunged toward me, blade straight out, as if to run it through me like a kebab. I

saw him shift into the stance, and ducked down beneath his arm, moving under his blade as he moved toward me. I was close enough to drive my sword into his gut. This close I could smell him, the sweat forming at his axilla and the blood thrumming under his skin; I dragged the tip of my blade over his ribs as proof that I was this close.

Despite the dulled edge of the sword, the very tip was still sharp enough to pierce through the fine cotton of his shirt, leaving a small cut in the fabric where I'd been. I ducked lower and shifted my weight, so I was behind him again, and raised my sword just quickly enough to block another overhead swing aimed at me. With one hand on the hilt and the other palm on the flat of the blade, I pushed back against his sword, grimacing with the effort, digging my heels into the dirt of the arena.

“A sneaky maneuver,” he said through gritted teeth. “Your escort spoke truth.”

I said nothing, focused entirely on the effort of holding his sword back.

Then, suddenly, the pressure was gone. He stepped back, but before I could regain my bearings, he slid his blade beneath my sword, still brandished as if to parry, and flicked it back toward himself. I lost my grip on the hilt and my sword went flying into the dirt.

I hopped back into my stance, hands raised defensively, half-expecting another strike.

The king only straightened his posture. He stuck the blade of his sword into the dirt like a flag claiming his victory.

The crowd exploded into cheers. Had they been making noise throughout this fight? I'd heard nothing but the ring of the swords connecting, the rush of his breath, my own blood pounding in my ears. The thunderous noise nearly overwhelmed me. But the king didn't acknowledge it all. He just watched me, a small smile playing on his lips, his eyes flecked with gold.

Interested. Curious.

I should've fought harder. I should've humiliated him.

No—I should've been *worse*. I should've given up from the very beginning.

Whatever I'd just done here was not the right choice. That was the same look I'd seen in the hallway—and at dinner, before he'd murdered a court member in cold blood. The same look I was trying to *stop*.

I bowed politely to the king and started toward the staging area. I couldn't bear to stand here under his unreadable gaze with the cheers and howls of the crowd around me.

Before I made it two steps, though, the king stepped forward and caught my wrist. I was still in my sparring mind, and I reacted on instinct, turning on my heel and then leaning back, using his hold on my wrist for momentum as I directed a snappy kick right at his shin. He barely dodged it, awkwardly lunging back, and bared his teeth at me in response.

“Fight's over,” he growled, but the corners of his lips were still lifted, and his eyes, now golden, sparkled with amusement.

I met his gaze steadily.

He tightened his grip on my wrist and wrenched me closer. My instincts went wild, my wolf howling to be released—to submit or fight back, I wasn't sure.

I stumbled forward, nearly falling into his chest, but I caught myself and reeled backward. “Let me go,” I hissed through gritted teeth.

“You did well today, little wolf,” the king said in a low voice. He nodded toward the tear in his shirt. A thin red line was visible on his skin, and tiny drops of blood threatened to spill over from the miniscule wound. “Rarely has an opponent managed to draw blood from me in the arena.”

“Ah,” I said. “My—my apologies, Your Highness.”

He grinned again, showing his sharp teeth. “You apologize for succeeding in another trial?”

“A lady shouldn’t draw blood,” I said. Being this close to the king was making my head feel like it was full of cotton.

“A lady, perhaps,” the king said. “But a wolf should.”

“And I *am* a lady,” I snapped.

“You say that,” the king said with a grin, “but the way you speak to me suggests otherwise.”

My cheeks burned, and not from exertion. I wrenched my wrist out of his grasp. “I’ve said nothing that is untrue, nor anything that the court members do not already know. You’ve shown your true colors.”

He reeled back as if struck.

“A lady has good manners,” I said, “but she is also honest.”

The king’s eyes burned gold, and the air around him crackled with energy. I turned on my heel and hurried back to the staging area. I didn’t want to see him in his wolf form again—and I didn’t want to be struck dumb by its power and forced to bear the full weight of his terrifying attention while the crowds watched from the stands.

I fixed my ladylike mask back in place and beamed at Barion as I approached; playing up my exhaustion, I had him escort me back to my quarters without much fanfare.

The next morning, when Rue and Amity entered into my bedroom and flung open the curtains, I groaned and pulled the blankets back up over my head.

“Milady?” Amity asked. “Are you all right?”

I’d hardly slept at all. I’d had dreams of running through the forest, either pursued by the king’s great wolf, or running alongside him. My body ached from the sparring, and I was just exhausted. Emotionally and mentally. The thought of going down to the solarium to play nice with Rona and Lady Glennis, and potentially the king himself, made my head pound.

“I’m not feeling my best,” I said. “Might I have breakfast here instead of in the solarium?”

“Ah, you did put on quite the show yesterday,” Rue said with a smile. “Certainly, we’ll inform Lady Glennis and have a meal brought up.”

The girls hurried out of the room.

I sat up with a sigh and pushed my hair out of my eyes. All I’d thought about, and dreamed about, was the king, the king, the king. I was sick of having him dominate my days and now my dreams at night. I’d come to Efra with hopes of learning more about the continent—of travel, and friendship, and experiencing a little bit more of the world than I had before, and then *leaving*.

If I had a rare morning to myself, I was going to enjoy it, and not think about the king at all. I pulled the slim volume I'd picked up at the bookstore out of my nightstand's drawer. *The History of Fae in Frasia*. I opened to the beginning of the book and settled back into my cozy bed. Immediately, I was entranced by the detailed maps drawn carefully in the very front of the book.

The city of Efra was bigger than I'd even imagined—and it was smaller now than it had been in the past. The map in the book showed Efra sprawling out across Frasia, its neighborhoods almost reaching Daybreak and the other packs. Huge. As if the city of Efra was the entirety of the continent. I smoothed my finger down the map. What had changed to shrink the city so much, and to break the land into the separate domains of the packs?

Amity and Rue arrived with breakfast, and I dismissed them just as soon as it was set up. I stayed in my pajamas as I sipped my coffee and nibbled at toast, the small tome open flat on the table beside me. There were few pleasures better in my life than a lazy breakfast and a good book.

I was only a few dozen pages into the introduction to the book and the history of author Hae Blaylock's life when a brisk knock at the door shattered my attention. I pressed my lips together. I'd expected Barion to show up at some point, especially if he heard I wasn't feeling well—he'd want to discuss how the sparring went, and what ways I could improve. We hadn't debriefed yesterday so of course he'd want to this morning. With a sigh, I pulled my robe on over my pajamas and fastened the tie at the waist.

Another brisk knock. I rolled my eyes and padded over to the door, opening it with a half-hearted greeting for Barion already on my tongue.

Except it wasn't Barion.

It was the king.

There was a strange look in his dark eyes, something distant and almost...almost sad, in a way. His hands were clasped neatly behind his back, and he was dressed simply, as

he always was. Like he could be an off-duty soldier on his way home instead of the King of Frasia walking his own royal halls.

“Your—Your Majesty,” I stammered.

“Lady Reyna,” he said.

I swallowed. There was still a strange intensity hovering in the air between us, but it wasn't the tightly coiled energy from the arena. There was something else there, something that made my skin prickle with the need to be simultaneously close and far away. “What brings you here?”

“Lady Glennis informed me you weren't feeling well,” he said. “I wanted to make sure you were all right.”

I blinked. Make sure I was all right? There had to be some kind of ulterior motive here...

“I'm fine,” I said. “Just tired.”

“Understandably so,” he said. I expected some sort of pithy remark, a joke or a barb—but none came.

“I just needed a bit more rest after yesterday,” I explained to fill the slightly awkward silence. “That's all.”

“I'm relieved you're not sick,” he said. “You didn't seem unwell at all yesterday. You're quite agile with a sword, for a woman.”

My confusion soured into the now-familiar irritation. “A lady,” I corrected him. “You might be surprised to find out that women can do many things. Often, we can do the same things men can do.”

The king pressed his lips together into a hard line. My sarcasm was not lost on him, that much was obvious. For a moment, he looked like he was about to say something else, to push back and argue in some way—but then he just sighed, shoulders slumping.

“Right,” he said. “Get some rest then, Lady Reyna.”

Internally, my wolf whined at the sight of the king looking so upset—she was a caretaker and wanted to surge forward to

improve his mood. If he felt her close to the surface, he didn't show it. Not even a single gleam of gold in his dark eyes. Before I could say anything else, he nodded his head curtly and walked back down the hall.

I closed the door behind him and leaned back against the cool wood with a sigh. What was that about? After all that time spent insulting me, provoking me, and teasing me, he was suddenly sincerely concerned with my well-being? But then, even as he attempted to compliment my sparring, he managed to insult me as well? For a king, he was no good at conducting himself. Every interaction I had with him only made me more confused about what he wanted from me.

My wolf's reaction wasn't helping, either. She was starting to have more of an influence on me than I'd like. That soft, sad look in his eyes made something in my chest pull tight. But I didn't want to feel *bad* for him. I didn't want to feel anything for him at all. Especially not anything like this—a little curious, a little warm. I thought suddenly of that moment in the arena, when his strong, callused hand had tightened around my wrist as he'd tried to pull me closer.

What if I hadn't resisted? What if I'd let him pull me closer, until I was flush to the plane of his broad chest? How would my wolf react to that kind of closeness: sweat, warm skin, muscle, the barely there coppery scent of blood that I'd drawn myself?

I shook that thought from my head. What had gotten into me? The king was taking up far too much space in my thoughts. I glanced at Blaylock's book. There was some engaging information there, sure, but it'd only made more questions bubble up.

Staying in this room would only cause me to get more lost in my own head, though. If I was stuck in Efra for more trials, I should at least take advantage of the resources provided. I dressed quickly in the fine outfit I'd ordered from Camille with the wide pants and the long jacket. I pulled my hair back in a loose ponytail. My wolf was still irritable, and her urge to pace and whine was already beginning to give me a mild headache. She felt off, unsafe, for some reason—was it the

fact that we'd upset the king? Or shirked our duties at breakfast?

"It's fine," I muttered aloud, as if that would calm her down. "It's just a day to rest."

Except she didn't feel rested at all. She wanted closeness, other wolves, either the handmaidens or Fina and Adora, or better yet, the king. That wasn't happening today, though. I padded over to my dresser and pulled out the fine silver knife Barion had given me, sheathed in its leather scabbard embroidered with the Daybreak crest. Sometimes a wolf's instincts were just a little overactive. I'd been through a lot of stress—the dinner, the sparring, and having the king show up at my door. My wolf was on high alert. Having the little knife on my person would calm her down, certainly. I slipped it into the waistband of my pants.

It worked. My wolf settled, the weight of the knife a substitute for her bared teeth, and a tangible reminder of Barion, too. Then I tucked *The History of Fae in Frasia* into the crook of my arm and slipped out of my room. I didn't leave a note for Amity and Rue, but I had a feeling they'd know where to find me.

I made my way through the halls of the manor undisturbed by the occasional staff I saw in both human and wolf form. The library was just as quiet as it'd been when I'd first visited: the fire burned low in the hearth, and the lights were dim, as if the room was waiting in stasis for someone to arrive. I was grateful for the quiet, and I immediately felt soothed, relaxed, by the presence of all the unfamiliar books.

I was here for a purpose, though. I climbed the stairs to the wraparound balcony and headed directly toward the archival maps. The cartography table was still in the same place it'd been when I'd first visited, except this time, I hurried to the door near the back shelf first. Delicately, I pressed my ear to the surface of the door and listened for any sounds of activity: the scratching of a pen, an exhale of breath, soft footsteps. But I heard no noise, and my wolf was still quiet—no prickling in my nape, nothing.

The king wasn't using his study, or whatever that room was. I sighed with relief. Finally, I had the whole library to myself.

First, I opened the small book and peered at the map of Efra included in the front. The king hadn't wanted me looking at these maps. What kind of information was hidden in them? There had to be some answers as to why the structure of Efra, and Frasia, had changed so much since they had been drawn. When had the city shrunk? When had the nation split into the divides I knew now?

I smoothed the book flat onto the table and then stood in front of the shelves biting back a smile. I'd have to work through these methodically. I'd have to look at *all* these maps.

It took a while, and a very serious handle on my self-control to not get sucked into the more unfamiliar and curiosity-piquing maps, but after an hour, I'd pulled two more of Efra that illustrated some of the differences.

Strange. I smoothed the first map out flat. In this one, Efra was similar to the city I knew from current maps, except the south side was much larger, with neighborhoods extending nearly to the Frasian border. Now, that territory was mostly wasteland. I hadn't heard reports of any wreckage in the wastes, either—it was like the city had never been there at all. I rolled out the second chart to compare. This map was even closer to the survey in the Blaylock book, with the southern side full of city infrastructure, as well as a larger Efran reach to the north and east, towards Daybreak.

The strangest thing was—the surveyings weren't that old. Both were dated to my grandfather Constantine's reign, which ended a century ago. Why had the city grown smaller during that time? And why was there seemingly no mark of that shrinkage in Efra today?

It was so large in the front of Blaylock's book that I wondered if it was a metropolis at all. Was I seeing Efra, when really it was just Frasia, unbroken into cities and pack territories? The mystery thrilled me. I didn't have access to materials like this in Daybreak, and the questions unspooled

endlessly in my mind. I was good at this kind of thing, I realized—good at research, good at reading maps, good at building connections. There was so much I had to offer the court of Daybreak that I was never allowed to do. The realization made me frown. At least once I was done with this competition, I'd have more freedom. Maybe less access to materials like this, but I'd be free to travel where I wished, instead of being holed up in the Daybreak Manor dreaming of the day I could leave.

For now, though, I needed an even earlier map—one that predated my grandfather's reign. I went back to the shelf and raised up onto my toes, reaching up to the topmost shelf. If my guess was right, these were probably arranged chronologically, so the oldest would be the charts in the dirty archival tubes on the highest shelf. I reached for the maps with some effort, my fingertips catching on the leather as I attempted to nudge them off the shelf and into my hands.

I finally got one and was just about to pull it from safekeeping and spread it out on the table, when my nape began to prickle.

Someone else was in the library.

I turned around slowly, so slowly, hopefully not attracting any attention. I hoped it was just a servant or guard making the rounds, maybe even a librarian who might be willing to help me access the older maps.

On the stairs, a wolf of Nightfall paused in its slow ascent.

This was not a wolf making the rounds. This wolf was looking for me. It was obvious in the way its hackles were up, nostrils flaring, ears pricked forward. Its pelt was the deep brown and black of the Nightfall pack, and it wasn't huge—not like the guards, nor the king, but not as small as Amity and Rue. If I didn't know better, I would've assumed it was a she-wolf like Rona. But what would a she-wolf be doing creeping around the halls? It had to be a guard, or—

Or something worse. Someone sent to find me.

I swallowed, my feet pinned to the floor. “Can I help you?” I asked primly, the steadiness in my voice hopefully concealing some of my fear. But I didn’t doubt the wolf could sense the anxiety radiating off me. It crept up the stairs until it was on the balcony with me, its paws silent on the stone floor.

Internally, my own wolf raised her hackles.

“What do you want?” I asked, low.

What did I expect? For the wolf to shift back into human form and explain itself? Of course it didn’t—it just pulled its lip back from its teeth in a snarl as a growl began to build.

The yellow eyes fixed on me with the bloodthirsty gaze of a predator.

This wolf wasn’t here to scare me.

This wolf was here to kill me.

I barely had time to acknowledge that truth before the wolf launched off its back feet with teeth bared. I scrambled backward, and my foot caught on the hem of my loose pants; with a curse I crashed to the floor. Fear lanced through me as the wolf sprang again, its yellow eyes gleaming like it was pleased. It surged toward me, jaws open and teeth bared, so close I could feel its hot, humid breath rolling over my skin. I slammed my elbow into its snout, knocking it out of the way at the last moment.

The wolf yelped. I followed my elbow with a fierce donkey kick to its chest, and the wolf staggered back a step.

My own wolf snarled and snapped her teeth internally. I could feel her beating against my ribs like a physical presence, telling me to *shift, shift, shift, defend yourself*. If I were a lesser wolf, like a wild beast of Nightfall, my wolf would've forced me to shift. But I had more control than that.

Even with the other wolf snarling at me, its saliva frothing white between its teeth and at the corner of its jaws, I wasn't going to shift. Not in the Nightfall manor—not to fight—not when I was so heightened.

I realized, staring down this wolf with my blood icy in my veins, that part of me feared I wouldn't be able to shift back.

I shoved that fear down. I didn't need my wolf to beat this one. I was just as strong in my human form, just as agile, just as smart. I bared my teeth at the beast and scrambled to my

feet, dropping into a low fighting stance, and wrenched the small silver knife from my waistband.

“Come on,” I hissed at the wolf. “Try me.”

The wolf snapped its jaws again and surged forward. This time I met its attack with a swift kick to the side of the head, snapping it sideways; I barely hopped out of the way fast enough to avoid its jaws closing around my shin. My defense knocked the wolf to the side as its bulk crashed into the shelf of maps, sending the leather tubes tumbling from the shelf and all over the floor. A few bounced off the wolf’s body. It growled louder in frustration and shook its body like it was dispelling water droplets.

With its teeth bared, it charged me, eyes blazing, and it was only years of training with Barion that gave me the reflexive ability to stay alive. Instinctively, I leaped as high as I could, so the wolf barreled beneath me. It couldn’t keep its footing easily on the stone floor, and attempted to skid to a stop, but its weight and speed had it sliding. I ran after it.

This was my opening. I’d only get one. Be aggressive or be dead.

I launched myself forward off the balls of my feet, not too unlike the wolf itself, and drove my knife hard into its shoulder. I wrenched down, creating a deep gash in the muscle. The wolf howled in agony and thrashed under my hold, but I wrapped my fingers in its rough fur and held on, staying safely behind it as it struggled to throw me off. The gash poured thick, hot blood which steamed in the drafty library, the coppery smell flooding my senses. The gore covered my hand, and as the wolf thrashed, it sprayed flecks onto my face and fine clothes. It wasn’t a killing wound, but it was deep enough to hurt, and the howling and gnashing of teeth made it clear I had hurt this wolf badly.

All I had to do was get away now. If I withdrew the knife, kicked off, I could jump over the railing of the balcony before the wolf could get to its feet. My hands were drenched in its blood, and my grip began to slip on the fur as it thrashed.

Then, a commotion sounded behind me. Before I could turn around, strong arms wrapped tightly around my arms and torso, dragging me bodily off the wolf with a grunt. I swore and thrashed—what the fuck was happening? And only then after I took a breath did I recognize the now-familiar scent of the king behind me. His breath washed over the side of my face as he hauled me back, my knife still in my hand.

Beside us, two immense Nightfall guards shifted into their wolves and rushed toward my attacker. Their bodies shielded the staggered wolf from view, but the thick smell of blood still permeated the atmosphere.

“By the fucking gods,” the king growled. The low tone of his voice sent a shiver down my spine. “There’s always trouble when you’re in the library, isn’t there?”

My chest heaved with exertion, and I struggled in his hold, fruitlessly. He carried me like I weighed nothing, down the stairs and to the back door of the library, into a narrow torch-lit hallway. Outside an unobtrusive door, he finally set me down onto my feet. My knees quivered; he gripped my upper arm hard to hold me up. It wasn’t painful, though, it was steady.

I didn’t know what I expected when he pushed across the threshold—torture devices? But it certainly wasn’t more shelves of books and maps, scattered carelessly on large, unfinished tables with hard-backed chairs.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“My study,” the king said sharply.

“Then what’s the room upstairs in the library?” I asked.

“My archival study,” he snapped. “Why am I letting you ask questions?”

He guided me to one of the chairs at the table and pushed me down to sit. I swallowed. Goosebumps rose on my arms. I was still riding high from the adrenaline of the fight and reeling from the way the king had carried me—I was offended while my wolf was preening. Right now, I was too tired to untangle those reactions.

He exhaled. “Are you hurt?”

I looked down at my hands. They were covered in blood, sticky and darkening as it dried, and it had reached my clothes as well. Certainly it had flecked my face, too. The same dark blood stained the king's hands where he had grabbed me.

"I'm fine," I said. "It's not my blood." Suddenly, renewed anger surged through me. "Care to explain why I just got attacked in *your* library?"

"Attacked?" the king asked.

"Yes, attacked!" I tried to stand up to get in his face, to demand answers, but my knees were still weak and I dropped back down into the chair. That only made me angrier. "I'm supposed to be protected while visiting the Court of Nightfall, am I not? Are all your guests threatened with such savagery? I know the coloring of the Nightfall wolves, and I know that was one of your packmates!"

The king clenched his fists. Then he strode to a basin on a small hutch against the wall and poured water into it from a jug. He rinsed his hands, toweled them, then brought the basin over to me.

"Here," he said. "Clean up a little."

"I need to bathe," I grumbled.

"At least wash your hands."

I almost said no out of pure contrarianism, but the blood was beginning to dry into a sticky, rancid mess on my hands. I dipped my hands into the basin and carefully scrubbed it off. As I did so, the king reached into the hutch and pulled out a small opaque bottle and two glasses. He poured a small amount of rich brown liquid into each, then walked back toward me with the two glasses easily balanced in one hand and a mildly anguished expression on his face. He set one of the glasses down on the table by the basin and sighed.

I dried my hands then picked it up. "What's this?" The liquid smelled so strong it made my hair stand on end, and I nearly reeled back.

"Bourbon," the king said. He took a sip of his own, as casually as if it were a cup of coffee. "And it's not poisoned."

Believe it or not, I don't want you harmed."

My wolf trusted him. But still I didn't touch the alcohol, leaving it in the glass by the basin. I wanted to have my wits about me. The king wouldn't poison me, though—if he wanted me dead, he could just snap my neck whenever he wanted, just had he had Lord Cazzell. No reason for theatrics. "I must admit, I am finding that a bit hard to believe."

The king said nothing, just pressed his lips together into a tight line. It was an expression similar to the one he'd worn when he'd showed up at my door, worried that I was sick or injured. There was concern in that expression, but something else, too. Something else I couldn't quite read.

"But if you didn't arrange the attack," I said, "who was that? They obviously knew where to find me. This was planned."

"She's been dealt with." He stepped back over to the hutch and poured another finger of dark brown liquid into the glass.

"Dealt with?" I gaped at the broad expanse of his back. "*She?* You mean a woman attacked me? I've done nothing!" It couldn't be—no, that wouldn't make sense. Would it? It had to have been a guard, or a spectator.

The king exhaled a short, humorless laugh. "I wouldn't say you've done nothing," he said. "You've managed to do something no one else has been able to do."

"What?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"You've caught my attention."

A knock on the door interrupted us before I could fully process that statement. The king turned around and exhaled, shaking his head like he was vaguely irritated—like there was more he wanted to say. I balled my hands into fists in my bloodstained lap. Capturing the king's attention went against my entire plan. The plan was to be *dull*, be *boring*, be *adequate*, and then get sent home. And yet everything that I seemed to do in Efra was drawing me closer and closer to him.

I swallowed. It didn't help that I was curious about him too. About the weight of his gaze on me—and whatever he

was about to say.

He strode to the door and pulled it open. A slim man with dark hair cut close to his skull, dressed in the guard's dress uniform, stood with Lady Glennis at his side. Lady Glennis looked like she'd just been pulled from her own quarters, in a fine but plain dress and her hair hastily pinned back.

"Roth," the king said, waving them both over the threshold and into the room. "What's the update?"

"Sire, the woman—she's dead."

The king furrowed his brow in shock.

"Dead?" I asked. "Was she executed?"

"Executed?" Roth asked with a sneer. "She was with our healers. There was nothing they could do."

"She had a single knife wound," I said. "How is that possible?" The blade was small—the gash had been deep but not fatally deep. I hadn't even nicked an artery. The blood on my dress was the dark oozy blood of veins.

"We should be asking you that, Lady Reyna," Lady Glennis said in a clipped voice. "Since you were the one who struck her with a poisoned blade."

The king watched me carefully, his glass still in hand.

The blood drained from my face. Poisoned. So that was why Barion had insisted I not touch the blade. I simply thought it was the weapons safety he'd drilled into me since I was a little girl. But no—it was poisoned, and he hadn't told me. I hadn't intended to kill her, just stop her—but would I have killed her with the blade alone if I'd had to?

Yes, I realized. I would've done whatever it took to protect myself. My wolf and I were aligned in that way. Her instincts had pushed me to carry the knife with me, and if I hadn't listened, my attacker would've torn out my throat without remorse.

"I was attacked without provocation," I said. I met the king's gaze steadily. "She tried to kill me. I defended myself."

“A guest of my court cannot be carrying weapons like that,” the king said. “A scuffle should not result on the death of a wolf.”

“A scuffle?” I balked. “She tried to kill me! If I hadn’t defended myself—”

“A wolf should always defend herself,” the king said. “If a wolf threatens you, meet them as a wolf.”

Anger flared in me. I had just been attacked for no reason in the king’s own manor, and somehow I was the one who was in trouble? “Oh, forgive me for not adhering to the Nightfall code of contact for unexpected life-or-death battles in the library,” I snapped. “Perhaps you should go over those rules with your guests before you send assassins or jealous girlfriends to pick us off.”

“Lady Reyna!” Glennis hissed.

I didn’t care if it was rude. The king wasn’t going to kill me—but maybe this would be the thing that finally made him send me home. Whatever mysteries Efra had to offer, it wasn’t worth risking my life.

The king bared his teeth. His wolf surged to the surface; his eyes gleamed golden as his canines elongated in a sudden show of dominance. He didn’t shift, but the closeness of it made my own wolf whine and cower internally. The memory of his wolf form in the ballroom, sniffing me carefully, made my nape prickle.

“You speak treason,” he snarled around the shape of his fangs. “I would never endanger you.”

My wolf whined again, begging me to back down, but I was too frustrated to listen to her. It felt like all he’d done was endanger me!

“If I’m speaking treason and unintentionally breaking rules,” I said curtly, “perhaps it’s best if you just dismiss me back to Daybreak.”

“Your Highness—” Lady Glennis started, but the king simply held up his hand.

“I have my reasons for keeping you in this competition, Lady Reyna,” the king growled. He turned suddenly to Lady Glennis and Roth. “You’re dismissed,” he said curtly.

“Shall I escort the Lady Reyna to her quarters?” Glennis asked.

“That’s not necessary,” the king said.

Lady Glennis fixed me with a cold, serious glare, and then the two of them left the study. The door closed, and the air in the room suddenly felt tense and heavy around me. I squirmed in my chair, itching to run after Glennis and go hide in my own quarters.

“We’re not finished here,” the king said. His wolf had withdrawn, but his attention still kept me pinned in place.

“I don’t see what else there is to discuss,” I said.

“The dead wolf is Rona.”

It was as if he’d dumped ice water over my head. The chill ran from the crown of my head all the way to my feet. Part of me had known it the entire time, though—my wolf had recognized her from her shift in the arena. But I’d denied it, avoiding that truth because it was too painful to face. I knew Rona didn’t like me, and I was used to that. I was used to being disliked. But hated so intensely she wanted to kill me? What had I done to deserve that?

I slumped forward and stared into the basin of dirtied water. Dirtied with Rona’s blood. “Why?” I asked. “Why would she attack me?”

The king tilted his head. “What?”

“I haven’t done anything to her,” I said. “I’ve been nothing but nice. I realized she didn’t like me, but—”

“Really?” the king asked. He looked halfway between distressed and amused. “You don’t understand?”

“No!” I nearly threw my hands up over my head. “No, Your Majesty, forgive me for not understanding why I just got nearly mauled to death in the midst of the Choice.”

“You’re her only competition,” the king said, like this was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Fina and Adora are better suited for the role than I am. *They’re* the true competition.” I was so caught up in the confusion and horror of what had happened I briefly forgot that I was speaking to the king himself. Then I snapped my jaw shut, and glanced up with wide-eyed horror.

A small, bemused smile played on his face. It wasn’t quite as smirky as the expression I was used to, but it didn’t look angry. Despite the fact that I’d just called him ridiculous to his face.

“They are suited for the role, of course,” the king said. “Any woman sent by a court would be. But I need a queen who can fight by my side, not a lady more interested in fashion, socializing... Womanly things.”

“Those ‘womanly things’ are what keep a court running,” I said. “You and I both know perfectly well that Fina or Adora would make an excellent queen, especially if you want the rest of Frasia to trust you to lead. What you call ‘fashion’ and ‘socializing,’ a queen calls ‘trade’ and ‘diplomacy.’” I shook my head. “Adora may be weak with a sword, but the resources she would bring to your court would empower you more than any show of strength on a battlefield.”

“The council agrees with you,” the king admitted.

I blinked. “They do?”

“It’s an obvious choice,” the king said. “Adora is a beautiful woman with exceptional resources at her disposal. She impressed the council greatly during the first trial.”

“Wonderful,” I said. “So it’s settled.” A strange dark disappointment washed over me.

“The competition hasn’t ended,” the king said. “The council does not make the decision—I do.”

I glanced up. “It doesn’t seem right to continue after this.”

He took another sip of his drink. “I am not holding the Choice for purely political means.”

“You’re speaking in riddles.” My head was spinning. Too much had happened in the past hour—I couldn’t keep up with the king’s tendency to talk around things. So the council had a favorite, but the competition was still ongoing, and Rona was dead. Where did we go from here? And strangely—why had the thought of being dismissed not filled me with relief?

Why did I want to stay in Efra, despite my simultaneous, fierce desire to return home?

“I will take the council’s recommendations into consideration,” the king said. “But this Choice is not only for me to find the Queen of Frasia. It’s for me to find my mate.”

Mate. The word sent a thrill down my spine, an electric sensation not unlike the promise of a shift. He sought a mate. My wolf wanted to howl with delight. He didn’t just want a diplomatic partner, a wife, a convenient arrangement to improve his reputation—he wanted a wolf with which to share his entire life.

But I already had that. I had Griffin.

My wolf whined. Griffin had never used the word mate, had he? And neither had I. That wasn’t what I wanted. It was so—animalistic. I wanted someone who appreciated me for who I was, for my mind and my skills and my ambition. And Griffin did.

Didn’t he?

I had to get my head on straight. This competition was making me dizzy.

“Rona knew the competition was more than diplomacy,” the king said. “She wished to skew the odds better in her favor.”

She had assumed that I was likely to win. More likely than Fina or Adora. But she was just a commoner, what did she know? But—she *was* a commoner of Nightfall.

The king was still watching me.

“I see,” I said. My voice only trembled minutely. “Your Majesty, I’d quite like to get cleaned up.”

I slept fitfully. My dreams were strange, half-remembered, some nightmarish recollections of Rona's teeth when she'd lunged for me, and some strange sensual flashes of a broad chest and dark eyes. I was relieved to shake the dream off when I woke up and let Amity and Rue dress me for breakfast. They'd helped me clean up last night, and the memory of that was present in the gentleness of their hands and Amity's concerned sigh.

"I feel like I should warn you," she said, low. "The kitchens got word that the duchess will be taking breakfast in the solarium."

My stomach turned. Somehow, the thought of facing Duchess Alana was more nausea-inducing than seeing the king again. "Thanks," I murmured.

"You don't seem to be in a good state to be surprised," Amity said.

I chuckled, but it didn't sound amused, even to my own ears. "You're right about that," I said. "I probably would've fainted as soon as I saw her if you hadn't warned me."

"She's stern," Rue said, "but understanding."

I nodded. It was a nice sentiment, but how could a duchess be expected to brush off the death of one of her pack members? No matter how this breakfast went, it was going to be uncomfortable.

I made my way to the solarium, escorted by Amity and Rue in their wolf forms. As I stood in front of the door, Amity bumped her nose into my hand and flicked her ears reassuringly. I swallowed and smiled down at her, a little rush of affection racing through me.

The duchess' severe, dark gaze was on me the moment I stepped into the solarium. She was dressed formally, in the black and rich purple colors of her court, at the head of the table. Her long, tapered fingers were wrapped around a steaming mug of coffee, but she seemed to have no interest in it at all. Adora was already seated at the table, looking a bit awkward herself, and relieved I'd arrived. I took my place at the table, and Fina hurried in right after me.

"Good morning, ladies," the duchess said. "I've come to inform you of a change of circumstances."

"What is it?" Fina asked. "What happened, milady?"

"Rona of Nightfall is no longer a part of the competition," the duchess said curtly. "You are the three remaining contestants of the King's Choice."

Adora's eyes widened. "Oh, wow," she murmured.

"She was dismissed?" Fina asked.

The duchess' dark eyes drilled into me. "We will not be discussing details."

Fina swallowed and turned her gaze to her coffee.

The cold tension lingered between all four of us, but it didn't seem to bother the duchess a bit as she stared me down. A Nightfall wolf attacked a Daybreak wolf and is killed. It was long ago that our two packs were at war, but there were still plenty of wolves in both packs for whom the wounds were fresh.

The duchess' scorn froze my breath in my lungs. She kept her gaze on me for a seemingly endless moment. Then, suddenly, with a brisk snap of her fingers, she summoned the servants in to bring breakfast. As my plate was filled with the usual delights, I couldn't summon the appetite to eat any of it.

“Now,” the duchess said, “it’s time for the final trial. Tomorrow, you will be attending the closing ball for the King’s Choice. You will be expected to face the council again, but this time, *you* will be presenting to the *council*.”

“Oh?” Adora asked. “Like a diplomatic meeting?”

“Yes,” the duchess said. “The council has tested your knowledge of governance and manners, and your physical skill on the battlefield. Now, the council would like to know why each of you wish to wear the Crown of Nightfall at King Elias’ side.”

Fina nodded, trying her best to look excited, but I could see the despair in her eyes. This felt like a terrible school assignment—having to stand in front of the council and argue that I wanted the crown? I was good at navigating diplomatic situations, like trade disputes and legal questions, but just standing there and telling them I wanted this seemed like an impossible task. And I could only assume the duchess would be trying to thwart me every step of the way. She already distrusted me for what had happened with Rona.

It would be miserable. But if the duchess disliked me, surely Adora would be the one chosen. The king had *said* he had the final say—but sitting here in front of the duchess, I wasn’t sure if his desires would be able to outweigh her and the council’s influence.

I took a deep breath to try to settle my nerves and eat a little breakfast. If I was right, this ball would be the end of my time in Efra. I should enjoy it. I deserved to have a little bit of fun after yesterday’s horror show. I didn’t have any interest in heading back to the library—as curious as I was about the maps, the thought of going back to the archival tables and seeing the freshly scrubbed floors made my stomach turn.

“This evening, a designer from Camille’s will visit you in your chambers,” the duchess said. “The Court of Nightfall will have gowns made for you specifically for this ball, to represent your own courts. The wolves of Nightfall will of course be in our own colors.”

“That’s very kind,” Adora said. “Thank you, Duchess.”

Fina and I murmured our own thanks as well. Excellent—another designer. Maybe she'd be part Fae, and I could get a little more information about the return of the Fae to Efra in the privacy of my own room.

Adora carried the conversation—Gods bless her. She even managed to wrangle a smile out of the duchess at one point. After the meal, Fina caught my elbow in the hallway as I headed back toward my room. I had planned to review my notes about the maps and craft some non-suspicious questions to ask the designer, but Fina's sparkling eyes made it clear she had something else in mind.

"Reyna, can I ask you something?" she asked.

"Sure," I said. "Is everything okay?"

"Oh, yes," Fina said. "That breakfast was a bit weird and tense, but everything's fine."

That was an understatement. I nodded. Adora stepped into the hallway, too, and Fina waved her over.

"Listen," Fina said, "I wanted to ask you—do you think you could train us in swordsmanship? Just a little?"

"Today?" I asked, blinking.

"Please," Adora said as her blue eyes grew wide and pleading. "You don't know how badly I failed in the arena. It was so embarrassing."

"You don't need skills," Fina said with a grin, "you need to do some push-ups."

"I could hardly lift my sword," Adora said, her face flushing.

"And you performed so well against the king," Fina said. "It was really amazing to watch."

I realized, then, that both Adora and Fina thought this might be the last day we had together in some time. Tomorrow, at the ball, one of us would be chosen as queen, and the other two would return home. I realized with a painful clench in my heart that I was going to miss both of these girls. More than I ever expected. But the thought of picking up a

blade after what had happened in the library did not appeal to me, not in the slightest. I'd only just gotten the last of the blood out from under my nails this morning.

"That sparring really wore me out," I admitted. "I think I'm still recovering. I need to be in good condition for the ball tomorrow."

"Oh, of course!" Fina said, but she couldn't hide the disappointment in her expression. "That makes sense, yes."

"I'll have to show you some tricks another time," I said with a smile. "Regardless of who is chosen for the Choice, I'm sure I can make plenty of diplomatic excursions. There's always trade going on in Daybreak."

"You're so sure you won't be chosen?" Adora asked. "The king himself seemed impressed by your fighting skills."

"Perhaps," I admitted, "but the council doesn't like me."

"So it wasn't just me?" Fina asked. She lowered her voice. "It really seemed like the duchess was staring daggers at you."

"Oh, it makes sense," I said. "The battle between Daybreak and Nightfall is too fresh. It'd be better to go with a different pack." I waved a hand through the air. "Shouldn't we enjoy the last of this time we have together, then?"

"Let me guess," Fina said, "you want to go back to the library?"

I laughed, but it was a little forced. "No, not today. There was some interesting research I was doing, but..."

"You know," Adora said, "I used to come to Efra often as a little girl, as my mother was part of the diplomatic envoy. There's an additional archival room on the lower levels."

I whirled to face her so hard I nearly knocked my shoulder into Fina. "What? Different than the library?"

"Yes," Adora said. "It has older materials, things that aren't accessed as often."

Maybe there'd be maps—maps of the city before Daybreak took power. "Do you still know where it is?"

Fina laughed. “Of course, no library, but instead we’ll go to a *different* library.”

I shrugged. “I’d like to see more of the grounds, too, don’t you agree? I feel like I’ve been going between my quarters, the solarium, and the dining halls over and over.”

“I know my way around,” Adora said. “I think.”

“Love the confidence,” Fina said with a smile.

“Walking will do you good if you’re sore,” Adora said. “And it’s warmer inside the manor than outside.”

Not that I needed any more convincing. Adora led us through the quiet halls of the manor. Though we passed guards and servants, no one seemed to give us a second glance. I had expected there to be more guards, or an increase in surveillance of some kind after yesterday, but it seemed like the duchess and the council would rather pretend it hadn’t happened at all. I supposed Nightfall violence was only acceptable when the Nightfall wolves were the victors.

We made our way to the northern wing of the manor, where the hallways were narrower and the lighting dim.

“This is mostly servants’ quarters and prep rooms in this wing,” Adora explained quietly. “My sisters and I would always come this way to play hide and seek when we were here as children. Anything to avoid the boring trade disputes.” She laughed at the memory. “If I’m remembering right, the archives are part of the larger storage facilities.”

“Look at you,” Fina said, impressed. “Sneaking around like you own the place.”

Adora shrugged. “There wasn’t much else to do.”

“Doesn’t seem like people often come this way, anyway,” I said. Cobwebs draped over the low ceiling of the hallway, and torches weakly lit up as we approached, as if enchanted to spark to life when necessary. Maybe they were. If the Fae had returned to Efra, what other magic might be simmering under the surface?

“What’s down this way?” Fina asked. She tugged Adora’s elbow to lead us both down a narrow hallway, which I’d nearly missed, thinking it was just an alcove.

“What?” Adora asked. “I don’t remember this being here.” She blinked, looking around confusedly. “I may have gotten a little turned around... It’s been a while...”

We descended a narrow staircase, which darkened the hall, lit only by the rectangle of dim yellow light we’d stepped through. Something in the hallway made my hackles rise slightly, as if I were stepping into a dark forest full of potential threats instead of an unknown part of the manor. It didn’t feel like the presence of another wolf, just a general sense of awareness. Potential danger.

“What is that?” I asked.

“What is what?” Fina asked. She moved further down the hallway. At the very end, there was a small door, barely four feet tall. As she approached, she straightened up. “Oh,” she said. “I see what you mean.”

“Feel it?” I asked. The hair on my forearms rose into goosebumps.

Adora shivered and rubbed her upper arms like she was cold.

The door was locked with a huge iron lock, almost comically big on the small entryway. The sensation radiated off the lock, strong enough that it seemed to poke and prod at me, even tickling my nose. It wasn’t pleasant, but it didn’t hurt, either.

“It’s Fae magic,” Fina said. “Wow—it’s *old* Fae magic.”

“What?” I asked. My eyes widened. “How can you tell?”

Fina knelt down and smoothed her fingertip over the lock. “There’s Fae writing here,” she said. “And the magic...it’s like it’s leaking out of the lock. I’ve never felt it before, but my tutor used to say it felt like walking through a thundercloud.”

It was an apt description. It did feel like lightning could strike at any moment. “Your tutor taught you that?”

“There are a lot of romance novels about Fae,” Fina said with a sheepish grin. “Obviously I got interested in Fae lore, as well.”

“So we should probably go, right?” Adora asked. “We shouldn’t be caught snooping around in private storage.”

“You’re the one who led us here,” Fina teased. She tried the lock, and of course it didn’t budge.

“I’ve been reading a little about Fae history, too,” I said. “What do you think would be leaking Fae magic in the middle of the manor? Why would they keep it locked up like this?”

“I’m sure there’s a good reason,” Adora said. “Come on, we should go.”

“This will just take a second.” Fina pulled two pins from her hair and slipped them into the lock.

“By the gods,” Adora muttered, “this is *not* ladylike!”

“Come on,” Fina said. “We all know you’re the one who’s going to get picked. I deserve to have a little fun for wasting my time in this competition, don’t I?” She fiddled with the lock, and the tip of her tongue bit between her teeth as she focused.

I knelt down next to Fina, watching her work as she picked the lock. Fina shot me a sideways glance, almost apologetic, but I just briefly shook my head. She was right—Adora was surely the frontrunner. I knew Fina and I had a lot in common, but I wished I’d known earlier we had the same curiosity about the Fae here, too. I’d been so used to only having Griffin as a friend in Daybreak, but he wasn’t exactly interested in history the way I was. He’d listened politely when I uncovered an interesting bit of history or folklore when I’d come across it, but I couldn’t imagine him ever trying to pick a lock to see what Fae magic was behind a closed door. It was nice to have someone like Fina. How many friendships like this had I missed out on, locked up in Daybreak?

“Almost...” she muttered, adjusting the hairpins with her nose now right up against the lock. “There!” The lock clanked

open loud enough that the sound echoed around the hallway and made Adora start. The door swung open of its own accord.

“Whoa.” Fina stood up and took a step back. Behind the door was a wall of darkness, as if the door opened into an abyss. It was so dark, it was like the light from the hallway hit a solid wall and couldn’t penetrate it.

Well, I’d already almost died once this week. Might as well keep the fun going. The Fae magic crackled around me. I grinned at Fina, ignored Adora’s protests, and stepped into the dark room.

As soon as I crossed the threshold, the magic raced over my skin like a curious, sparking touch. It made my hair stand on end, and my wolf alert and attentive internally. Not fear, just—intensity. Curiosity. Then, as I squinted into the inky darkness, torches lining the walls sparked to life.

Light flooded the room. I gasped, my eyes widening as I drank in the sight in front of me.

This wasn’t just a room. This was a *vault*.

It was a small room, low ceiling, with stone walls lined with shelves. Where there weren’t shelves, there were glass cases, lining the space like the books in the library. It was crowded, stuffed with items, and the whole room crackled with energy.

“Wow,” I murmured.

Fina and Adora stepped in behind me, both equally shocked. “What is all this?” Adora asked.

“Fae artifacts,” Fina said. “A *lot* of them.”

“These are all Fae?” I asked.

“I would assume so,” Fina said. “That’s why the energy is so strong. The magic has nowhere to go, it’s just bouncing between all these artifacts. I wonder where the owners are...”

“What do you mean, owners?” I asked. I walked to one of the cases near the back, which was full of fine jewelry.

“Well, my tutor used to tell me that each Fae had a special item they used to help channel their power from Faerie into our realm,” Fina said. She leaned so close to one of the wall shelves that her breath fogged the glass shielding an immense golden dagger. “If you separate a Fae from their channel, they’re a lot easier to kill.”

So why would all these items be here? If the Fae were gone, why were their artifacts beneath the Nightfall manor? And why did the magic still work? If the magic still worked... Did that mean the owner was still out there? Or was it just an echo? The questions rolled over in my mind.

“This is crazy,” Fina murmured. “I didn’t even know you could still find items like this. I wonder what the king plans to do with them.”

I peered at a small golden ring, resting on a white pillow under the glass case. It had a tiny gem inlaid in it, so small it was like a single drop of blood. My fingers itched with the desire to touch it. It was like the magic in the ring was calling to me, specifically. Briefly, crazily, I wondered if the glass case opened.

“What’s this?” Adora asked. She was leaning over a small table tucked against the opposite wall. This one was not shielded in glass. “A record?”

I straightened up. “Like a ledger?”

“I think so,” Adora said. “It looks old, too.”

With some effort I pulled my attention away from the delicate ring and hurried over to join Adora. The book on the table had a dark leather cover, with no title or wording on it. The front cover was blank, too—no title, no author, no date. The other pages included careful illustrations of each item in the room. *Enchanted dagger. Armored brace. Ring of unknown power.* Some had names next to them, too. No dates.

At the back of the ledger, there were maps drawn—maps like the ones I’d seen in Blaylock’s book, and in the library. Maps that showed the Efra shrinking over time. Under one of the later maps, a section of forest that was once neighborhoods

was circled in dark ink, with a question scrawled next to it.
Why no evidence?

It seemed like whoever had last used this ledger had the same questions I did. But it offered no answers—nor even a hint to who had written the question.

“I haven’t seen a book bound in this style in a long time,” Adora said. “This is an old ledger.”

I nodded in agreement. “I wonder how old.”

Who brought these artifacts here? Was it Nightfall? Or—were these already here when Nightfall took power? I kept thumbing through the ledger as Fina peered at the artifacts. I was absorbed in the detailed drawings and maps as the questions folded over each other, leading only to more and more questions like ripples in a pond. I had no idea how much time had passed, until Adora finally cleared her throat.

“Um,” she said, “it’s been a little while now, and we do have an appointment with the tailor...”

“Oh, right!” I snapped the ledger closed.

Fina looked just as startled. “Right—shouldn’t be late.”

Our eyes met, and I knew we were thinking the same thing: didn’t want someone to come looking for us and find us down here. We left the room just as we’d found it, an abyss of inky darkness with a big, mysterious lock.

“**T**here you are,” Amity said as I stepped back into my quarters. “I was about to send Rue out looking for you. Your escort has been asking about you, and he’s quite insistent.”

Rue shifted back into her human form, looking slightly disappointed to have lost the tracking mission. I clapped a hand over my mouth as guilt rushed through me. Barion! Of course, he’d heard about what had happened with Rona—surely he was worried about me. I’d been so wrapped up in the political repercussions I hadn’t checked in with him.

“Terribly sorry,” I said, “I was with the other ladies and lost track of time.”

Amity raised her eyebrows, but only nodded. “Well, there’s lunch if you want it, milady, and the designer is currently meeting with the council, and should be here shortly. Would you like Rue to fetch your escort?”

“Please,” I said.

Rue hurried out of the room, and a few minutes later, Barion burst in with his eyes wide. I had barely stood up from the table before he crossed the room in a hurry, then tugged me into a hard embrace.

“Reyna,” he said gruffly. “I heard what happened. You’re all right?”

“I’m all right,” I said, muffled into his chest. “Seriously, I’m okay.”

He pulled back and gripped my upper arms, examining me as if checking for wounds. “You’re sure? You were attacked by a wolf, Reyna, that’s no small event.”

“I’m aware of that,” I said. I sat back down at the table and scarfed down some of the sliced meats and cheeses the girls had prepared for me. “Things were a little complicated because of the weapon I used.”

“I’m glad you had it on you,” Barion said. “I knew I taught you to be prepared.”

“Well, I would’ve appreciated it if you’d told me everything about that blade,” I hissed, low. “I’d only intended to subdue her.”

Barion pressed his lips together in a thin line. “With a wolf like Rona, one of you would’ve ended up dead. I’m simply grateful it was her and not you.”

I sighed. I knew he was right—if I had injured Rona, she would’ve kept attacking me. Even though the king had intervened, she would’ve been punished by her pack for her insubordination. Most likely, the outcome would’ve been the same. That didn’t make me feel any better about it, though.

“I know they confiscated the knife,” Barion said. “Take this one.”

He pulled a small knife from his waistband and handed it hilt-first to me. It was simpler than the one he’d given me prior; this one was clearly from his own collection. The hilt was well-worn, and the blade was simple, sharp steel. No embellishments. Function only. I found I liked the weight of it in my hand much more than the fine one I’d had before.

I tossed it, flipping my grip to test the weight. “Is this one altered in any way I need to know about?” I asked with a pointed arch of my brow.

He huffed a laugh. “I wish it was,” he said. “That knife served you well. It kept you safe. Well—” he paused. “You kept yourself safe. The knife helped. Keep that one with you until this competition is over.”

I nodded. “I will.”

“Lady Reyna?” Amity said apologetically. “I hate to interrupt, but the tailor is on her way.”

Barion stood up briskly, then clapped his hand on my shoulder. His eyes were soft as he looked at me. “Stay alert. We’re in the final stages of this competition.”

“I will,” I said again. I couldn’t tell him I intended to lose—but I also intended to stay alive. For me, and for the future I wanted with Griffin. Griffin—in a sudden swoop, I missed him terribly. I wondered what he might’ve said, knowing I’d taken down Rona like that. He never liked my focus on sparring, but after this, maybe he’d understand why I trained so much. I was grateful to have another blade, in any case.

Barion left in a hurry, and just a few moments later, there was another brisk knock on the door. I stuffed the knife into my trunk, stood up, and had just swallowed a big bite of bread and cheese when Rue opened the door.

The woman on the other side of the threshold was so gorgeous, I nearly dropped the piece of cheese I was holding in hand. She was tall, with enormous brown eyes in her youthful face, and long, flowing hair so silver it was like it was spun from spider-silk. She wore a simple, pale blue gown, and carried with her a large box and a canvas bag swung over her shoulder.

“Good afternoon,” she said, in a voice smooth like expensive wine. “I’m Aerika, of Camille’s. I’ve brought your gown as discussed.”

Not discussed with me, certainly, but discussed with *someone*. This woman’s hair was so striking, and her aura so...magnetic. Was she Fae? Would I know if she was?

Aerika breezed in like she owned the place, then placed the box at the foot of the bed. “We’ve designed this gown off the traditional Daybreak formalwear,” she explained, “but updated for Efra’s climate and for the high formality of the ball. We can make any adjustments requested.”

She pulled the dress from the box; she was so tall she could hold it up easily without the hem brushing the floor.

Again, I nearly gasped with shock. I hadn't been exactly looking forward to this fitting—I was much more interested in the artifacts beneath the manor—but I couldn't deny how stunningly beautiful this gown was. And how its familiar, elegant designs made my heart clench with sudden homesickness.

“You've captured Daybreak beautifully,” I murmured.

The gown was made of eggshell white fabric, sleeveless, with a scooped neck. The full skirt was layered, with the same eggshell fabric and pale blue tulle; when Aerika moved it in the air, it fluttered like waves. The corset was embroidered with tiny suns along the top, like the Daybreak crest, and in between them were tiny fish, each decorated with a single gleaming moonstone. The moonstones caught the firelight and glittered. She'd brought a cape too, made of a deeper blue fabric and embroidered with eggshell and pale blue fabric in the delicate shapes of waves.

“It's stunning,” I added.

“Good,” Aerika said, sounding professionally pleased. “There are shoes and accessories too, of course, but those will be delivered tomorrow after we do any alterations. Please, try it on.”

Behind the dressing screen, Amity and Rue helped me into the gown. Despite the layered fabric, the dress felt light. Easy to wear. I felt beautiful in it—more beautiful than I ever had in the gowns I'd worn in Daybreak itself. It was a strange sensation. I was homesick for the warm seas of Daybreak, the sunshine, the crisp air, the familiar conversations of the market. But I'd never wear anything this attention-grabbing at home. My father wouldn't allow it, and Griffin certainly wouldn't, either.

In Daybreak, I was a lady—and the Ice Princess.

At the ball, I would be representing my pack as a woman I never could be in Daybreak itself.

“What do you think, milady?” Rue asked as she fastened the ribbon on the back of the corset. It tied at mid-back, so

when I removed my cape, I could reveal an expanse of my pale back if I so desired.

“I love it.” I stepped out from behind the dressing screen and back in front of Aerika’s discerning gaze.

She hummed thoughtfully, then instructed me to twirl. I did so, lifting up on the ball of one foot to spin in a smooth circle; the skirt swept out around me in a rush of pale tulle and white like sea foam. Aerika tutted to herself, then held her hand up for me to stop. Then she made some minor adjustments on the dress, pinning the skirt here and there and adjusting the corset.

“Good,” she said, “just minor fitting adjustments.”

Amity and Rue ushered me back behind the screen to carefully peel me out of the dress without disturbing Aerika’s careful pinning. I pressed my lips together. There were so many things I wanted to ask Aerika, but I didn’t know how to formulate the questions. None of my etiquette lessons had covered how to ask someone if they had Fae heritage. For all I’d known, the Fae hadn’t even still existed!

What was I supposed to say? And how could I raise the issue without risking making Amity and Rue suspicious?

Rue dressed me back in my own clothing. As she did, Amity brought my gown back to Aerika, who laid it back in the box.

“Wonderful,” she said. “I’ll have the staff bring the dress with the accessories by lunch tomorrow.” She closed the box and picked it back up.

“Wait,” I said.

She paused at the door and pinned me with her huge brown eyes. Her silver hair framed her face and seemed to move with a strange kind of weightlessness, almost as if she were underwater. Under that serious gaze, I couldn’t seem to wrangle the questions I wanted to ask out of my mind.

“Thanks,” I said meekly. “It’s a beautiful gown.”

“Of course, Lady Reyna,” Aerika said. She swept out the door just as quickly as she had arrived.

The questions turned over and over in my mind as Amity and Rue guided me through the evening rituals to prepare me for bed. My curiosity kept me awake until it was late, and as the sun broke over the horizon, I longed to sneak back down to the room in the basement. If I looked carefully through the ledger, I wondered would I see something with Aerika’s name next to it? I’d hoped I might have a free hour or two to myself that day, but as soon Amity and Rue threw open the curtains and laid out breakfast, they informed that I’d have no such luck.

“Preparing for the ball is a day-long affair,” Amity explained, like this was obvious. “Aren’t you excited?”

“I sure would be,” Rue said dreamily. “This is the biggest event the court has held for ages.”

The morning was taken up by the longest bath I’d ever been subjected to, then lunch, then ages at the vanity while my handmaidens combed and dried my hair and styled it into an elegant series of plaits wound into a bun at the base of my skull. The style would allow for me to show off the pale skin of my back if I wanted, a hint of beauty and desirability I’d never had in Daybreak. It sent a small thrill through me.

As promised, the dress was delivered as I was finishing a light lunch and coffee, eating carefully as to not disturb my fine hairstyle or the thin layer of makeup I already had on. Amity and Rue didn’t rush me through my meal, but I could tell they were eager to see the dress on. So I finished quickly, and let them corral me back behind the dressing screen.

Somehow, the dress looked even more gorgeous than it had yesterday; it was so light and fit so perfectly. The eggshell fabric had a faint warm hue against my pale skin, and the blue tulle caught the light when I moved. With the dress, the tailor had sent a pair of low heels in the same color, so it was like another flash of waves whenever I took a step.

“You look so beautiful, milady,” Rue said with a sigh. “You represent Daybreak marvelously. The king should be

honored to have you in the Choice.”

I flushed. “Aerika did all the heavy lifting. All I’m doing is wearing it.”

Rue fixed my deep blue cloak over my shoulders, while Amity fastened the necklace at my nape. The jewelry was just as elegant as the dress: a thin strand of silver with three pearls right at the hollow of my throat. Small, unobtrusive, just a glimmer of finery.

Finally, the girls stepped back and looked over me discerningly. They both smiled, pleased.

“Sometimes I think you two enjoy this more than I do,” I said.

“There aren’t too many balls in Efra, normally,” Amity said. “And usually, we’re in the kitchens preparing for big parties like this. Getting to see the gowns up close is a little more fun.”

“It’s time,” Rue said. “Unless you’d prefer to be late.”

“Absolutely not,” I said. Nerves crawled into my throat. I had the sense that this trial was going to be the hardest of all of them. I was much more comfortable in the arena with a sword in my hand. But facing the council, arguing my ‘case’ for why I was the right choice—maintaining my pack’s dignity while ensuring I didn’t sell myself better than Fina or Adora—felt like I was walking a tightrope with a bucket of water in each hand. I took a steadying breath. “Lead the way.”

My handmaidens led me through the manor, which bustled with activity of both guests and servants. We garnered no attention, though, not until we were standing in front of the doors to the great dining hall. Amity was in her human form while Rue was in her wolf shape at my side. Rue nudged her nose into my palm, and I took another breath.

Amity opened the door and led me inside. She swept into a delicate curtsy and announced to the room, “The Lady Reyna of the Court of Daybreak.”

Briefly, all eyes in the room turned to me. And there were a lot of eyes. This was a far bigger ball than the prior gala.

There was no dining room table, just tall consoles for hors d'oeuvres; the lush curtains were pulled closed against the windows and the room was lit in warm candlelight. In the corner, the band played a slow, delicate song as the guests milled about.

At the back of the room, the king, the duchess, and the council were all seated at a long table atop a dais. The king was in the center, and his dark eyes found me immediately. He was dressed in a dark shirt and pants with an equally dark cloak, and for the first time, I saw him wearing the simple, delicate gold band around his forehead that was the king's crown.

It was striking. It suited him. Internally, my wolf perked up, easily ignoring the presence of all the other shifters to focus on the king.

Maybe she was interested in him, but all I could think about was how easily he'd wrapped his hand around Lord Cazzell's neck and broken it.

Lady Glennis stood in front of the dais, facing the crowd. She tapped her champagne glass with her fork, and that delicate motion was all it took for the band to cease playing and to draw the attention of all the elegantly dressed shifters in the room, as well as the guards in wolf form patrolling the perimeter.

"The final trial will begin in an hour," Lady Glennis announced. "Until then, please enjoy yourselves." She smiled and gestured broadly around the room, then to the band, who began again. The delicate music filtered through the space as conversations picked back up.

I'd never seen this many members of the Nightfall pack elite in one place. All of them were dressed in the blacks and deep purples of their packs: the women in flowing, elegant gowns with glinting silver jewelry and the men in fine slacks and jackets. I stood out like a sore thumb amid the dark colors, my pale moonstone-embroidered gown catching the dim light like icicles.

Luckily, it made it easy to pick out Fina and Adora from the crowd. Both of them were standing by a small table near the center of the room, talking to each other while occasionally being graciously interrupted by lords of the Nightfall court. I hurried to join them. I'd need all the support I could get before I faced the council for the final trial.

"Wow," Adora said as I approached. Her eyes widened. "Your dress is incredible."

"So is yours," I said with a smile. Adora's gown was blue and pale green, with a tighter skirt accentuating her gorgeous curves. Her hair was loose around her shoulders, with crystals sparkling in the loose waves. Her eyes shone with delight as I approached.

"They kind of went a different direction for me," Fina said with a grin. She was dressed in the rich navy of her court, so she didn't stand out quite as much, but they made up for that with incredible jewelry, including her gleaming tiara, and an extravagant necklace that was more like a collar.

"Check this out." She waggled one foot at me.

"Oh!" I gasped. "For a formal event?"

"I know!" Fina beamed. She wasn't wearing a gown at all—it was a jumpsuit. When she stood with her feet together, it looked similar to a floor-length gown with a cinched waist, fastened with a long navy ribbon. But when she walked, it was clear they were pants. "Seems like there are some parts to the Nightfall culture that aren't so bad."

"Do you think we'll have to answer questions about the culture?" Adora asked quietly. "I've been studying, but I'm so nervous—I did so poorly in the last trial."

"You did fine," Fina said. "That one was more a show for the city, anyway. This is the kind of stuff that matters more."

"What do you think they'll ask, then?" I asked. My stomach clenched. A waiter drifted by with a plate of delicious-looking canapes, but I was too nervous to eat anything.

“My escort says Nightfall wants to solidify their power,” Adora said. “The king’s reputation is a good way to get power, but not to keep it.”

I glanced up at the dais, and for once, the king wasn’t looking at me. He was in deep conversation with Lord Elfriede, looking as serious as ever even with his sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms. Internally, my wolf whined, knocking against my ribs insistently. She was getting more demanding these days, craving his attention and wanting to be let out. I wasn’t used to it. I was used to her being relaxed, sleepy, forgettable. The longer I spent in Nightfall, the more she demanded my attention.

“So,” Adora continued, “I think what I’m going to do is try to talk less about myself, and more about what my pack could bring to the Court of Nightfall. Less about me fitting in, and more about our power consolidating. At least, I think that’s a good strategy.”

“Seems it,” Fina said. “That’s Starcrest’s strength, anyway.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Adora said. “We have moonstone, sure, but moonstone doesn’t matter a bit if there’s no food production. Without Duskmoon’s resources, the country falls apart.”

Fina raised her eyebrows. “Are you sure you want to be giving me talking points?” she teased.

“That seems like it makes sense,” I said. “I hope they ask some questions though... I’m not great at just giving a presentation. And in front of all these people!”

“You’ll do great,” Adora said. Then she winked. “Hopefully not as good as me, but great nonetheless.”

I laughed. If only Adora knew I was on her team the whole time. If she was right, this could be manageable. I could make Daybreak look good, certainly, but not as good as Starcrest. Under the discerning gazes of the council and the Nightfall elite, I could almost forget what the king had said to me in the privacy of his study, when I’d been covered in Rona’s blood.

“Wine, milady?” a passing servant asked. He had a single glass of fine, pale liquid on a carrying tray, unlike the other servants passing by with full ones. I took it gratefully and the servant swept away.

I could try to forget, but my wolf couldn't.

Mate.

The king couldn't *really* overrule the council, could he? Certainly they'd want Adora. There was no way whatever strange tension was between the king and me would outweigh the real, tangible power the Starcrest coffers and resources would bring to Nightfall.

Fina cleared her throat.

I blinked back into the present.

“Milady?” an unfamiliar man asked, with a tone that suggested he had already said this once or twice before. He was taller than me, with dark hair and a stern, barely lined face, in a dark military dress uniform that had a heavy cape. “Pardon me for interrupting.”

“Ah.” I took a sip of my wine. “Beg your pardon.”

Fina and Adora delicately took their leave, leaving me alone with the stranger. It was the proper thing to do, etiquette-wise, but I immediately missed the security of their presence. Even at the balls in Daybreak, no one ever approached me to dance—or even talk. The only person I ever danced with was Griffin, and even then, getting him on the dance floor was like pulling teeth. A pang of guilt swooped through me. I'd hardly thought of Griffin at all since I'd been here—and when I did, his memory often came up short. I supposed the novelty of travel still outweighed what was waiting back in Daybreak for me. Things would be better between us once we left Daybreak for good.

“I'm Cyran of Nightfall,” he said. “Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Likewise,” I said, taking another sip of the wine. He offered no other information about his ranking, but my gaze

fell to his chest, where his uniform sparkled with medals. “Are you a soldier in the king’s army?”

“Yes,” he said. “A general, in fact.”

“Wow.” I hoped I sounded suitably impressed. “You’ve trained your soldiers well.”

Cyran smiled and extended his hand. “While I appreciate the compliment, I’d much rather talk about you.”

I set my wine glass down with only the dregs left in the bottom. The music picked up, louder and more upbeat than it had been before. It wasn’t quite the riotous jig they’d played at the last ball, but it was certainly faster than what I was used to—but strangely, I found I wasn’t that intimidated. I wasn’t the Ice Princess here. I could be a Lady of Daybreak of my own design. Representative of my pack—and of myself.

I glanced up at the dais, but the king was nowhere to be found. My wolf whined plaintively, but being in the presence of this strong shifter soothed some of her anxiety.

Cyran guided me to the center of the dance floor. Around us, dark gowns swept across the floor like storm clouds. Fina and Adora had found dance partners, too. Cyran set his hand at my waist and took my left hand in his right. With his posture military-straight, he began to lead me in a brisk but elegant box step, easy to follow and forgiving if I took the wrong step.

“How have you found Nightfall, milady?” I asked.

The dance was quick enough that I felt swept along by him, that the rest of the crowd seemed to melt away around us. “It’s lovely,” I said.

A smile curled his lips. “Yes? Even with the complications from the competitor who was chosen by lottery?”

I swallowed. Fairly brazen of him to bring that up first thing—especially when I’d been doing my best to not think about it at all.

“There are complications during any inter-pack negotiations,” I said easily. “Regardless of any surprises, I’m having a lovely time with the other competitors.”

“I saw the three of you chatting like old friends,” Cyran said. “I confess it wasn’t quite what I expected, since you are in fact competing.”

The song picked up, a bit louder, a bit faster, and Cyran guided us easily as we swirled around the dance floor. The noise and the speed made my head spin a little, and I stumbled a bit to keep up. Cyran didn’t seem to notice, his hand on my waist guiding me into the steps.

“They’re lovely girls,” I said. “I won’t be the winner anyway, so it doesn’t matter.”

He raised an eyebrow. My blood roared in my ears. Why had I just said that? The words had slipped out unexpectedly.

“I didn’t think you the type to have such low self-esteem,” Cyran said.

“Ah,” I said. I fumbled to get the conversation back on track, and I blinked, peering at the medals adorning his chest as my headache worsened. “You’re a general,” I said, even though this was obvious. But I shouldn’t have said I wasn’t going to win to someone as high-ranking as a general. That had been uncharacteristically careless of me.

“Yes,” Cyran said, his grin widening.

“I shouldn’t have said that,” I said. The dizziness was worsening, and spinning around to the fast-paced music wasn’t helping.

Cyran just laughed, then pulled me into a spin. I would’ve fallen if not for his slightly too-firm grip on my hand. Nausea turned my stomach, and this time it wasn’t just the anxiety.

“Please,” I said. “I don’t feel well. You must excuse me.”

Finally, we stopped dancing. Unfortunately for me, the room kept spinning around me. Cyran kept one hand on my shoulder, steadying me. “Milady?”

I couldn’t bring myself to meet his gaze, but I didn’t hear a whole lot of pity in his tone. I said nothing more as I let him lead me back to one of the small tables at the edge of the room and guide me into a seat.

“I’ll fetch you some water,” he said.

I closed my eyes tightly, trying to will away the spins. The nausea worsened even when I was sitting down. How had this happened? I’d only had one glass of wine! Sure, I’d drunk it a bit quickly, but it was still just a single glass!

But, I realized through the haze, it had been the only glass on the servant’s platter. Had he tampered with it in some way? Given me something to make me dizzy? But why would he do that? Why would a servant have stakes in this Choice? Someone else must’ve given it to him.

“Lady Reyna?” a cold voice asked.

That was not Cyran. I took a breath and looked up.

Lady Glennis glared down at me impassively, looking as terrifying as ever in her dark dress gown. “Lady Reyna? Your initial trial will now begin.”

“Initial?” I asked.

Her expression only soured further. “Are you drunk?”

“No!” I staggered to my feet, and Lady Glennis had to steady me with a hand on my upper arm. She did not look pleased about it. “I’m fine. I’m ready to begin.”

She did not look convinced in the slightest, but she guided me not to the center of the room, where the dais was empty, but to a side door just to the right of the empty platform. She opened it and pushed me unceremoniously over the threshold.

Inside, the king, the duchess, and the four council members sat in plain hard-backed chairs, facing a chair in the center of the room. My head still spinning, I made my way to the chair and sat down hard.

“Too much to drink?” Lord Elfriede asked with one brow elegantly arched.

“I only had a single glass,” I stammered. “Something—I think something is wrong—”

“I am not interested in excuses,” the duchess snapped.

The disdain in her voice made hot tears prick behind my eyes. Usually, it wouldn't have bothered me in the slightest, and I would've met her gaze fearlessly, but I still felt so dizzy and terrible. Internally, my wolf whined in misery, ears back. She wanted me to run to the king's side.

The king. The king, who was staring at me with his elbow propped on the arm of his chair and his elbow and his forefinger tapping his chin. He had said no harm would come to me—why wasn't he doing anything about this?

“Are you attempting to forgo this challenge?” the duchess asked. “To do so would disgrace your pack's name.”

“No, I'm not,” I said. I blinked hard, exhaled, and straightened up in my chair. I met the duchess' eyes steadily, ignoring my wolf begging me to submit. “I'm ready to begin.” As ready as I ever would be, I guessed.

“Then we'll begin,” the duchess said.

“Lady Reyna of Daybreak,” Lady Marin said, “when you shift, do you receive any other powers while in your wolf form?”

I furrowed my brow. It took a moment for the question to process. “None,” I said curtly. “Though—I don't shift often enough to pay close attention.” My wolf moved restlessly inside as if irritated by this admission.

Lord Nylander leaned to Lady Marin, and they murmured to each other, gazes still on me.

“For what reason do you not shift?” Lord Nylander asked.

“I...” My head pounded. “I'm not in control when I shift, and it isn't becoming of a lady to be out of control.”

The duchess' expression soured impossibly further. Why had I said that? The words had fallen off my tongue as if forcibly pulled out of me—the same way they had when Cyran had spun me on the dance floor. The council members murmured among themselves, looking just as horrified as the duchess did. I swallowed hard. I shouldn't have confessed that—least of all to wolves of Nightfall, who shifted as easily as breathing. Not shifting often was one thing, but admitting I

didn't have a symbiotic relationship with my wolf was another.

The king didn't look upset like the council did, though. He looked curious. Like he was beginning to put together a puzzle. I didn't like being subjected to that gaze—it made me feel like he could see right through me. Right to my soul, to my wolf, who so desperately wanted to be seen by him.

“Lady Reyna of Daybreak.” Lady Oleta folded gnarled hands together in her lap, and the room went silent when she spoke in a hushed, scratchy voice. “Is it true that in the arena, you drew the king's blood?”

I blinked. Why was she asking about the sparring session? And why did she need me to confirm it? “Um, yes,” I said. “But it was barely a scratch, barely a drop of blood. I hadn't intended to scratch the king at all.”

“And your mother is of the Stardust pack?” Lady Oleta asked.

“Yes.” I didn't understand the order of these questions at all. It was like a mental sparring session, where Lady Oleta had a sword, and I had a big stick, and my boots stuck in molasses. My wolf was beginning to demand more and more of my attention. She knew I was failing here, and she thought her way would be better. And she was beginning to get tired of me ignoring her.

“I look like my mother,” I said, “but my father raised me. My mother is no longer with us.”

“You see?” Lord Nylander murmured aside to Lady Marin. “She *is* a wolf of Starcrest. The prophecy stands.”

“Not fully,” Lady Marin said. “Until we know for sure.”

Prophecy? My head spun. Why did the council care about that? Barion had mentioned it—but with my head pounding I couldn't remember what he had said. The thought slipped away like a leaf on a stream, focused as I was on not vomiting up my guts in front of the council.

“Hm,” Lady Oleta said. “And your father, did he ever speak of your mother's lineage?”

“He didn’t speak about her at all,” I said. My wolf howled internally. “I think—I think he avoids me because I remind him of her.” I closed my eyes. Why did I *say* that?

The council nodded, then again began to speak among themselves, too low for me to hear. Not that I could focus on their voices at all, even if I’d wanted to.

My head pounded, my heart raced, sweat beaded on my forehead. My senses began to heighten: smell first, as the smell of booze and sweat began to permeate my senses. Not just sweat—the king’s sweat. The way he’d smelled in the arena. I could smell it now, and my nostrils flared.

The duchess looked at the king, and he nodded once. Curt and quick. Under the careful gazes of the council, I felt like I was about to be walked to the gallows.

“Majority wins,” Lady Marin said in a cold voice. “Lady Reyna progresses to the final round.”

The final round—the last two contestants in the Choice.

The king’s eyes gleamed gold as he watched me. Like there wasn’t anyone else in the room.

That’s when it happened.

My wolf surged to the surface. I was weakened from whatever had happened, exhausted from the trial, and desperate to know what in the gods’ names the council was talking about. I couldn’t hold her back anymore. I clapped my hands over my mouth as my canines elongated, and my vision sharpened; from the king’s expression, I knew my eyes had flashed silver.

No, no, no, I begged her internally, though I already knew it was a lost cause. *Not now. Not like this.*

The king stood up.

I leaped from my chair and rushed for the door. As soon as I pushed it open, my wolf sprang free.

I barreled out of the small side room and into the crowded ballroom, my paws skidding on the polished stone. It wasn't the presence of a wolf that shocked the crowd, but the speed with which I skittered out. The guards in their wolf forms watched me curiously yet they made no movement. Adora gasped, her hands covering her mouth.

My wolf was small and sleek, with a thick, double-layered pure white coat and silver eyes. It made running in Daybreak uncomfortable, but here in the chill of Efra, it was almost pleasant. I shook out my coat and then barreled toward the door, weaving around interested guests and ignoring Fina's and Adora's voices behind me. I had to get out of here. Away from all of this. Away from the council, away from the ball, away from the king.

I needed fresh air. I needed to clear my head. Most of all, I needed to *run*. Whatever had been in that drink would be burned out of my system once I got my paws in the dirt. I clattered out of the ballroom, down the hall, and out of the back doors of the manor.

I ran without thinking. In my wolf form, I knew where the woods were. All I had to do was run. I tore through the city and into the tree line, until my paws dug into the soft earth and the roots. The air was crisp and cold in my sensitive nose, bringing with it intoxicating scents of the trees, the wildlife, and the wolves of Nightfall.

As I ran through the woods, the questions turned over and over in my mind. Why had the council been asking me so many questions about my mother? My mother had nothing to do with the Choice. I'd never met her. She hung over my life like a specter—the woman I resembled, and the reason my father resented me. And now the council wanted to know about her, too?

It was never about just me. I should never have been so naive as to think the choice would be a place I would be appreciated for who I was. It was all about the pack. About my lineage, whatever that meant. Not about me.

But at least right now, in my wolf form, I could be myself. I could pretend nothing mattered except the dirt under my paws and the cold breeze rustling through my coat.

Then, a low, long howl cut through the silence of the forest. It seemed to be coming from nowhere and everywhere at once, surrounding me. I skidded to a stop, hackles rising and tail low as I looked for the source of the howl. I slunk into the brush, carefully concealing myself in a low bush, pressing my body low to the ground.

Then, from amid the trees, the king emerged.

He had frightened me in his wolf form when I'd been in my human form. He was immense, his coat dark and thick, his golden eyes glowing, his breath exhaling in clouds of steam around his snout. My hackles rose, lips curling back as I exposed my teeth.

In this form, I wasn't afraid. In this form, I wanted him to know I was just as strong as he was.

Before I could think about what I was doing, I leaped forward and careened into the king, teeth bared, slamming into the side of his body hard enough to knock him off balance. He whirled on me, his own teeth bared as a deep, intense growl rose from his throat. I lowered down and sneered right back, matching his growl. He moved to lunge at me, but in this shape, I was even quicker than I was in the arena. I dodged him easily, then turned and barreled off into the woods, running as fast as my feet would take me. My wolf had so

much pent-up energy, I felt like I could leap forward and start to fly.

The king was pursuing me. I could feel his paws striking the earth behind me, and hear each rough exhale of his breath, smell his scent carried on the cold wind.

But I wasn't scared. I was almost euphoric.

Even if the king caught me, even if he fastened his teeth on my throat and bit down, crazily, I thought it'd be worth it to experience a cold run like this. I still had the presence of mind to feel a small bit of guilt about the sensation. I'd kept my wolf buried for so long—maybe she just didn't fit in Daybreak. Maybe she fit somewhere like here.

Not with the king, of course, but in a colder climate. Somewhere like Efra.

I crashed out of the tree line and into a small clearing. A few paths led to different parts of the woods, and I inhaled deeply, trying to catch a scent that wasn't the king's. I had no idea how far I'd run. I didn't want to leave the king's territory and trespass into another pack's land.

I was about to head down one of the paths, to keep the chase going, but I'd underestimated the king's speed.

He crashed into me hard, knocking me onto my side; I yelped as I hit the dirt and all the breath was knocked from my lungs. He pinned me with his weight, and before I could snap my jaws at him, his sharp teeth set at my throat and bit down. Not hard enough to break the skin, but hard enough that I could feel their presence like a promise. His breath rushed hot over my pelt. I was tense beneath him, desperate to thrash and fight, but not with those teeth so close to my jugular.

Then he withdrew his jaws, but kept me pinned beneath him. He bared his teeth and a deep growl rumbled from his chest.

Do you submit?

His voice rang in my head as clear as if he'd spoken in my ear.

How was that possible?

I exhaled hard, my ears twitched.

Speak, he said.

In my head? To you?

Just like that. Do you submit?

How is this possible?

I'm the king. His voice in my head sounded almost amused as his golden eyes gleamed down at me. *I can speak to all my wolves.*

His wolves. His voice sent a shiver racing through me; the fur at my hackles stood on end. Part of me balked at the language—I didn't belong to anyone, despite what everyone around me seemed to think. But my wolf preened at the suggestion. To be a part of the king's pack—the strongest pack in Frasia. Under the strongest king. To my wolf, that was the ultimate success. Her pleasure raced through me despite my own misgivings. Without thinking, I tipped my head back against the dirt, exposing the vulnerable expanse of my throat. The submission was wordless.

The king rumbled his approval low in his chest.

You can get off me now, I muttered.

The king snorted, like a laugh, and then dragged his tongue over my snout.

He *licked* me. Licked me! Like I was some sort of disobedient but beloved pup. I couldn't believe it! It was degrading, disgusting—and yet my tail thumped against the dirt. He looked like he was grinning down at me, tongue lolling out of his mouth like he was a pup himself.

Ridiculous. This man was ridiculous! I thrust my hind legs into his belly, pushing him off me. With his bulk, he easily could've resisted and forced me back down, but he didn't. A faint scent of iron stung in my nostrils. Maybe my hind claws were sharper than I'd thought.

I scrambled to my feet and shook out my pelt, blowing some of the dirt out of my white fur. The king stood in front of me, front legs slightly bent and tail moving in a low, slow arc. His tongue still lolled out of his mouth. If I didn't know better, I'd think he wanted to *play*.

It couldn't be that simple, though. This had to be some kind of test. I paused in the clearing, lifting my nose to sniff the cold wind, the trees, the king's scent, and the distant smell of the rest of the pack in Efra. I didn't know what I was supposed to do here. What the king expected from me. But my wolf wanted to run—so run we would. I guess we'd see if the king could keep up.

I ran. And ran. And ran. The more I ran, the more my thoughts settled down, until I had no thoughts at all. All I felt was sensation: the dirt, the wind, my breath, my heart. There was no past, no future, no expectations. Just each moment cascading by like a rushing river. I ran until my lungs burned and my muscles protested, until the sky was inky-black with night.

I reached another clearing where a small creek cascaded down a rough rock face. The water was clear and cold, gurgling, and I hurried forward to drink from the stream. As I started to feel refreshed, I flicked my ears. The forest was alive around me, with sounds of small creatures in the underbrush, owls in the branches overhead, the wind rustling the leaves, and the stream rushing over the rock.

The king stepped out of the tree line, panting. He padded closer to me, slowly this time, and lowered his head to drink from the stream as well. His presence comforted me. I didn't have to pay careful attention to the forest around me, not with the king nearby. Instead, I could focus on the simple pleasure of being in this shape—and how pleasurable it was. This was the most time I'd spent in my wolf form in years. Maybe ever. At least since I was able to control my shifts. And it felt good, indulgent, like dancing all night. I knew it was a bad choice, and knew I'd regret it, but it was so intoxicating in the moment I couldn't bear to stop it.

Then the king lifted his head. He nudged his nose against my flank, then guided me closer to the rock face where the water spilled over. In the side of the cliff was a small opening. He nudged me again and I padded into the cave. It was barely a cave—more like a burrow. It smelled of cool dirt and fresh water, and the security of being enclosed immediately made me sleepy.

I flopped onto my belly in the cave, and the king padded in after me. With the two of us in the cave, we nearly took up all the space on the ground—and that only made me feel more secure.

He lay down next to me, then nosed at my neck, and at the fur behind my ear. His exhale washed over me, and having his scent so close soothed me, made my pulse slow down as exhaustion washed over. He pressed close, his warm bulk surrounding mine. Distantly, I knew this wasn't appropriate, but the protest was faint, like a mosquito buzzing. Easy to wave away and ignore. Especially when I was so tired. And the king smelled so good. And he was so warm. And the den was so safe. I huffed an exhale and nuzzled closer.

Sleep, his voice rumbled. *I'll protect us.*

Sleep fell over me like a heavy blanket, comfortable and warm.

When I woke up, enough time had passed that the early morning light was beginning to filter into the opening of the cave. I hummed, blinking slowly into wakefulness. My whole body was deliciously sore, like the day after a particularly good sparring session, and my usually circling thoughts were finally quieted. I nuzzled closer to the warm body beneath me. The broad, muscular chest, steady beating heart, smooth, warm skin. He wrapped one arm around my waist, pulling me closer languidly in his half-sleep, so our bodies were pressed flush together.

Wait.

Oh, no. No, no, no.

I leaped to my feet so fast I nearly cracked my skull on the cave ceiling.

My feet.

My *human* feet!

I'd been sprawled all over the king like he was a mattress! It was one thing when we were wolves—oh, Gods above, we'd run together as *wolves*—but to be flopped all over him in the middle of the woods? In our human forms? *Nude?!?*

I clapped my hands over my mouth and muffled my horrified little shriek.

The king exhaled slowly, then slowly opened his eyes. Lazily, he propped himself up on one elbow.

I didn't know if I wanted to shield my body, or my own eyes. He was gorgeous, that much was undeniable: broad, functional muscle, tan skin dotted with scars, his bare feet crossed at the ankles. Completely unselfconscious. Even with his manhood just—out there! Visible! Big! And I certainly wasn't looking at it, and certainly wasn't thinking about how it'd pressed against my thigh when he'd pulled me flush to his body.

Oh, Gods, help me.

“Good morning,” the king rumbled, his low voice rough with sleep. The sound made something hot curl in my gut. “Seems like you're not quite used to waking up like this.”

“Like what?” I asked. I wanted to leave this cave, but crawling over his body to get to the entrance seemed like the worst thing I could do right now.

“Oh, you know,” the king said. An amused smile curled his lips—that cursed flirty, curious, smirky look that I was so familiar with. “Next to a naked man.”

“Of course not!” I snapped. “This is—and we—I mean—I'm a *lady!*”

“That's a cute way of saying you're a virgin,” the king said.

My eyes widened. “How in the gods’ names did you know that?” I asked. How much information did the Nightfall court *have*? First all those questions about my mother and my lineage and now—

“I didn’t,” the king said with an infuriating smirk. “But thank you for confirming my suspicions.” He stood up and stretched out his shoulders, as best as he could in the confined space.

My face burned with embarrassment. I rushed by him and stormed out of the cave, into the freezing morning air. The forest was still and beautiful, with the birds beginning to sing their morning songs and the sky turning pink and gold in the early dawn. I wrapped my arms around my body and shivered. How far had we run yesterday? It couldn’t have been too far—maybe we’d gone in circles. If I strained my ears, I could hear voices.

The king strode out of the cave bare as the day he was born. He didn’t seem bothered by the cold at all, save for the faint rising of goosebumps down his arms and his breath exhaled in a cloud of steam. I swallowed. If I ran in this form, there’s no way I’d outrun him. I didn’t even want to. I didn’t know what I wanted.

Before I could decide, though, the king took my hand, unwrapping my arms from around myself. He tugged me close to his body, flush again, and I couldn’t help but sigh with relief at the warmth of his touch. It was so cold, I couldn’t bring myself to push him away.

“I didn’t mean to embarrass you,” he said. “It’s just something else that intrigues me about you.” He smoothed one hand up and down my back, bringing warmth back to my bare skin. His voice rumbled so deep in his chest, it was like his growl was vibrating into my own body. “I like that no other man has touched you. I admit I’m a jealous creature. The thought of another man’s hands on you drives my wolf wild.”

I huffed an irritated half-laugh against his chest, even as my wolf preened internally at the possessiveness.

“I’m not some innocent flower,” I said. “Just because I’m a virgin doesn’t mean I’ve never...”

I snapped my mouth shut. What was I saying? He didn’t need to know any more about me than he already did. He’d just told me he was jealous—why would I tell him about Griffin?

“You’ve never what?” the king prompted. He pulled back a little to smile down at me, still holding me close. “Desired? Been with a man?” His eyes flashed gold. “Touched yourself?”

My pulse skyrocketed. The king’s nostrils flared. Could he smell me? Could he sense the way his words sent desire rushing through me? I shivered, and pressed my thighs together, but it wasn’t from the cold.

Of course, I was familiar with my own body. I was a lady, but I had needs. I took care of myself. I always had. “None of your business,” I said primly.

“Don’t be shy, little wolf,” the king growled—but his growl was closer to a purr. He set his hand at my lower back, and it was so big it nearly spanned the width of it. “Tell me. It will help with my dreams tonight.”

“You beast,” I said before I could stop myself. My hands fluttered to his chest, as if to push him away, but I couldn’t make myself actually do it. “I won’t give you anything for your fantasies.”

“You don’t need to,” he said with that smirk. “I’ve got plenty I dreamed up all on my own.”

My blood roared in my ears, and I forgot the cold around me. Standing with the soft dirt under my bare feet, it was like all the pageantry of the Choice dissipated like our breaths. It was just us, together, two wolves in the crisp morning air.

The king swept his hand up to my sensitive nape. He flattened his palm against it, fingertips digging into the sides of my neck, and I gasped. He swallowed the sound in a burning kiss.

Instinctively, I wrapped my arms around his neck, tugging him closer. Any protests I had melted away under the intensity of his kiss. He devoured me, swiftly taking control and sweeping his tongue into my mouth like he wanted to taste me.

I was surrounded by him, overwhelmed by him, the heat of his body, his strong muscles, his scent, his touch, his taste. It was so easy to surrender to my desire. It felt like it had in the cave as wolves—it was just easy to be close to him. The kiss made my head spin. I'd never felt so desired. I'd never wanted to be close to someone like this. My wolf was sated, and I was, too—for the first time in a long time, we were aligned.

Kissing Griffin had never felt like this.

Griffin.

I snapped back into reality, planted my plans on his chest, and shoved him off. The king took a step back, eyes widened with surprise.

“I can't do this,” I said. My voice was small and only wavered a little.

I expected the king to push back, to tease me, or grab me again and pull me back into his arms. It wasn't like I was strong enough to resist him.

But he didn't. His expression faltered slightly, then became something soft, almost understanding, with the corners of his lips turned down and a small furrow in his brow. It reminded me of how he'd looked when he'd showed up at my door, thinking I was unwell. He had these moments where he kept surprising me. Like he was right at the brink of revealing some other side of himself—something beneath the layers he wore when he was acting as the king.

“Lady Reyna,” he said quietly.

“Please,” I said. The cold was sharp on my skin again, feeling even worse now with the loss of his touch. “I need to get back to the castle.” I glanced over my shoulder, toward the source of the voices. “Alone.”

The silence hung between us. I felt small, small and isolated and confused. I wanted a hot meal, a nap in a warm

bed—I wanted to go home.

“If you insist, my lady,” the king said, with a heretofore unused formality. “Just—” he tipped his head. “You can’t go back like that.”

“I’ll figure it out,” I huffed. Not like I could make my standing with the council any worse.

“Here.” He ducked back into the cave and emerged with a heavy canvas cloak. It wasn’t nearly as fine as the cloaks he wore when with the court, but it was thick and warm and fur-lined around the neck so as to not irritate my skin. He handed it to me, and I didn’t hesitate to wrap it around my body, immediately grateful for the protection from the cold.

“Thank you,” I said, and swallowed.

The king only nodded. He looked at me for a long moment, and then, in a crackle of energy, shifted back into his wolf form. His golden eyes flashed, and then the immense dark wolf bounded back into the woods, away from the city.

I pulled the cloak tighter around my shoulders, standing still until the sounds of his paws receded to silence. Then I turned toward the path I hoped led back to the manor.

It was early enough that the manor and the surrounding town was still quiet when I returned. The path led me to the servants' back entrance—where the laundry was hanging up to dry, and the servants hurried in and out with baskets of supplies, preparing for another day. I pulled the cloak tightly around my shoulders, smoothed down my hair best I could, and rushed toward the back door. I got a few glances from the servants working, but no one stopped me. Being wolves of Nightfall, I could only assume they were used to seeing people hurry in from an ill-advised or unplanned shift.

I slipped in through the back door, weaving through the disinterested servants. As I made my way toward the back staircase, someone called, “Milady! Milady!”

I cringed and glanced over my shoulder, just in case they weren't calling for me. But it was Amity who was trying to get my attention; she hurried out of the bustling kitchens. “Milady! Are you all right?” She raised her eyebrows at the cloak, then wrinkled her nose. “What on earth is this?”

Oh, gods. I hadn't even thought about that—the Nightfall wolves were so sensitive, did she smell the king? Did all the servants know that I had—

“That smells like you pulled it out of a river!” she exclaimed. “What on earth happened?”

Rue appeared from the kitchens, too. They corralled me into the laundry room and closed the latch behind me. There,

Amity took the cloak with her nose wrinkled in disgust. Amity dressed me in a clean servant's dress, pulled from the closet in the laundry room, and a plain shawl which I pulled over my dirty hair. I didn't want anyone to recognize me as I made my way back to my room. The fewer people knew about this, the better.

My maidservants and I made it back to my room thankfully undisturbed. Once Amity had locked the door behind me, she took the shawl and sighed. "We were so worried last night, milady," she said. "We heard what happened at the ball."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'll explain."

"You needn't explain," Rue said, "we're just glad you're all right."

That only made me feel worse. "Thank you," I said quietly. "Would you mind if I took a bath?"

"Of course not," Amity said. "Rue, would you fetch Lady Reyna some breakfast?"

"Certainly." Rue opened the door, then shifted back into her wolf form to traverse the halls.

Amity ran the bath, and I shed the servant's dress and climbed in gratefully. The heat immediately soothed my sore muscles. I hurried to wash off the dirt and sweat that had accumulated from the running. There was even dirt under my toenails. Once the worst of it was off, and I was soaking, Amity poured clean hot water over my hair and began to carefully work her fingers through the tangles.

"Are you sure you're all right, milady?" she asked. "I don't mean to pry, but the girls in the kitchen said you looked a bit frightened when you left the ball yesterday."

"That's a polite way of putting it," I murmured. Frightened was an understatement. I'd felt crazed when I'd barreled out of the private room—I couldn't imagine how I looked, wild-eyed and snapping my jaws as I frantically searched for the exit.

Ugh. I'd have to face the council again. The thought made my stomach turn.

But word had traveled fast around the servants. If gossip moved like that...maybe they knew something.

“Can you keep a secret?” I asked.

“It’s a major part of the job,” Amity said. “Of course.”

“Something strange happened last night,” I said. “I think someone drugged me.”

Her hands stilled briefly, and then continued working. “Why do you think so?” she asked.

Rue stepped into the bathroom. “Milady, would you like a coffee while you soak?”

“Oh, yes, please,” I said. I took the warm mug gratefully from her hands and took a sip as Amity’s skilled fingers continued to work through my hair. Rue, sensing something in the conversation, lingered.

“I only had a single glass of wine,” I continued, “but it made me sick. Dizzy. And it loosened my tongue far too much. But it was brought to me, specifically, a single glass.”

Amity and Rue exchanged a glance.

“What is it?” I asked. “Do you two have an idea of who might do this? It had to be—it had to be something. It couldn’t be just the wine. I don’t drink much, but this wasn’t just drunkenness. It was something else.”

Amity rinsed the shampoo from my hair. Rue sighed.

“Please,” I said. “I just—I’m just afraid.”

“I don’t know for sure,” Rue said, “but I heard people talking. About Ulfric trying to do something like this.”

“Ulfric?” I asked.

“A cousin of Rona’s,” Amity said.

“But it doesn’t make sense, does it, Amity?” Rue asked. “That method.”

Amity nodded. “I thought the same thing.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Wolves of Nightfall are a proud pack,” Rue said. “To try to get revenge in this method...it doesn’t suit a Nightfall wolf.”

Amity nodded in agreement. “Rona’s family were proud of her winning the lottery,” she said. “If Ulfric was working alone, he would’ve challenged you.”

“Challenged me?” I asked, blinking back my surprise. “A lady?”

Rue nodded. “You proved yourself a worthy competitor. If he really wanted revenge, and to better his family’s standing, he would’ve challenged you formally.”

“Plus,” Amity said, “where would he have gotten drugs?”

“You two have thought about this a lot,” I said.

“We heard rumors only,” Rue said. “And there’s not much else to do in the kitchens when you’re washing dishes.”

“Drugs are expensive,” Amity said. “Rona’s family can’t afford something like that. The ones that work in the manor provide for their entire family.”

“Ulfric works in the manor?” I asked. Was he the one who had given me the wine? I wished I could remember the face of the servant who had brought me the glass. I’d been so anxious, so wrapped up in my own thoughts, and he’d just been another passing worker in a long string of them. How many people had I ignored in that way? I pressed my lips together.

“I think so,” Rue said. “I haven’t seen him recently.”

“Where would he have gotten the drugs?” I asked.

“That I don’t know,” Rue said. “I wish there was more I could do, milady.”

Strangely, I wasn’t even angry at Ulfric. I understood where he’d come from. If his family was as poor as Rue said they were—maybe Rona was their first real chance at a better life. And now she was dead, and I was the high-class lady about to take the role they had hoped for her. I sighed and sank lower in the bath. It was cruel, honestly, to even hold the lottery at all, considering it was all for show. To give a family

like that a taste of possibility and then yank it out from underneath them.

I finished bathing and climbed out of the tub, then dressed quickly in one of the plush robes provided. It was much better than the heavy, scratchy cloak—but part of me missed the scent of it. I pushed that thought down.

“Rue, can you do me a favor?” I asked.

“Certainly,” Rue said.

I rummaged around in my trunk and pulled out some of the coins I’d brought with me. Everything so far had been covered by Nightfall—I hadn’t spent a cent. But how much money was a life worth? Impossible to say. I put what I assumed to be a few months’ wages into a small bag and handed it to Rue. “Will you take this to Rona’s family with my regrets?”

Rue’s eyes widened. “Milady, pardon my forwardness, but I’m not sure if—”

“Just offer it,” I said. “And if they refuse, then I’ll find a different way to help them. But I have to do something, if Ulfric is willing to stoop to such levels.” Rona was the one who had attacked me—but now her whole family was suffering. Not just the loss of a daughter, but the loss of a dream.

“Of course,” Rue said. “Right away.”

She hurried out the door. As I’d rummaged through my trunk, I’d uncovered Barion’s knife. I wrapped my hand around the hilt and pressed my lips together. It was a good blade. At the time I’d thought him a bit paranoid, but now I understood that I *did* need to remain armed. It seemed everywhere I turned, someone in this court was trying to harm me from the shadows. It made me feel better to have the knife in my hand.

With a sigh, I nearly collapsed into the seat at the table. I’d barely had a sip of my coffee and I was starving. Amity and Rue busied themselves cleaning up the bathroom, gathering the dirty linens and towels. They were headed back to the laundry room—and, Rue had said, they’d take care of the

cloak I'd walked in with. It reeked, but I did want it back once it was clean. I purposefully did not investigate that desire too deeply.

By the time I'd eaten and dressed and tucked my weapon carefully into the waistband of my skirt, it was well beyond breakfast time. I made my way to the solarium, where Amity had informed me Fina and Adora were having a mid-morning tea. As soon as I walked in, Fina jumped to her feet and pulled me into a hard hug. The urgency of the motion surprised me, and I smiled as I returned it. Then she pulled back and placed both hands on my shoulders, concern creasing her brow.

"Are you okay?" she asked immediately. "What happened last night?"

Adora stirred her tea, watching me with similar concern. "Your wolf looked upset when you came out of the room. What did the council say to you?"

I sighed. I must've looked just as exhausted as I felt, because Fina set her hand at my mid back and guided me to the table. I joined them, and Adora poured me a cup of sweet-smelling green tea.

"I didn't intend to shift," I admitted.

Fina widened her eyes. "Your wolf forced it?"

"Yes," I said. "I typically only shift on the full moon, and sometimes I don't even shift then."

Adora hummed in acknowledgment, concern and confusion warring in her eyes.

"Do you remember when we were chatting, and the server came up to offer me a glass of wine?" I asked.

"Um, I don't know," Fina said. "I admit I wasn't really paying attention to the service."

"Nor was I," Adora said. "I was too anxious about meeting with the council."

"It was strange," I said. "At one point, right before I went into the meeting, I drank a glass of wine a server had brought

me specifically. And then I started to feel sick, sick and dizzy, like I'd had an entire bottle by myself."

"You were drugged," Fina said, stunned.

I nodded. "I think so. The drugs forced me to shift."

That wasn't entirely untrue—the drugs had loosened my tongue, and my inhibitions, which had allowed my wolf to react to my panic. It hadn't been forced, per se, but it had primed me to lose control. Which, to me, was pretty close to forcing.

"Who would do such a thing?" Adora asked.

I sighed and took a sip of my tea. As much as I wanted their support—they didn't know Rona had attacked me. I trusted them, but at the same time, how much could I safely share?

"I don't know," I said.

"Are you all right?" Fina asked. "Was your wolf able to run off the drugs?"

I nodded. "I think shifting helped," I admitted. "The run cleared my head." I couldn't tell them how I'd spent my evening, either. The mere thought of it made my cheeks burn.

"Well, whatever happened didn't seem to hurt your chances in the competition," Fina said with a small, sad smile.

"What?" I asked, setting my teacup down with a clink onto the table. "What do you mean?"

"I'm out," Fina said with a shrug that looked decidedly faux-casual. "I've been dismissed from the Choice."

My heart sank. "Oh, no, Fina," I said. I reached out over the table and folded my hand over hers. "Fina, I'm so sorry."

"Why are you sorry?" she said with a small laugh. "It makes your odds better." Before I could answer, though, she glanced between us with a shake of her head. "I guess the king has a type."

"The king's not the only one who makes the decision," I said. "The council may have more of a hand in this than we

think.”

“Could be prioritizing trade,” Adora said. “Particularly if the king wants to expand his territory.”

Fina shook her head. “The reason doesn’t matter to me. I’m just grateful I don’t have to go home immediately. I would hate to have to leave you two without having a chance to say goodbye.”

“You get to stay, then?” I asked.

She nodded. “The duchess has allowed me the option to stay until the end of the Choice. Both Rona and Wynona were offered the same, apparently, but neither took the option.”

My gut clenched. So the truth about Rona was still being kept under wraps. I was grateful to still be able to spend time with Fina though.

“Why don’t we make the most of our time this afternoon, then?” I asked. “We could take a stroll in the gardens.”

Adora looked at me in slight shock. “In this cold weather? I’d assumed you’d be miserable in this heat.”

“The exercise will do me good,” I said. “Going on a run helped me adjust to the climate. And regardless, I’d like to spend some time with you both in private.”

I raised my eyebrows. In the manor, there were always prying eyes and ears. I wanted to hear why Fina had been eliminated—and if the council had said anything about me or Adora. I needed to be prepared for the rest of this competition in any way I could be.

“I’ll need to get some extra layers,” Fina said, “but I’d love to.”

Adora laughed. “Let me fetch you a pair of my extra gloves,” she said. “They’ll change your life.”

We parted ways to hurry to our rooms to get our cloaks, with plans to meet outside the manor near the gardens. As I made my way down the quiet hall toward my quarters, a dark figure turned the corner, heading toward my room.

I paused. The figure was too tall to be one of my maidservants. Who would be creeping toward my room? I pulled the knife from my waistband and unsheathed it. I was done taking chances around this manor.

Slowly, quietly, I crept around the corner, blade drawn.

Standing at my door was the tall general from last night. Cyran. He had sharp hearing and turned toward me as soon as I took a step, his eyes immediately flitting to the knife in my hand.

I shoved it back in its sheath in my waistband. “Good day,” I said curtly.

Cyran bit back a smile. “I see the lady is well-prepared.”

“May I ask why you’ve come to my quarters?” I asked. I kept my distance.

“I came to see if you were all right,” Cyran said. “You seemed unwell last night after our dance, and then, well...” He gestured vaguely in the air.

I cringed. Every person I ran into would likely have something to say about my shift last night. At least internally my wolf was settled and not demanding my attention at every look and word. It was as if letting her run had calmed her down a little. Small blessings, I supposed. “Let me step inside and fetch my cloak.”

Cyran nodded and stepped aside to let me slip into my room. Inside, the cloak the king had given me was folded neatly at the foot of my bed. I smoothed my hand over the rough canvas fabric, then, before I could realize what I was doing, I leaned forward and pressed my nose to the fabric. It smelled mostly of detergent and the crisp air it had been dried in, but still faintly beneath that I could detect the dirt of the cave, the barest hint of the king’s musk. That made my wolf stir.

As much as I wanted to wear it, for the simple instinctive pleasure it brought me, I couldn’t risk someone else picking up the faint scents. I pulled my usual cloak from the wardrobe and tugged it over my shoulders.

When I stepped out, Cyran was waiting for me. I was slightly surprised to still see him there, and glad I still had my knife at my waistband.

“Where are you off to on such a cold day?” he asked.

“Taking a stroll through the gardens with the other competitors,” I said. “Since the Choice is coming to a close soon, we’d like to enjoy our remaining time together.”

Cyran tilted his head, surprised. “You’re friends with the other ladies?”

“Why, of course,” I said. “Is that so unexpected?”

“Well, I’d assume you wouldn’t be friends with the other women,” he said. “Since you are all competing to be by the king’s side.”

“I’m here to represent my court and my pack,” I said. “Why would I be rude to the other competitors? It would disgrace my family.”

Cyran hummed his acknowledgment. As we strode down the halls toward the gardens, Cyran fell in step with me easily. “You didn’t answer my question,” he said.

“Which?” I asked.

“If you are all right, after last night.”

I sighed, grateful for the quiet of the hallways. “I’m fine,” I said.

“You seemed quite intoxicated,” he said carefully.

“I wasn’t,” I said shortly. “I only had the one glass of wine. I believe someone slipped something into it.”

Cyran paused. “You believe someone drugged you?”

“I don’t have a better explanation,” I said. The knife in my waistband and the servants passing by gave me a boost of courage. “You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

“What are you implying?” Cyran asked, low.

“Just asking a question,” I said. “The wine was brought to me specifically, and I don’t know who sent it. It coincided with your asking me to dance. I wondered if you saw anything suspicious.”

From the narrowing of his eyes, he knew as well as I did that I wasn’t asking if he had seen anything. “Of course not, milady,” he said. “Had I seen anything of the sort, the culprit would’ve been killed where he stood.”

“I suppose that is the Nightfall way,” I said. “And you are a general.”

My acquiescence bettered his mood. He straightened up. “I am. Though these days, I am more of a peacekeeper.”

“No battles on the horizon?”

“The court has no enemies,” he said. He sounded almost wistful. “In times like this, my role is to keep our soldiers trained and prepared, and to develop new strategies for the continued growth and success of the pack.”

I peered at him. “I admit, General, that it sounds like you would rather be leading them into battle.”

“I cannot deny it,” he said. “A soldier is meant for the battlefield. As much as I am grateful for times of peace, part of me always longs for the simplicity of war.”

I hummed. Maybe that would be why the king chose Adora—to have full control over the moonstone resources, to fund a push into new territory. I could only hope Cyran was throwing his weight behind her as a candidate, as well.

Maybe that was a good reason for him to get rid of me. If the king was interested in me, perhaps it was easier for a war-hungry general to remove me from the equation.

We reached the doors to the manor. Fina and Adora were already waiting on the small patio that led out to the gardens, bundled in scarves and cloaks. Fina, as promised, had on a pair of fine white gloves of Adora’s. They both glanced up curiously when the door opened, and then nodded their heads in greeting at Cyran.

“Thank you for the escort, General,” I said.

“My pleasure,” Cyran said. He cast his eyes to the other two with interest. “Enjoy your stroll.”

The gardens were beautiful but bare in the winter cold. As soon as we began to walk, the clouds covered the sun, ridding us of the only respite we had from the freezing cold. I tugged my cloak tighter around my shoulders and tried to keep my teeth from chattering.

“Goodness,” I said. “I did think the sun would be out this afternoon.”

Fina looked up at the sky. As if on cue, fat flakes of snow began to drift down from the cloud that had just covered the sun.

Adora laughed. “It’s not *that* cold. Reyna, you may be the one who has to adjust to this.”

“Don’t remind me,” I grumbled. “I already miss the sunshine at Daybreak.”

Fina gave me a strange look. I swallowed. I was so comfortable with these two—it was like I had already told them my secret plan. But of course, I hadn’t. As far as they knew, I wanted the crown just as badly as Adora did.

In the cold air and the quiet privacy of the gardens, I found I wanted to tell them the truth.

“I’m really going to miss this,” I said. The words fell off my tongue.

“As am I,” Adora said.

Fina’s expression fell. “Me, too,” she said quietly.

I knocked my shoulder against Fina's. "It really means a lot to me that you both wanted to be friends," I said. "I never..." Embarrassment heated my cold cheeks. "At home, I didn't have any friends."

"What?" Adora asked. "But you're so charming!"

"I was too busy being a Lady of the Court at home to make friends," I admitted. "There wasn't anyone of my same age or standing... And those who weren't in the court referred to me as the Ice Princess."

"Because you look like a woman of Starcrest?" Adora asked.

"Or were you a bitch?" Fina asked with a cheeky grin.

"Fina!" I said, then broke into a laugh. "I guess I was a bitch. My father asked a lot of me, even though he never wanted me around. When I was growing up, I was always trying to be perfect to win his approval. By the time I was ready to be my own woman, my reputation as being cold was pretty much done. Griffin is the only one who ever treated me as a person in Daybreak."

"Griffin?" Fina asked.

I bit my lower lip gently. "My betrothed," I said.

Adora gasped. "You have a fiancé? At home? And still you're at the Choice?"

"It's secret," I admitted. "It's not approved by my father. I never fit in at Daybreak—I never wanted to be a member of the court. I want to travel! And see the world! There's so much more than the duties of the court! And Griffin will do that with me."

"You plan to leave?" Fina asked.

I nodded. "My father insisted I attend the Choice—it wasn't like there was anyone else in the court who could represent our pack well. But I thought it might be the perfect way for me to get out of my duties."

"How in the gods' names would that work?" Adora asked. She was listening with a pinched expression somewhere

between disbelief and abject horror.

“I’d planned on performing adequately in the Choice, to uphold my pack’s honor, but to be boring enough that I would be eliminated,” I admitted. “But everything I’ve tried to do to get dismissed seems to have backfired.”

“The king’s had his eye on you since the first day,” Fina said. “You can’t tell me you haven’t noticed.”

“She’s right,” Adora said. “His eyes always find you.” She sighed and pushed a stray lock of blonde hair off her forehead, then gazed in the direction of the manor. “I admit I’m hoping the council will overrule him.”

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly. “I don’t know what to do.”

“There’s nothing we can do, at this point,” Adora said. “Whoever is chosen will be chosen. I believe I’ve done the best I could to represent my pack.”

“I think you have too, Adora,” I said. “I think you’ll make a marvelous queen.”

Fina blew a raspberry. “I think I’d be the best queen, actually.”

We both laughed, and then strolled with Fina in between us. “You’re right, honestly,” I said.

“Regardless,” Fina said, “my father will be pleased that I’ve established a good relationship with the new queen. We’ve got all sorts of great ideas to share with you about cultivating a more sustainable farming practice across the nation.”

We made our way back toward the manor. I felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders, now that my friends knew my intentions with this competition. I hated the thought that I had progressed further than Fina, who wanted it just as badly as Adora, but they were right. We had no say in the matter. Even they had noticed the way the king watched me—if they knew the time the king and I had already spent together, that’d be even more embarrassing.

My relaxed mood dissipated as soon as we approached the doors to the manor, where the duchess was waiting for us. She cut an imposing figure in a fine, heavy gown and a dark cloak with a high collar. Her brow was furrowed and lips downturned as she gazed down the bridge of her nose at us.

“Ladies,” she said in cool greeting.

Fina swallowed, then swept into a brisk curtsy and hurried away.

That was apparently the right decision. The duchess paid her no mind as she disappeared into the manor. Adora and I stood side by side in front of her, both of us red-cheeked from the walk, with snow in our pale blonde hair. The duchess didn’t look happy to see either of us. “The council had decided one more trial is in order to decide which of you is fit to become Queen of Frasia.”

Adora nodded, and I did the same. It was admittedly hard to find the right words when faced with the queen staring me down like this.

“You will both be spending an evening with the king,” she said. “Dinner.”

“Alone?” I asked.

The duchess’ gaze slid to me. “Yes,” she said. “Alone. Is that a problem, Lady Reyna?”

“N-no,” I stammered. “No, not a problem at all.”

“I would hope not,” the duchess said, “as this is the man who may become your husband. I would hope you did not require a chaperone to be comfortable in his presence.”

“Of course not,” Adora said. “It’s an honor, Duchess.”

The duchess afforded Adora a small smile for that. Dinner alone with the king? And she had said an *evening*. That implied a little more than dinner. What kind of trial was this?

“You will have tonight to prepare,” the duchess said, “and then Lady Reyna will have dinner with the king tomorrow. Lady Adora, you will dine the next night.”

Adora swallowed. It was only the time we'd spent together that allowed me to see the irritation in her posture. "Wonderful," she said.

"Any questions?" the duchess asked in a tone that suggested we best not have any.

We both shook our heads. The duchess took her leave without another word. Then, Adora and I were left in the freezing cold, standing stunned side by side.

"A private dinner with the king," Adora said, sounding slightly awed. "Wow. I wonder what he's like."

"I wonder, too," I lied. I wished I didn't know a thing about the king. I wished my gut wasn't tightening with heat and curiosity and anticipation at the thought of a dinner alone with him. I'd spent plenty of time alone with him already. I shoved down the memory of the kiss we'd shared in the middle of the forest.

That was impossible, though. The memory of the kiss made my wolf stir with interest in my chest. My wolf wanted more time with him—wanted to be close. Wanted me to remember, over and over again, his broad chest, his burning kiss, the way he'd said the word *mate* in the privacy of his study.

But it didn't matter what my wolf wanted. She'd already gotten more than she deserved, with that wild run we'd taken through the woods. I had someone waiting for me at home—someone who was willing to let me live my life the way I wanted to. I had to get back to Daybreak to start my own journey, and Adora deserved to be the Queen of Frasia.

If only I could get my wolf to understand.

“Oh, milady,” Amity said with a dreamy sigh. “You really do look gorgeous.”

I grimaced. “This is really what the council decided on for me?”

“Sent directly from Camille’s,” Rue said. She fastened the small hook and eye closure at my lower back.

In the mirror, I hardly looked like myself at all. For the previous trials, I’d been dressed in fine gowns that represented my court: pale eggshell whites and seafoam blues, with delicate details of crystals and moonstones, cinched bodices, and long, flowing skirts. My dresses had suggested movement, ease, beauty but functionality. Things that suited me. They’d even let me wear pants! But this—this was something much different.

It was a full-length gown, but the skirt was fitted through the thigh, accentuating the curve of my leg. A slit ran from the hem of the skirt just past my knee—much higher than anything I’d ever worn!—revealing an expanse of my bare leg. It had a long neck, and full sleeves of fitted black lace, but the back was completely open. A string of small, delicate pearls held the dress closed, running across the width of my shoulders. The opalescent coloring of the pearls matched the stars embroidered at the bottom of the skirt. It was silk, slick against my skin. The entire gown was also black.

Pure black. Inky black, black as the night sky. My father never let me wore black. He’d always said it was a low-class

color. I'd never understood why, but now I realized it might not have been about class at all. The black made me look older, more refined—desirable. This wasn't a dress to impress the council with my skills or my wit. I felt like I was trotted out like a show pony for the king. I pulled my blonde hair forward over my shoulders; the contrast between the silk made it shine even brighter. Rue delicately pinned my tiara in place. The final touch.

“Are you excited?” Amity asked. “Dinner with the king in his private room. Wow.”

Anxiety fluttered in my chest. “I don't know what to expect. Why an outfit like this?”

Amity and Rue exchanged a glance. “Because it looks lovely,” Rue said, while at the same time Amity asked, “Why do you think?”

I frowned at my reflection in the mirror. Was that really what this was about? Was I being offered up to the king on a platter like a meal? Did he intend to have sex with me, and then Adora tomorrow night? Perhaps this was the final trial—to see which of us the king was more sexually compatible with. Or, even worse, perhaps the decision had already been made and the king simply wanted a bit of fun before it was announced.

Well, if he thought I would debase myself like that before the commitment of marriage, he was a fool.

I squared my shoulders. It was only dinner. If the king tried for more, I'd simply stop him. Whatever strangeness had happened between us in the privacy of the woods would not be repeated—especially not in a context like this.

“Are you ready, milady?” Rue asked.

I nodded. Amity opened the door, then the girls shifted into their wolf forms to escort me through the halls to the king's private quarters. His quarters were near the center of the manor, on the top floor, away from the hustle and bustle of the court's daily activities. The wolves led me up a gorgeous

staircase to a small private landing, which led to a plain wooden door.

As I stood in front of the door, my palms began to sweat.

This was really happening. The last time I'd been alone with the king—that kiss—

No, I couldn't think about that now. If everything went as planned, this would be the last time I'd spend any time alone with the king. Just dinner. Once he spent time with Adora one-on-one, he'd fall for her. She was the right choice. I swallowed, ignoring the way my wolf whined internally at the thought.

Amity bumped her nose into my palm, then tipped her head at the door.

Right. I couldn't stand here all night.

I knocked on the door. The wolves turned and trotted away, leaving me alone for the space of a breath.

And then the king opened the door.

He was dressed in slightly more finery than I was used to seeing him in: fine black slacks, with a deep purple shirt open at the collar. His dark hair was loose around his handsome face, and he had the delicate gold crown on, as if I could forget his standing in this court. Despite his fine clothes, his feet were still bare on the floor, as if part of him could never commit to being completely refined. Some part of him always wanted to be physical, animal.

“Good evening, Lady Reyna,” he said, his voice low.

My wolf was alert and overjoyed to see him. Despite my worries, the draw was still there. I couldn't help but remember the way his hands had felt on my waist, and the heat of all that muscle pressed against me.

His eyes flashed gold briefly before settling back into their usual deep chocolate-brown. Was he thinking about it, too?

“Good evening,” I murmured. The king stepped out of the way and welcomed me into his quarters. The space wasn't too large, but it was luxurious, with a dining table set up in the

center of the room, a sitting area by the roaring hearth, and big windows with the curtains half-opened so the light of the full moon shone in. From the top floor, the snow-dusted trees of the forest were visible.

It was so quiet, the sound of the crackling fire was all I could hear. The king set his hand at my bare lower back. The contact burned. "Please," he said. "Take a seat."

I took my seat at the dining table, which was laden with tasting plates and low candles. It was different than the meals I'd had so far: smaller portions, different meats, spices that smelled more exotic and curious than the fare the Nightfall Court usually served. Immediately, my interest was piqued.

"You look lovely this evening," the king said in his low rumbling voice.

"Thank you," I said. "Can't say I had much to do with the choice."

A wolfish grin flashed across his features. "Not what you would've chosen for yourself?"

"I don't know what I would've chosen," I admitted. "I've never worn anything like this."

"Well, it suits you," he said. "A she-wolf of Nightfall should always look so elegant."

I nodded, then cut my gaze down to the floor. My wolf preened from the compliment, even though I wasn't a wolf of Nightfall. Not yet. Hopefully not ever. And yet the possibility made my wolf shiver in delight.

"I hope having dinner with me isn't too much of a hassle," the king said easily. He ambled over to the small bar at the wall and pulled a bottle from beneath it. "I know the council wanted me to have my decision made, but I find it's easier to get to know someone in private."

"I see," I said. Our encounter in the woods wasn't enough?

"And," he continued as he opened the bottle of wine, "I wanted to see you again, after you ran off yesterday morning." He decanted the bottle.

My cheeks burned. I wasn't going to let him make me feel bad about what had happened, though—since I was the one who had been drugged in *his* court. I straightened up in my chair and said nothing.

The king stepped back toward the table with the decanter in hand. Delicately, he poured me a fine glass of red wine, then smoothed his hand over the bare skin of my back.

How was such a gentle touch making my wolf go so wild? She'd been so quiet all day, and now suddenly in the king's presence, she wanted more, more, more. And having the king serve me—pour *me* wine, like I was the one in higher standing! I set my teeth into my lower lip gently as he poured his own glass, too, an elegant motion made more beautiful by the shifting of his biceps and forearms.

“Please,” he said as he sat down across from me. “Let's eat.”

I took a sip of my wine. At least this one I'd seen opened and poured. No funny business. It was a rich red wine, deliciously smooth over my tongue, running warm through my veins.

“I didn't intend to shift,” I admitted.

“I could tell,” the king said. “But you are a beautiful wolf. I've never seen a pelt so pure white.”

Again my wolf preened. My cheeks heated under the praise. So few people had seen my wolf at all—the only person I'd ever run with was Griffin. In some ways, the run felt more intimate than the way we'd woken up in our human forms.

“I hear you've been spending most of your free time with Fina and Adora,” the king said. He took a bite of the well-seasoned meat first, and I did the same. It was so tender it nearly melted on my tongue. “And that this is why Fina has chosen to stay in Efra for the remainder of the competition despite her dismissal.”

I nodded. “They're lovely women. They've been so kind to me throughout this process. The competition is a bit nerve-

racking” –that made the king smirk— “and having those friendships has made it much easier. Especially for me, since I’ve never had many friends at home.”

The words were simply spilling off my tongue, but this time it wasn’t the wine forcing my hand. It was just the king’s presence. Even with my nerves and my wolf’s sudden wakefulness, the king’s attention was so...simple. In this context, without the council around us, or the prying eyes of the court, or my confusion about his attention in the quiet of the halls or the spell of the forest, he looked curious. Interested. Like this was just a conversation—like there was no ulterior motive. He always had that same intoxicating pull.

“No friends?” he asked. “I have to say, I find that hard to believe.”

“That was the way of things in Daybreak,” I said.

“What do you mean, the way of things?”

I sighed. “I was a Lady of the Court before anything else,” I said. “My father, the duke, preferred that I prioritized my duties.”

“Which meant you weren’t allowed to have friends?” the king asked.

“I didn’t do much besides manage the Daybreak trade,” I said.

“No balls? No dates?” He took a sip of his wine, brow furrowed thoughtfully.

“Certainly not,” I said. “My father...” I trailed off and took another bite of the meal, though this time I hardly tasted it.

“It sounds like he kept you on a short leash,” the king said.

“That’s one way of putting it, I suppose,” I said. It was only here in Efra that it was so obvious how much my father had controlled me. Sneaking away to see Griffin was the only reprieve I had. And we’d never had a date like this—he’d never listened to me so intently. He’d never poured my wine for me.

The king hummed. He watched me carefully, over the rim of his wineglass, like he was figuring something out. There wasn't pity in his eyes, but something similar. An understanding of some kind. Like he was putting a puzzle together.

"Well," he said finally, "a Lady of Nightfall is under no such control."

Control. Is that what it was? As if I wouldn't be under a different kind of control here in Efra.

"So what would a Lady of Nightfall do instead?" I asked. "What are the duties of your queen?" I wanted to steer the conversation away from my past, from Griffin, from the guilt and confusion starting to twist in my gut.

From the king's arched brow, though, it was clear my curiosity had piqued his. "Oh? What would you be interested in doing?"

"That's not what I asked," I said curtly.

The king grinned, and his face came closer to that smirky, flirtatious look I'd grown familiar with. Usually, it irritated me. Now, I felt more comfortable back in this territory, instead of under the scrutiny of that more genuine, almost concerned gaze of his.

"Well," he began, "there are plenty of possibilities."

Conversation was easy after that—discussions of the court, and Nightfall's history, and Frasia's trade possibilities. Light but serious. He was surprisingly easy to talk to, once I got used to the intensity of his deep brown eyes. It was comfortable. By the time we'd finished dinner, my wine glass was down to the dregs and my initial anxiety had melted into a warm ease.

"It's a beautiful evening," the king said. "Shall we step onto the balcony?"

I nodded my assent. He stood and offered his hand, then led me through the curtain-covered glass doors onto the balcony. It was a gorgeous, small space, with a comfortable two-person couch overlaid with fine furs. The air was brisk,

cold enough that goosebumps rose on my bare back. But the view was gorgeous—the snow-capped trees and the still night. It felt like we were somewhere private, a mountain retreat, instead of in the Nightfall manor. He'd brought the carafe of wine with him, and nodded for me to sit on the couch as he poured two more glasses. Then, before he joined me, he picked up one of the thick brown furs from the couch and draped it over my shoulders. I tugged it tight around myself, immediately warmer from the soft fur and heated look in the king's eyes.

He sat down next to me and offered me my glass. I took another sip as I burrowed deeper into the fur.

The king smiled. "You'll have to get used to the cold, it appears."

That made me start, rousing back into reality. I scoffed. "I don't know about that."

The king peered at me for a long moment. "What do you mean?"

I pressed my lips together. The anxiety bubbled back up in my chest. "I am a Lady of Daybreak," I said. "Where the weather is warm year-round."

"Lady Reyna." The king slid closer in the couch, turned toward me, and rested the callused palm of his hand on my thigh. "You must know the outcome of this competition."

"You'll choose Adora," I said. I only sounded a little frantic. "She's a fine woman and will be a finer queen, with all of Starcrest's resources behind her, and a true passion for leadership and bettering the lives of—"

The king leaned forward and kissed me.

I dropped the wine glass. The king gripped my nape, guiding the kiss, and slid his hand on my thigh up, under the fur, to my waist. His grip was firm and grounding with just the thin layer of silk between us. I couldn't help but part my lips under his kiss, letting him guide it, letting him sweep his tongue into my mouth.

My hands fluttered to his chest, smoothing over the plane of muscle to wrap around him and pull him closer. It was instinctive. It felt good—it felt right. He slid his hand from my waist to my bare back and the contact burned like a brand.

“No, Lady Reyna,” the king growled against my lips. His voice rumbled through me, making both me and my wolf shiver in pleasure. “You will be my queen. The Queen of Frasia.” His fingertips pressed into my back. “My mate.”

I gasped against his mouth as my wolf howled in delight internally. *Mate*. The word made my blood sing and desire curl hot and low in my gut. He pulled me closer and bared his teeth into the kiss. With ease, he grasped my hips and dragged me into his lap, so my knees were astride his pelvis, the silk of the dress hiked high and straining tight. The cold breeze brushed against my bare calves but I hardly felt it at all, lost instead in the feeling of his hands roaming up and down my back, down to the swell of my ass, smoothing over the silk and squeezing the muscle. I moaned into the kiss and wrapped my arms around his neck.

He slid his fingers from my nape into my hair, then gripped tight to guide the kiss. The barest hint of pain only heightened the pleasure, and I rocked forward against him, suddenly desperate for more contact. Heat raced through me. I throbbed with desire between my legs, craving, wanting, more than I ever had. More even than I had in the woods. More than I ever had with anyone—certainly more intensely than anything I’d felt for Griffin.

Griffin. His face flashed in my mind, his freckled nose and wide smile. My wolf whined in agony as I broke the kiss and pushed backward, both of my palms flat on the king’s broad chest.

“What is it?” the king asked, in that low voice that made my entire body spark with desire. His eyes glowed gold as he gripped me.

“I—” I swallowed. “Your Majesty, I—I can’t.”

“Why?” That teasing smirk reappeared on his face. “Because you’re a virgin?”

I cringed, and clambered out of his lap. Regret flickered across his face. He'd broken the spell—whatever spell had made that kiss like something from my most overwhelming fantasies. I wasn't a prize for the king to win. A Lady of Daybreak wouldn't be so easy to seduce. She wouldn't forget who she was just from a golden gleam of the king's eyes. I smoothed the silk down over my thighs.

“Lady Reyna,” he said, “you know I wouldn't—”

“It's not that,” I said with a dismissive wave of my hand. “I just—I should retire to my chambers.”

“Then what is it?” He stood up, then caught my wrist in hand and pulled me close to him. “All I ask is that you be honest with me.”

I pressed my lips together hard. When I didn't pull away, he gently wound his arm around my waist, then brushed a strand of my hair off my forehead. That curious, concerned expression was back.

Honesty. He made it sound so easy.

“I'm not fit to be queen.” I closed my eyes tightly. “I never wanted it—I never wanted to be a part of this competition at all. I'm only here to represent my pack. I was never supposed to make it this far.” I paused, waiting for the king to interject and say something, but he was silent. Just holding me. I didn't bear open my eyes and meet his. “I was supposed to be dismissed from the competition, then return back to Daybreak with my pack's reputation intact but my father disappointed. Then he would excuse me from the court and I could start my life. A life of my own.”

Still he said nothing. His hold tightened on my waist.

“All I've known is life in the Daybreak Court,” I said. “I cannot go from that to being Queen of Frasia. There's so much of Frasia—of the world!—I haven't seen. It would be a disservice to the wolves of this nation.”

“Forget the royal duties,” the king said.

Finally, I opened my eyes. He captured my gaze, and this close, I could see the gold encircling his pupils. Maybe it was

always there against the dark—maybe his wolf was never fully asleep. “What?” I asked.

“If there were no royal duties,” the king said, “if I were not asking you to be the queen. If I were simply asking you to be my mate—then what would your answer be?”

“I—I don’t know,” I stammered. I’d never thought about it. My wolf certainly had, she seemed to think about it constantly, her desire like a burning coal in my chest, but I couldn’t think of the man holding my waist as anyone but the king. His duties were inextricable from his selfhood, as mine would be, were I Queen of Frasia.

I knew that was true. And yet the question grabbed hold of me and wouldn’t let go. What would it be like, if neither of us had the roles we’d been assigned? Would this magnetic draw still be between us? My wolf howled her affirmation. Would it be even stronger? For a moment, when I’d awoken in the cave sprawled on his chest, I’d felt like I’d finally found where I belonged. That feeling had dissipated almost immediately, of course, but now I wondered. Without the baggage, the demands...could it be that easy?

“It’s not just politics,” the king said quietly.

“It’s mostly politics,” I retorted.

He hitched me closer and the hard curve in his fine slacks pressed into my hip. I gasped and clung to him as renewed desire raced through me. “One night,” he growled. “No politics. Just us. Let me make you feel good.”

Then he captured my mouth in another burning hot kiss. Before I could think otherwise, I said, “Yes, yes, yes,” repeating it like a mantra—as if even though I was still a human, my wolf was leading the way. I couldn’t take control back, and I didn’t want to.

The king growled in pleasure, then slid both hands down to my thighs. He gripped hard and then easily lifted me off my feet. I squeaked in surprise and flung my arms around his neck, then wrapped my legs around his waist. The silk of my dress nearly hiked up my hips in this position, but all I could

focus on was his hands on me, his smile tucked into my neck. He carried me like I weighed nothing, back into his quarters and through the door to his bedroom.

He kissed my neck, then placed me gently onto the center of his immense, soft bed, its dark sheets mussed. My heart raced, blood pounding in my ears as I wiggled further back until my head was resting on the soft pillows that smelled strongly of his rich, masculine musk. My wolf nearly purred with delight, safe and aroused and desiring so strongly.

The king stood at the foot of the bed, gazing at me with his brown eyes flashing gold. There was a flush high on his cheeks, and his mouth was red from the kissing—I wanted those lips on mine again, immediately. I reached for him, a wordless sound of desire falling out of my mouth. He immediately crawled onto the bed, knee-walking up until his knees were astride my thighs. Then he lowered down, weight on one forearm, and kissed me deeply. He skated his other hand over my shoulder and upper arm, then over the swell of my breast, his thumb catching on my nipple.

I gasped into the kiss and arched up slightly toward the touch. I was sensitive there—sensitive in ways I didn't know. It shocked me with the pleasure of it. He hummed, pleased, his lips curving into a smile against mine. Then he did it again, swiping his thumb over my nipple through the silk again and again. I moaned into the kiss, my hips shifting restlessly on the bed.

“So responsive, little wolf,” the king hummed, pleased.

He slid his hand lower, over my belly, then lower across my hip. I wound my arms around his neck and clung close, overwhelmed, but not wanting him to stop, either. His fingertips dipped lower, in between my legs, and rubbed up and down over my pussy. Even with the silk of my dress and my undergarments in between us, his touch blazed hot, and something in the cradle of my hips tightened.

“Oh,” I gasped into the kiss. “Please, I—”

“You like that?” he growled.

“Yes,” I moaned, the syllable one long sigh of pleasure. I tried to spread my legs wider for his tongue, only to be stopped by his legs astride mine. He smiled, pleased, then dragged hungry kisses over my jawline and neck.

“You’ll let me touch you?” he asked into the curve of my neck.

“Please, Your highness,” I begged. “Please, touch me.”

He sat up. My arms fell back to the mattress, then I immediately reached to set my palms on his strong thighs. Desperate for contact. There was a strange look in his eyes as he gazed down at me—I was sure I looked a mess, with my face hot with desire and hair splayed out on his dark pillow.

“Elias,” he said. He smoothed his hand over my thigh. “Right now, call me Elias.”

I parted my lips. He was so handsome like this, with sweat beading on his temples and his shirt undone at the top, revealing a tantalizing hint of tan skin and dark hair. For this moment, not the King of Frasia.

“Okay,” I said. “Elias.”

He bared his teeth, in a display of possessiveness that made me arch up toward him. Then he curled his fingers hard in the silk of my dress and pulled it up over my hips, so it was bunched up around my waist. He traced his fingertip over the hem of my undergarment, the delicate touch raising goosebumps in its wake.

His eyes met mine, as if in a question. I nodded, and then he hooked his fingertips under the hem and tugged my panties down.

My cheeks burned, and I fought the urge to snap my legs shut out of the sudden embarrassment and exposure, but that feeling dissipated as Elias growled low, then dropped his mouth open like he wanted to eat me. I’d never seen him look this animal, this desiring—not even when he was shifted. It made me burn hot all over. It made me want to touch and be touched. It made me want to give him everything.

“Gorgeous,” he rumbled low in his chest.

He shifted down on the bed, then maneuvered us so he was kneeling on the mattress between my knees—so my legs were spread wide. I was blushing so hard I could barely stand it. He ran his hand up my thigh, squeezing and massaging, then over my hip, then over my mons. So close to where I wanted him and yet he kept his touch just out of reach. I grasped his wrist desperately, and he glanced up, eyes gleaming playfully.

“Yes?” he teased.

“Please,” I said, uncaring of how needy I sounded. I’d never been so wound up—never been so wet in my life. “Please, touch me.”

That seemed to be what he wanted to hear. He pressed his palm firmly over my pussy, with heat and pressure, and I gasped at the sudden pleasure of it. Being held like that—it made me feel safe, and cherished, and I immediately needed more. He didn’t make me wait anymore. With his free hand, he pressed my hip down into the mattress, then dragged two fingers up my pussy, slow and luxurious, gathering the slickness there.

“Yes,” I sighed.

He set his teeth into his lower lip as he stroked me like that again, and again, running his fingers over my lips, the inner folds, but carefully avoiding my clit. Each touch made me shiver and shake, squirming on the mattress because I needed more, but I didn’t know what *more* was. He pressed his fingertip to my entrance, barely dipping inside, and my whole body clenched. Of course I’d touched myself, worked fingers deep inside and made myself come, but this already felt different. Overwhelming.

“No one’s touched you like this before,” Elias growled.

“Just me,” I sighed. “Please—”

“Next time,” he said, and it sounded like a promise.

I whined, low in my throat. I wanted him *inside* me, even if it was just one finger—wanted it so bad I couldn’t help but rock my hips down as if I could encourage him to change his mind.

He just laughed, low in his chest. “Suddenly so eager, my wolf.”

His. *His*. I swallowed down my moan of pleasure.

He withdrew his hands, and I was about to complain again—but then he slid down the bed. Until he was flat on his belly with his hands on my thighs. His face between my legs.

“Oh, gods,” I gasped, and threw one arm over my eyes. I couldn’t stand to look at him. I was already close, teetering on the brink just from being touched. And now he was going to do—*that*?

“Pretty thing,” he growled. His breath washed over my cunt and I swore it throbbed with desire. I became impossibly wetter, wet enough that I had to be dripping onto his fine sheets. He gripped my thighs and spread them wider. “Been dreaming of this.”

I flexed my thighs under his hands, just to feel how easily he pinned me in place. He kissed one thigh, then the other, then dragged the flat of his tongue up my inner thigh right to the crease of my hip.

“Elias,” I sighed, “Don’t tease.”

He laughed again, low and pleased. “I like it when you’re demanding.” Then he dragged the flat of his tongue over my cunt.

The sensation was so overwhelming, it was like I’d been plunged into a hot spring. I cried out, hips rocking as I searched out more sensation. I’d never felt anything like it, never anything so hot, wet, and perfect, sending pleasure rolling through me like waves. He licked me again and again, slow, languid movements of his tongue like I was the best thing he’d ever tasted in his life. He kept one hand on my thigh, keeping my legs spread, then grabbed my wrist where my hand was fisted in the sheets.

“Touch me,” he said. “Be rough. I like it.”

“Gods above.” Arousal rocked me to my core. He liked it rough. Of course he did. I tangled my fingers in his soft brown

hair and pulled slightly, and he growled with pleasure. My wolf thrilled at the power.

He worked me over with his tongue, slow and methodical, taking his time exploring the heat of my body and driving me mad with pleasure and desire. Then, finally, when I was about to wrench his face to where I really wanted it, he pressed the flat of his tongue to my sensitive clit. I cried out his name and rocked my hips down toward his face, seeking out more pressure, more sensation, *more*.

He pressed the flat of his tongue to my clit again, again, in a hard rhythm, and I felt my orgasm begin to build low and promising in my gut, rapidly coiling tighter and tighter; I tightened my grip in his hair and arched up, my core tensing, thighs tensing, and then—

He stopped.

“Elias!” I whined, slumping back.

He pulled back, just enough to gaze at me.

The sight of him nearly made me come right then and there. He was gorgeous, flushed, his lips reddened and shiny with *my* slick, his pupils dilated against his gold irises.

“You’re beautiful,” he rumbled, and his voice sounded almost awed. “You taste amazing.”

I was too aroused to be embarrassed. Instead need raced through me, an animal like a shift. I needed his mouth on me. I needed to come. I needed *him*. I pushed down on his head, guiding him back down to where I wanted him.

He *loved* that. He growled again, this time around a big, wolfish smile, before he dropped back down and pressed his mouth to my cunt. He focused his attention on my clit first with the flat of his tongue and then fitting his mouth around the sensitive bud and *sucking*, and I had to bite the palm of my hand to keep from crying out too loudly. The sensation was electric, overwhelming, and this time, he wasn’t teasing. He found a rhythm, the perfect pace, and gripped my thighs hard as he sucked me. My release began to build again, low in the cradle of my hips and then tightening, tightening, until my

core was tight, my thighs, my heels pressing into the mattress as I quivered. My breath came in staccato gasps as pleasure built and built and built and finally—

I buried both hands in his hair, holding his face in place. I couldn't help it—I bared my teeth and felt my eyes flash silver as I growled low, my wolf as overwhelmed as I was by the sensation. My thighs closed around his head, keeping him close as I came harder than I ever had. Pleasure rushed through me, molten hot, setting my nerves alight as I arched against his mouth. It rolled through me seemingly endless, wiping out all thought, all need, everything except the sensation of his mouth on my body and his hands on me. His touch. Him. *Elias*.

I slumped back onto the mattress and finally loosened my grip on his hair. Dazed, I let one hand fall to the mattress, but kept the other lightly wound in his hair. He kissed my pussy, almost teasingly, and I gasped and squirmed away.

“Sensitive,” he growled, then kissed my hip, my navel, then my ribs over the silk of my dress. Then he was above me, flushed and gorgeous. His mouth still messy with my slick. It made me feel equal parts embarrassed and aroused. Before I could think better of it, I pulled him down for another kiss. This one still hot, but languid, easy, dazed. Just like how I felt under him. We kissed for a few long moments, and with his body pressed to mine, the hard length of his arousal pressed into my hip.

“Elias,” I murmured, “what about...”

“Don't worry about me,” he rumbled. “This was about you.”

I swallowed, but didn't protest. I was exhausted already, and I wanted to touch him, explore his body, his muscles—but I was a little intimidated by the size of that burning hot curve pressed to my body. He kissed me again, then pulled back.

“Wait here,” he said. “I'll be just a moment.”

Then he stepped away and into the ensuite. I sprawled out onto the mattress with a sigh, stretching out my limbs across

his fine sheets. Even with my dress still rucked up around my waist, I felt comfortable, sated. My wolf did, too. I could easily fall asleep here, in the warmth of his quiet quarters, with the fire burning low in the hearth and the sound of water running and idle pattering coming from the bathroom. Sleep was already beginning to tug at the edges of my consciousness when Elias stepped back into the room. He'd removed his shirt, revealing all that muscle and dark hair and soft skin, and interest curled hot inside me even though I'd just had the most powerful orgasm of my life. He seemed to notice the effect he had and smiled as he approached the bed. He had a washcloth in hand, and the promising hard curve in his pants was gone as well.

I reached for the washcloth, but he just shook his head and crawled back onto the bed. Tenderly, he cleaned up the mess of my inner thighs, his touch heart-stoppingly gentle, but I was so sensitive it still made me hiss. And made me want more—again—his hands on me, his mouth on me. I pulled him down for another kiss as he cleaned me up, but this was slower, easier. Almost like it meant something.

Then there was a demanding knock on the door of the quarters, audible even in the bedroom itself. Elias pulled away with a sigh. "I should get that," he said. "They only bother me in my quarters if it's important."

"Of course," I said. I pressed my lips together. Being forcibly reminded of the outside world broke the spell. Right. For a moment I'd been swept up in the fantasy—a world where all that existed was him, and me, and the confines of this warm room. But of course that wasn't reality. He was still the king. I was still a competitor.

Had he meant what he said? That I was to be the queen?

Surely that was just the heat of the moment. Surely the council wouldn't allow that.

Elias stood up with a sigh. Again, there was another insistent knock on the door. "Your Highness!" a voice called from the hall. "It's urgent!"

He grimaced and pulled a heavy, fur-lined robe from his armoire, then tugged it on as he strode out of the bedroom. I clambered out after him and tugged the silk of my dress back down, smoothing it over my thighs. My underwear was nowhere to be found, though, lost in the covers of the bed.

“Your Highness,” a man’s voice said.

I lingered in the doorway of the bedroom. At the threshold, Roth stood at attention in his guard’s uniform with a concerned wrinkle in his brow. He glanced up at me, and his eyes narrowed briefly, almost imperceptibly, before his gaze cut back to the king. “Terribly sorry to interrupt, but it’s urgent...”

I ducked back into the room, unnerved by the expression on Roth’s face. I stepped into the bathroom and rinsed my face in the basin of clean water. I dried off, then peered at myself in the mirror.

What had just happened? I’d gotten so swept up in the attraction. I’d lost control of myself. It was almost worse than shifting in the middle of the dining hall. No, it was definitely worse. I hadn’t been thinking. We hadn’t had sex exactly, but still—still.

Griffin. Waiting for me, alone and loyal in Daybreak. How could I have done this to him?

A commotion outside snapped me out of my reverie. But it wasn't coming from the front room of the king's quarters—it was outside. Shouts and snarls, and the tell-tale crack of sword pounded against steel breastplates in intimidation. A sound I knew well from the training grounds at Daybreak.

But the wolves of Nightfall wore leather.

I hurried back into the bedroom and threw the curtains open.

Outside, the dark wolves of Nightfall snarled and growled, pawing at the dirt near the edge of the forest. Standing against them, emerging from the tree-line, were Daybreak scouts on foot in their human forms. Daybreak soldiers rarely, if ever, shifted. The Nightfall guards were hulking and bestial, jaws open like they might lunge forward at any moment. But this wasn't the front of the manor—the king's quarters overlooked the back. If there were scouts here... What was happening?

My blood ran cold. I rushed back out into the front room, heart pounding, only to see Elias still in deep conversation with Roth, shoulders set as the role of king fell back on him like a cloak.

“Tell them to allow the interloper into the throne room,” he growled. “Keep him guarded. I'll be down soon.”

“Sir,” Roth said. He turned on his heel and strode down the hall.

Elias closed the door behind him and whirled to face me. His eyes blazed with anger, ferocious enough that I took a stunned step back across the threshold into the bedroom.

“What is it?” I asked. “What’s happening?”

“Soldiers from the Court of Daybreak are at the gates of the Efra,” he said. “Led by an insolent little brat who calls himself Griffin, claiming he’s here to free his betrothed from the prisons of Nightfall. Might you know anything about that?”

My heart stopped. I stood frozen in his bedroom, standing by the mattress with the sheets we’d just mussed, with his gaze that was so tender just minutes prior now burning through me with rage. Rage and something that looked almost like betrayal. Bile rose in my throat, and for a moment I felt like I might throw up.

How could Griffin be here? Why would he do this?

“Tell me,” Elias growled. He stalked toward me, and I instinctively stepped back, back, until I was pressed against the cool stone wall of his bedroom. His eyes flashed gold as he loomed over me, his wolf close to the surface. This time it was from anger, though, not arousal. My wolf was conflicted internally, still wanting to be close to him, wanting to soothe away this rage, while my own fear of the king’s anger cut through me like a knife.

“Little wolf.” Elias placed his hand by my head, caging me in against the wall. “Have you a betrothed in Daybreak?”

“No,” I said immediately.

He bared his teeth.

I tipped my head back against the stone wall, baring my throat in a subconscious sign of submission. “No, I mean—it’s nothing official.”

“Then what is it?” he demanded.

“He’s—he’s my boyfriend, in Daybreak,” I said. The words felt childish even as I said them. “He has been for years.

We never thought—the Choice was not supposed to happen in our lifetimes.”

“And you came into my bed without telling me this?” he said. “That you belong to another?”

“I don’t *belong*—”

The animal growl that sounded from Elias’ throat silenced my protests as if he’d physically grabbed me. But it wasn’t like I’d planned for this—it just happened! I’d intended to have dinner and then return to my quarters, but I’d just gotten swept up. This was never supposed to happen.

A sudden swoop of anger rushed through me. Navigating the Choice was *my* responsibility. Griffin had said he trusted me. Sure, I hadn’t written past that first letter—but there was nothing in that letter that suggested I needed rescue. What was he *thinking*?

He suddenly stepped back and shook his head roughly, then pushed both hands through his dark hair. “I should send you down to the jail where your *betrothed*” –he spat the word like it tasted foul— “believes you to be. I should leave you there to rot.”

“You can’t—”

“But,” he continued as if I hadn’t spoken, “I find that would be almost a kindness now.”

I swallowed. My hands clenched to fists at my sides.

“I cannot let a deception like this go unpunished.” He pulled a shirt roughly on over his head. “And there’s something that appeals to me about knowing your underwear is still somewhere in my sheets, while you stand in my throne room and watch your betrothed die.”

I clapped my hands over my mouth. Griffin—Griffin, you *moron*. Did he think this would work? That somehow he could ride in and ‘rescue’ me? This was not a game. This was the Bloody King of Frasia.

He stormed toward the door.

“Wait,” I said, before I could stop myself. “Wait, Elias—”

He turned on his heel to face me, and his wolf surged to the surface. His teeth elongated, eyes burning gold; even his claws lengthened in a sudden threat as he slashed his hand through the air like he was waving off an irritating fly.

“You will *not* use that name with me,” he snarled. “You will refer to me as Your Majesty.”

My knees quivered. “I should’ve known,” I whispered. “I should’ve known this all meant nothing to you.”

He turned away. “I only have so much patience,” he said with his back to me. “I’d be careful what you say.”

The door to his quarters slammed shut behind him. I put my face in my hands as I sank down, sliding down the wall until I was seated on the floor with my knees pulled toward my chest. I pressed my forehead into my knees, making myself small. I could hardly think through the pounding in my head and the nausea in my gut, and my wolf whining with despair in my chest. My wolf wanted to be with the king—with Elias—and I ached with frustration and disbelief knowing Griffin was being hauled into the throne room.

The door opened, and then sharp claws clicked their tell-tale sound against the polished hardwood floor of the quarters. I lifted my head. An immense, dark wolf of Nightfall stood in the bedroom doorway, his yellow eyes gleaming as he watched me. He didn’t have to shift for me to know this was my escort. The king wouldn’t even escort me himself.

I hauled myself to my feet. The throne room was waiting.

I followed the guard through the halls. Each step made the circumstances feel more real, and I felt more hopeless. More ridiculous. Here I was, in my wrinkled silk dress with no underwear beneath it, my hair a tangled mess, being walked toward the throne room like a disobedient teenager, instead of the Lady of the Court I was supposed to be.

Was there any worth in being a Lady of my Court, anyway? All the work I’d done in this Choice to maintain my pack’s reputation had gone out the window. Griffin had made sure of that.

But that shouldn't be a death sentence. Griffin had to have known how this would end.

Right? He wouldn't be so foolish. That wasn't the man I left in Daybreak. A man who didn't think I could handle myself—who thought I needed to be rescued. Who would toss aside all the diplomatic work I'd done here?

At the door to the throne room, the guard shifted back into his human form, fully uniformed in his leather armor. He gripped my upper arm, as if I were a prisoner, and walked me in through the side entrance to the throne room.

The side entrance opened near the dais, where the king sat atop his throne with his elbows on his knees, leaning forward, looking halfway between bored and disgusted. He was flanked by Nightfall guards, in both human and wolf form, all with their attention focused ahead.

Focused on Griffin.

He stood facing the throne, in his fine steel breastplate that didn't have a nick on it. His dark red hair was combed back, and his eyes blazed with determination. He had two Daybreak guards with him, neither armed—the guards by the doors had taken their halberds. They were flanked by heavily armed Nightfall guards lest they try something foolish. With the flush high on his cheeks and the tense line of his shoulders, I had a feeling he might.

The side door opening caught Griffin's ear. His eyes widened. "Reyna!"

Instinctively, he surged forward, as if to run to me, only to be stopped by the Nightfall guards lowering their weapons like a gate in front of him. He burned with desperation, so much I saw his eyes flash clay-red as his wolf surged to the surface.

I clenched my hands into fists again to keep from running toward him. I'd been so angry he'd done this, but now, seeing him, I could see the desperation and the despair in his expression—and I missed him. I missed the ease and comfort of our relationship. I wanted to embrace him. I wanted all of

this to be over, to go home to Daybreak, where I knew who I was and what I wanted.

“So tell us why you’ve come here, Griffin of Daybreak,” the king said from his throne. He sounded bored. “You’ve interrupted my Choice enough as it is.”

“I’ve come to free Reyna from this farce,” Griffin said. “Daybreak wolves are not to be traded and tested like livestock.”

“Is that what you think this is?” the king asked, his eyebrows raised idly. “You compare the future Queen of Frasia to livestock?”

Griffin’s flush deepened. “The Lady Reyna does not belong to you,” he said, so low it was almost a growl. “She belongs with me.”

“Is that so?” The king cut his gaze toward me, and that wolfish smirk appeared on his face. This time, it didn’t confuse or interest me—it scared me. “And what would you do to keep her, Griffin of Daybreak?”

“Please,” I cried out. “Griffin, just go. Just leave.”

He didn’t know what he was getting into. He didn’t know what the king could do to him—what I’d seen him do.

“Go?” Griffin furrowed his brow. “Reyna, I came here for *you*. I’m not leaving without you. You think I can return to Daybreak knowing you’re trapped here with this brute?”

The king rumbled a low laugh.

Griffin glared at him, then returned his attention to me. He lunged again, but the guards stopped him, looking just as bored as the king did.

“He doesn’t care about you,” he said. “And you don’t care about being queen. What happened to *us*?”

“This isn’t about us,” I said. “Griffin, this isn’t—this isn’t about *honor*. I don’t want anyone to get hurt because of me.”

His face fell, briefly devastated, and then turned back with thunderous anger onto the king. We knew each other well

enough that I didn't have to say what I was afraid of. Griffin knew I wasn't worried about the king. I was worried about *him*. And that only made him angrier. Now, red-faced and eyes flashing, he had something to prove.

“Elias of Nightfall, King of Frasia!” Griffin bellowed. “I challenge you to battle for the right to the throne!” His challenge echoed through the throne room, fading into a chilly silence.

Again, the king smiled. It was a slow, deliberate smile, predatory, revealing his canines. An icy feeling of terror trickled down my spine.

“Griffin of Daybreak,” the king said, “I accept your challenge.”

The Nightfall guards surrounded Griffin and his two Daybreak escorts from all sides and corralled him back toward the doors of the throne room. He walked backward, his eyes fixed on me. They still burned that deep clay-red with the promise of the animal under the surface. I'd never seen his wolf this close for this long.

"I'm getting you out of here, Reyna," he called. "We'll be together again soon."

"Oh, Griffin," I said quietly. "Griffin, you fool."

The doors clattered closed, and that same chilly silence fell over the room. From his seat, where he was still sprawled lazily, the king brandished his hand in a clear dismissal. The guards turned and filed from the room.

I pressed the palms of my hands into my eyes. I couldn't believe this—a challenge. My Griffin, challenging the Bloody King for the throne. The king who'd earned this throne through violence. Griffin was never a wolf like that—he was soft-spoken and thoughtful, more interested in the games at Marco's Pub than training on the battlefield. We were supposed to travel together, explore, document. Not fight. Not get sucked into the pack politics that had already dominated our lives. And Griffin was about to sacrifice that future together because he didn't trust *me* to handle things on my own.

I swallowed and turned to leave through the same narrow door the guard had escorted me through. I needed to be back in

my quarters. I needed time alone.

Before I could take a step, a strong, callused hand caught my arm. I whirled around, anger burning in me. “How could you do that?” I smacked his broad chest ineffectively. He didn’t even move. “Why would you agree to that challenge? You could’ve just sent him away!”

“Because you are a wolf of Nightfall, now,” the king said, “regardless of what life you led in Daybreak. That life is over now.”

“That’ life? That life is *my* life,” I shot back. “Does that mean nothing to you? Am I just another possession of yours, a decoration in your court?”

“You’re much more than a possession,” he said. He smoothed his hand up my upper arm to the joining of my neck and shoulder, his touch firm and warm. Despite the anger still coursing through me, my wolf wanted to lean into the touch. The whiplash was exhausting. “You’re my queen.”

“If you go through with this,” I said, “I will never be your queen. Never. I swear it.”

The king chuckled low, like my anger amused him. “You can swear all you want, little wolf. But the Choice has come to a close. And I chose you.”

This couldn’t be happening. This couldn’t be how the Choice was ending. Not like this—not with Griffin here. Everything was going wrong, everything, all at once. I pulled out of his grip and ran through the side door, leaving the king alone in the throne room behind me. I didn’t want anything to do with him; I didn’t want to see him, didn’t want to hear his voice or feel his touch. I ran through the halls alone, avoiding the curious looks of the servants and guards as I tried to keep my face impassive despite the hot prickle of tears threatening behind my eyes.

I made it to my quarters, thankfully not pursued by the king or any of his guards. Amity and Rue met me in the hallway and guided me into my room, wearing matched expressions of concern as they ushered me inside.

As soon as the door closed behind me, I leaned back against it and buried my face in my hands again.

“Oh, milady,” Amity said gently.

Of course, they knew what had happened—the arrival of the Daybreak soldiers in Efra had caused a commotion across the entire city. Everyone had to know. Somehow, that made it worse. The challenge would just be another spectacle for the people of Efra, like my own fight with the king had been. Except this battle would be worse. It would be serious.

“Don’t,” I said. “Please, I just—I just need to think.”

They nodded. Rue hurried into the bathroom to run the bath, then Amity walked me in afterward. She helped me out of my wrinkled dress. It felt so different than it had putting it on. I’d been anticipatory, nervous, feeling out-of-depth in a sleek, gorgeous gown. Peeling it off, I felt nothing but misery. Amity bundled me into a plush robe and sat me down at the vanity, then began to brush my blonde hair, working out the tangles that had formed over the time I’d spent with the king. It was already so late, and exhaustion pressed on me like a weight. I was grateful for the silence of my handmaidens. They seemed to know as well as I did there was nothing that could be done.

“You can both go,” I said once the bath was prepared, fragrant and inviting.

“You’re sure?” Rue asked.

“Yes,” I said. “I just need some time alone.”

The girls nodded and left me in the bathroom; the door to my quarters clicked closed behind them. I sighed then stepped out of my robe and tied my hair into a bun atop my head. Only after soaking in the hot water did I realize how stressed I was—how tension coiled my muscles tight and made my breath come shallow. I closed my eyes and tipped my head back against the rim of the tub. One long inhale. One long exhale.

Then the tears started to flow.

I was so overwhelmed. So confused. Just hours before I’d been in the king’s bed, wrapped up in him, lost in the magic of

his touch and his kiss. My wolf had believed him when he'd said we could live however briefly in a world without politics. Where he wasn't the king. But that wasn't possible—he'd made that clear. He didn't care about me. He was willing to sacrifice Griffin to prove it.

Griffin was a fool for coming here—but the king was being outright cruel.

Cruel. That was how he got the throne, that was how he ran the Choice, and that was how he was going to prove his dominance to Griffin. It was pointless. It was peacocking. And I wasn't going to let it happen. I wasn't going to let this challenge stand.

I rinsed my face in the warm water of the bath, washing the tears from my face. Wallowing would get me nowhere.

Then a brisk knock sounded at the door. It was so late it was nearly morning. I hoped it was one of the maidservants, back with a cup of tea, or something sweet to soothe my pain a bit before I tried to catch a few hours of sleep. I stepped out of the bath and pulled my robe back around me, then padded to the door.

When I opened it, though, it wasn't my maidservants across on the other side of the threshold. It was the king—looking just as tired as I felt, with a concerned pinch in his brow. Different than the angry, cocky king I'd dealt with before. More like the man I'd been with in his quarters. My wolf warmed immediately to his presence but I was still cold. Just because he looked worried about me now didn't change anything about the decisions he'd made.

He reached for me, and I took a step back. "What are you doing here?" I asked. "I—I thought I made it clear I don't want to see you."

His dark eyes tracked over my body like a touch. I tugged my robe closed tighter, ignoring the rush of warmth that ran through me. With the space between us, he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. I wrapped my arms protectively around myself.

“You should leave,” I said.

“I needed to see you,” he said. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“*You* couldn’t sleep?” I scoffed. “This is your fault.”

“I meant what I said,” the king said. “You *are* the winner of the Choice. You will be my queen. After tonight, how could I think otherwise? I know you felt the connection between us, too.”

Connection. That was one way of putting it. His tongue darted out to wet his lower lip, and I couldn’t help but track the motion, and the memory of that mouth on me.

“That doesn’t matter,” I said. “I could never be queen to a king so callous. So thoughtless.”

“You think I have been thoughtless throughout this Choice?” He narrowed his eyes.

“I think you have been thoughtless in accepting this challenge,” I snapped.

“All I did was accept,” he said. Again a mix of interest and amusement flashed in his eyes. “Shouldn’t the blame rest on the man who offered the challenge in the first place?”

I blinked hard, fighting back tears again. How could Griffin be so stupid? After a long moment, I said, “Just don’t go through with it. Call off the challenge, and I’ll be your queen.”

“I can’t do that,” he said, with something in his voice that almost sounded like regret.

“Why not?” I demanded. “You’re king!”

“And the rules of a king are different than the rules of a mate,” he said. “A king cannot back out of a challenge. To do so is to display weakness. What else would I do—punish your Griffin unfairly? Put him in the stocks? I can’t send him back to Daybreak when he’s so audaciously brought soldiers to my doorstep. Word would travel.”

“What do you care about words?” I asked. “Is your reputation more important than a wolf’s life?”

“It’s not my reputation I’m concerned about. If other wolves hear they can issue a challenge without consequence, they’ll circle like vultures. I will not put my subjects at risk of invasion because your little boyfriend thought he could challenge me.” He shook his head. “The honorable thing is to accept. I know the rules of Nightfall don’t appeal to you, but I adhere to them. I’m an honorable king.”

“There’s nothing honorable about cold-blooded murder,” I said. “Griffin doesn’t know what he asks.”

“I can’t do anything about that,” the king said. “He has issued the challenge.”

The worst part of all of this was a small part of me knew the king was right. It was bad enough for Daybreak’s reputation that Griffin had come here at all. The only thing worse for our pack would be Griffin turned into a laughingstock. At least if Griffin failed the challenge, it would be with honor.

And I could redeem my pack if I became queen.

If I became queen. Was I really considering it?

There had to be a better way. There had to be a solution. It couldn’t end like this.

I turned away. “Just go,” I said, my voice breaking. “Please.”

The king took a step forward tentatively, hands open at his sides like he wanted to reach for me. I turned away, furthering the distance between us. I closed my eyes tightly, fighting back tears again. I wouldn’t let him see me like this.

“Please,” I said again, my voice terribly small.

The king inhaled like he was about to say something. But then, to my surprise, he simply exhaled, turned and left.

I crawled into my bed and let the tears pour out of me unencumbered. In the cold darkness of my quarters, it all felt impossible. Impossible, unreal—worse than I’d ever imagined.

I’d never see Daybreak again.

The next morning, I made my way down to the solarium for breakfast with Amity escorting me in her wolf form.

It was surprisingly normal at this point—normal enough that I could almost ignore the cold weight in my chest. I'd barely slept, and I knew it showed in my face. It was only the promise of breakfast that had gotten me out of bed at all. Fina and Adora would be there, and I needed to talk to a friend, someone I trusted. I needed advice.

I stepped into the solarium. Fina and Adora were already seated at the table, and Lady Glennis was there as well, seated at the head of the table with her manicured fingers wrapped around a mug of coffee.

"There are you, Lady Reyna," she said. "Please, join us."

I offered her a small smile, even as my heart sank. The last thing I wanted was to plaster on my good-competitor expression and face Lady Glennis.

I took my seat at the table and found my appetite was suddenly gone. Fina and Adora watched me with concern.

"Now with Reyna here, will you tell us what happened last night?" Fina asked. "The commotion woke me up, but I wasn't allowed to leave my quarters."

"Nor was I," Adora said. Her concerned expression carried a hint of suspicion. "What happened?"

"We had a visit from a Daybreak convoy," Lady Glennis said demurely.

Adora's eyes snapped to me. "What do you mean, a visit?"

"A member of the Court of Daybreak surprised us with a visit," she explained, "late in the evening, and challenged for the throne."

"What?" Fina reared back, nearly rocking her chair onto the back two legs. "A challenge? Against the king?"

The polite smile never left Lady Glennis' face. "Exciting, isn't it?" she said in a tone that suggested it very much was not. "Hence the commotion last night. But that isn't why I've joined you this morning." She took a sip of her coffee, then dabbed her napkin elegantly at the corner of her mouth. "The king has made his decision. Lady Reyna of Daybreak will be the next Queen of Frasia."

Adora's jaw dropped.

Stunned silence hung over the table. I folded my hands in my lap and stared down at them. I couldn't bear to meet Adora's eyes—she knew I didn't want this. And I knew she *did*.

"Pardon?" Adora said icily. "There must be a misunderstanding."

"No misunderstanding," Lady Glennis said. "The king has made his decision."

"But—but—" Adora sputtered. When I looked up, she was staring at Lady Glennis with her eyes wide and a flush high on her cheeks. "But that's not fair!" she exclaimed. "I didn't participate in the final trial!"

Fina met my eyes. She looked almost relieved, more so than happy—that was strange. Relieved because this was over? But didn't she want to stay in Efra? And—she also knew Adora wanted this so badly.

Lady Glennis said nothing, just watched Adora with a delicately arched brow. Adora stood up angrily from the table and smacked one hand on the table hard enough that my mug rattled, the coffee threatening to slosh over the lip. It was a rare display of anger from her.

“What happened?” Adora demanded. She turned her gaze to me, and her eyes flashed silver as her anger brought her wolf closer to the surface. “What did you do? Did you sleep with him? Is that why he chose you?”

My face flushed. It was my turn for my jaw to drop. Adora putting me on the spot like this—in front of Lady Glennis? “No!” I said. “Of course not, I did no such thing!”

It wasn’t exactly a lie, but it wasn’t exactly the truth, either. But what had happened between the king and me was private.

“This is unbelievable,” Adora snapped. “Why was there a final trial if it wasn’t a trial at all? Had the king already made up his mind? We all know his attention has been focused on Reyna since the beginning. How farcical!” She sniffed, then smoothed one hand over fine blonde hair. “How could you accept this?” she asked me.

“Accept this? Adora, you know this isn’t—I never—” I glanced toward Lady Glennis, who was watching us both with mild interest. “You know this isn’t how I wanted this to happen. We both know you would be a fine queen.”

Her expression softened as she heard the unspoken part of my statement. That this isn’t what I wanted. That she deserved it, not me. If I could, I’d switch places with her immediately, regardless of whatever feelings I felt for the king. Anger and desire and—and something else, something I wasn’t sure what to call.

“I know I would,” Adora said. “That’s the worst part.” She cleared her throat, then nodded at the table and Lady Glennis. “Thank you, milady.” She hurried from the room before any of us could respond, and the door to the solarium clattered shut behind her.

“Well,” Lady Glennis said primly, “she took that well. Such is to be expected in a competition such as this. Lady Reyna, it’s imperative that we begin planning for the wedding next week. It will be an event for the citizens of Efra as well, and there will be quite the schedule of events, as is the tradition with Nightfall. We’ll cover the basics first.”

“Lady Glennis,” Fina cut in, “I’d love to participate in the planning, should you be willing to continue your courteous hosting. Perhaps some wolves of Duskmoon can come aid as well?”

Lady Glennis smiled and patted Fina’s hand. “What a lovely offer. Of course Nightfall would appreciate your help. Do stay.”

I nodded in agreement. Already my head was beginning to pound with stress and sleep deprivation and miserable anticipation of a *wedding*. How could I have forgotten about the *wedding*?

“Let’s begin,” Lady Glennis said.

“If I may, milady,” Fina said, “with the additional help of myself and my pack, I see no harm in delaying the planning until tomorrow. With the events of last night, I believe we could all use a little more sleep...?” She smiled hopefully.

I met Fina’s eyes as gratitude surged through me. I needed more sleep, certainly, but more than that I needed to be alone. There was something more pressing than the upcoming wedding—Griffin’s upcoming challenge. I had to figure out what to do.

Lady Glennis sighed with mild irritation but nodded in agreement. “I do need both of you in top form to begin the planning,” she said. “Get some rest today, and we’ll begin tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you, milady,” I said, but I was looking at Fina. She smiled gently at me.

With a curt nod, Lady Glennis excused herself, leaving out the side door of the solarium. Fina and I stepped into the hall, and she quickly tugged me into a brief, hard hug. “Are you okay?” she asked. “Pardon me for saying, but you look awful. Was the date with the king that bad?”

“No, no,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s not that, it’s—it’s the challenge.”

Fina’s eyes flashed with recognition. “You don’t mean to say...”

“Yes,” I said. “It was Griffin who issued it. He tried to ‘rescue’ me.”

Fina hid her shocked expression behind her hand. “He thought he could stand against the King of Frasia? No offense, but is he a fool?”

“That was my reaction as well,” I said with a sigh.

“You must be able to discuss with the king,” Fina said. “He chose you, after all. He’ll listen.”

I couldn’t tell her that I’d already tried, and that it was a lost cause. There was nothing I could say to convince the king to call off the challenge. “I’m going to try,” I said to Fina. “I just need some time.”

She nodded. “Send for me if you need anything.”

I wrapped her in another hard hug. “Thank you,” I said. “For everything.”

“Thank me after the wedding,” she said, muffled into my shoulder.

I made my way to the only place I could think to go—the library. Thankfully, the halls were quiet and the doors unguarded. I pushed the heavy door open slowly and peeked inside. The room was empty. Did any of the Nightfall pack even use this space? The only one I’d seen use it was the king himself.

I swallowed, looking up at the wraparound balcony. The last time I’d been up there, it hadn’t ended well.

I closed the door behind me, leaned against the wood, and breathed deep. The familiar smell of paper and ink soothed my nerves. It was quiet in here. I was finally alone. And if there was anything I was good at, it was research. I didn’t know exactly what I was looking for, but there had to be something. Something would give me an idea. If I couldn’t stop the wedding, I could at least stop the challenge.

I climbed the stairs to the balcony and made my way to the map archives.

Briefly I paused, standing by the great wooden tables and the tall shelves, staring at the place where I'd driven my knife into Rona's flank. The memory of her jaws snapping down on me surged in my memory with startling clarity. And alongside it—the memory of Rona in her human form, watching me from across the table in the solarium, in her plain gowns with that sharp, determined glare.

She'd wanted this just as badly as Adora had.

Why me? Why was the king so insistent on claiming *me*?

I shook those thoughts from my mind. The *why* didn't matter. Every time I thought I had the king figured out, he did something new I didn't understand. Some curious tinge to his expression, some flash of gold in his eyes. But his motivations weren't important.

Focus. I pulled a few maps from the shelves. Something here would point me in the right direction. As I smoothed out the first map, I found I couldn't focus on the delicate lines of ink illustrating the cities and packs of Frasia. There was so much of the country we hadn't seen. All the places we'd meant to visit together—the small towns, the tall mountain ranges, the deep forests, the sea between Frasia and Askon.

Griffin couldn't die. Not like this. Not in the arena at the end of the king's blade. He was my safe place for so long, my only friend in Daybreak, and the only one who listened to me when I spun out my dreams of a different, bigger life. Even now, with this stupid decision, he'd done it for me. He'd wanted that life together, too.

I put the large map of Frasia aside and unfurled a different one. This was a current map, of Efra as it was built today, with its crowded streets and its bustling industry. I sighed as I traced the paths of the city I'd visited. The beautiful walls, the elegant gates, the bustling taverns, Camille's shop tucked away amid the busyness. Then, the manor itself, with its simple structure, built around the solarium, the four wings and—something I'd never noticed before.

I leaned closer to the map. There was a small pathway that appeared to lead from the northern wing of the manor through

the external wall, into the forest. How could it go through the wall? There wasn't a gate or an entrance marked there. Unless...

Unless it went under the wall.

The north wing was where we'd found those strange artifacts. If someone had wanted to move things in and out of the manor without detection, it made sense to have an unmarked passageway. Whether the pathway belonged to Nightfall or Daybreak, I didn't know. Or even if it was built earlier.

I rifled through the maps until I found one of the manor itself, tucked on the highest shelf in the archives in a leather tube that was so dusty just pulling it off the shelf made me sneeze. This was a detailed map of the manor, with all its rooms dutifully illustrated and labeled—an architectural blueprint of multiple layers and ink colors. And amid all the dark inks representing the building materials, there were faint gray lines winding under hallways and through walls.

Tunnels. Not just leading from north wing to the forest, but leading all over the manor. From the throne room, from the gates, from the dining hall, even from outside the solarium. A network of tunnels wove under the manor like a circulatory system. If I could figure out an entrance, I could find my way to the dungeons undetected. I spent the next few hours poring over the map, tracing the lines with my finger and murmuring to myself as I worked to copy the details of the tunnel system into my mind. I couldn't take it with me, but I'd studied maps enough that I could lay it out in my mind.

This was my chance. I'd get Griffin out of here. And maybe, just maybe, I'd be able to find a way out of here, as well. Maybe we'd be able to leave Efra behind and start our lives. A life on the lam—a life constantly looking over our shoulders—but a life nonetheless.

Was that the life I wanted?

I shoved that question out of mind. That didn't matter—not right now. I had to get Griffin out of here. I owed him that much.

Tonight. I'd take dinner in my room. And while the court dined with the king, we would escape.

Taking dinner in my room was no trouble at all. I dismissed Amity and Rue, telling them I was still exhausted and needed time to recover before I had to face the next day, which had both wedding planning *and* the challenge for the throne scheduled. A lot of emotion, I explained, and Amity and Rue simply nodded in understanding.

I'd miss them, I realized. If this worked, there was a chance I might not see them again. There were plenty of things I'd miss about Efra: my handmaidens, my friends, the activity of the city, even the brisk weather.

But none of it was worth losing Griffin.

Once I was sure they were gone, I changed briskly into a simple pair of dark trousers with a tunic and functional boots. All were given to me by Camille—training clothes, for afternoons spent in the arena. I pulled my cloak over my shoulders and tucked my knife into my waistband.

Then, for the first time, I pulled on the sapphire necklace Griffin had gifted me when I left for this competition. Everything else I could leave behind. It'd all just be a bad memory soon. But Griffin had given me this necklace to give me confidence, a physical reminder that he'd be waiting for me in Daybreak. He hadn't exactly waited, but I still wanted it with me as I made my way out of Efra and into my new life. I tucked the pendant under the collar of my tunic.

I looked in the mirror as I braided my hair into a tight, functional plait. This was a risky plan, but something in my chest had settled. It felt right. Wherever this tunnel system took me, I knew that was where I needed to be. In this functional outfit, with a plan of my own, I finally felt like *myself* instead of a pawn in the games of the Choice.

The sky darkened. The court would be at dinner.

It was time.

I slipped out of my quarters, then glanced around the hallway for any sign of servants or guards. I was met only with silence. Perfect.

I unfurled the map in my mind. According to the chart, there was an entrance into the tunnel system just under the window at the far end of the hall. There, a landscape portrait hung on the wall beside the window—an image of the forest that was visible outside, and a fairly unimpressive rendering of it, at that. I'd thought it was just a boring decorative choice, like most of the decor in the Nightfall manor. Now I wondered if it had a purpose.

I leaned close to the painting, but it was just that: a painting. Dull trees, snow, a gray sky, a few wolf tracks visible in the snowbanks. I wrinkled my nose, leaning closer. There had to be a clue in the painting, something that would show me how to get into the tunnel system. I smoothed my hand over the frame. Did it move? Was there something behind it?

As I knelt down slightly to feel the bottom of the frame, a breeze whispered over my fingers.

There was something there. I knelt further, pressing my hand against the frame. There was a seam between the floor and the wall, where the cold air snuck in.

I traced my fingers along the seam, following it to the corner of the wall under the window. There, barely visible against the dark stone and still covered in dust, was a tiny switch. I grinned to myself. Hidden in plain sight. I glanced around the hall again. I was still alone. So I pressed the switch.

The wall shifted slightly with a *clunk* that echoed around the empty hall. I scrambled backward, coughing as the seam widened and spit out a spray of dust and dirt. It sounded, and looked, like no one had used this entrance to the tunnel in a long time.

I pushed the wall open. Behind it was darkness, and a narrow, dusty staircase leading down, down, down. I'd known the tunnels were underneath the manor, but seeing the descent in person made my stomach swoop with anxiety. I swallowed. At least there was a dusty old torch mounted on the wall. I'd have to hurry back into my quarters to get a match to light it—if it was still intact from years of disuse.

When I reached out to check the torch, to ensure the wick wasn't disintegrated, magic crackled over my fingers.

I snatched my hand back like I'd been burned. I gasped, my eyes widening with shock as the torch flickered to life of its own accord. Atop the dusty wooden handle, behind a delicate glass encasing, a warm yellow light glowed and sparkled like a trapped star fluttering to escape. Then, more torches flickered to life along the staircase, one after another, like the torches were awakening each other in a chain. The lights glowed until the tunnel turned a corner at the end of the descent.

So no matches needed, I guessed. Curious, I reached for the torch again, and as my fingers neared it the magic danced around my fingers again. It was similar to what I'd felt in the artifacts room, like the magic was reaching out toward me.

Point of no return.

A thrill of anticipation raced through me. If I'd thought coming to Efra was exciting, this was, in a way, better. Because this was my decision—my exploration. However it ended, at least I'd done something for myself. And for Griffin. I was getting us out of this.

I stepped onto the landing and pulled the secret door closed behind me. The tunnel was silent, and even as the lights in the torches flickered and moved, they made no sound like a fire would. I made my way down, down, down, until I reached

the end of the staircase. The silence was unnerving, pressing down on me like a weight. It was almost like being underwater. Was I yet underground? At the end of the stairs, the tunnel turned sharply to the left. It was on a grade, too—a slow, subtle decline.

There was only one way to go. A torch flickered to life at my shoulder. I began to walk.

And walk. And walk.

The tunnel seemed endless ahead of me, winding straight ahead without any turns or tunnels splitting off. That seemed to align with what I'd seen on the map, but the more time passed, the more I began to doubt it. How far had I gone? And how deep underground was I? I'd been descending slowly the entire time—had the tunnel system changed since the map had been drawn? Perhaps it'd be wiser to turn around, then risk stealing the map from the library. It'd be an unpleasant ascent, certainly, but the deeper underground I went the more my anxiety spiked.

After about a half hour of walking, I was moments from turning back when my nape prickled. My wolf sensed another presence. I didn't know who it was, but after all this silent walking, finally we were approaching other wolves.

Then, in between two of the distantly placed lamps, a barely visible glow of light flickered from a crack in the wall.

A seam. Had I been missing doors this entire way? No—I would've sensed something, the same way my wolf was sensing another presence now. She was on high alert in the quiet of the tunnels. I approached the seam carefully, my feet silent on the earthen floor of the tunnel. Then, carefully, I pressed my ear to the wall of the tunnel. Through the earth I could hear murmurs of voices, but nothing distinct enough to make out. There was someone there. Someone on the other side. The tunnels were still in use.

I had to be near the center of the manor by now. Was the space I'd seen marked on the map of the dungeons? The center of the entire tunnel system?

Gently ,I pushed on the wall. It gave much easier than I expected, clunking back like it had been waiting for my fingertips to activate it. With a clunk, it slid back, and light flooded the tunnel. I leaped back, eyes wide and wolf on alert. But no one barged into the tunnel to find me. The voices were still only murmurs.

I peeked into the space the door had created.

The tunnel doorway opened into a hallway. It wasn't the earthen-floored darkness of the tunnel system, but more like the servants' hallways that snaked on the lower floors of the manor. It was narrow with stone walls and dim lighting. I pushed the secret door to the tunnel closed behind me. The cold air was permeated with a terrible stench of ammonia and iron – piss and blood. Then, a wail cut through the air, low and long. A weak cry of pain. Behind that, a howl sounded. A thump like a body being struck. The scrape of metal on metal.

Cold fear crawled into my throat. The dungeons weren't just a holding place—people were being hurt. I pulled my knife from my waistband and crept down the narrow hallway, toward the terrible sounds calling me like a dark siren. The hallway led to an immense archway. There wasn't even a door. The dungeons were just open, as if I were already in the dungeons now. I most likely was. The tunnels had been a secret entrance. I'd bet that behind me, at the far end of this hallway, there was a great locked door to keep the prisoners inside.

I pressed myself to the wall to try to hide as best as I could, and peeked around the archway.

It was only the fear of being caught that kept me from crying out. The main center of the dungeon was immense, as if whoever had built it had expected to keep and torture half an army. A huge wooden table was just off the center of the dungeon, half in shadow, surrounded by rolling tables dotted with saws and flogs and knives and hammers.

A skinny man was strapped the table by heavy leather straps, and he tugged ineffectually and lethargically against them. Occasionally, he stilled, so only his chest moved with

his breaths, and then suddenly he'd jerk back into wakefulness and cry out. He didn't seem to notice my presence at all. Nor did the others held in the dungeons, in the tiny, dank cells that lined the walls. They were all wolves, in their animal shape, in various states of sickness and injury. Most were pressed into the far corners of their holding cells, making themselves small. Internally, my wolf cried out at the sight.

Who was doing this? Was this all the work of the Bloody King? Certainly these all couldn't be Daybreak wolves. And for what reason were they being held?

"Reyna," a familiar voice whispered. "Is that you?"

My heart soared, whiplash from the despair of a moment ago. Griffin. He was here—he was alive. We had to get out of here, and fast. Whoever had strapped that man to the table... I had a feeling they would be coming back to finish the job. I hurried across the dungeon. Some of the wolves stirred at my presence, baring their teeth and raising their hackles, but some didn't even have the energy to lift their heads.

In the furthest cell, Griffin was still in his human form. He reached through the bars, and I took his hand.

"Griffin," I said. "Are you hurt?"

"You've come for me," he said. He sounded almost awed. A gash marked his cheek, and his tan soldier's uniform was streaked with dirt, but he seemed okay. "How'd you find this place?"

"Of course I came." I squeezed his hand. "Did you think I'd leave you here to die?"

"Die?" Griffin's brow furrowed. "The only one who is going to die is the King of Nightfall."

"What?" I pulled my hand away. "You can't be thinking of going through with this challenge."

"He's taken too much from us already," Griffin growled. His eyes flashed clay-red again, and my wolf raised her hackles at the sudden and unexpected show of dominance. I'd never seen his wolf this close to the surface, not outside of a

planned moon-shift. “I’m going to destroy him. The challenge is just the beginning.”

“He hasn’t taken anything from us,” Not yet, at least. “All he’s done is force me to participate in this stupid competition. And I thought we both agreed I’d handle this so we could start our lives.”

“You don’t understand,” Griffin said, low. “Frasia doesn’t belong to him—it belongs to *your* pack. To *your* father. To Daybreak. And when we marry, it will belong to *me*.”

He bared his teeth in an instinctive show of aggression, like the thought of the challenge filled him with a violent desire he couldn’t suppress.

This wasn’t the man I knew. This wasn’t the plan we’d made.

Then it all began to click into place.

“You didn’t come here to try to ‘rescue’ me,” I said slowly. “I’m just an excuse to challenge for the throne.”

“Of course I want you to be mine,” he said, “but our lives are secondary to the throne.”

“Secondary?” I gaped at him. “We were supposed to have our *own* lives, away from the court!”

He stepped closer to the bars and tipped his head to the side. “You had to have known that was a fantasy,” he said condescendingly.

“We had a plan,” I said. Shock pinned me to the spot. “I trusted you.”

“You can’t have wanted that to happen to your pack,” he said. “To your family. To *lose* the King’s Choice? After losing the throne by force? It would’ve brought so much shame. You really thought we could go through with that plan?”

“I thought you didn’t care about any of that!” I whispered-shouted. My world was crumbling around me. “I thought you cared about *me*!”

“I do care about you,” Griffin said. “Reyna, I do.”

I found it was becoming harder and harder to believe him. I wrapped my arms around myself, feeling cold and small in the dungeon.

“See it how you wish,” Griffin continued, “but your father needed a reason for me to come challenge for the throne. Your presence here was the perfect reasoning. And now, the king will die, and the Kingdom of Frasia will be returned rightfully to Daybreak.”

“Has this been the plan all along?” I asked quietly.

Griffin sighed. “Reyna, you can’t really believe I was satisfied with what we had, can you?”

I did. I thought he was. I was satisfied—why wasn’t he?

“Did you think I was happy waiting for you? We had no timeline for marriage. You wouldn’t even kiss me. I’m a wolf, Reyna, I have needs. I can’t be told to wait.” Again, his eyes flashed as he looked at me, hunger and desire evident in his gaze. My wolf cowered, pulling away from him. “A wolf isn’t supposed to run from a fight,” he continued. “I won’t run from Daybreak to follow your flights of fancy. I’m meant to be a leader. An alpha. When I kill the king, I’ll take what I’ve always been owed.”

Under his burning gaze, I wasn’t sure if he meant the crown—or *me*. Nausea turned my stomach. This wasn’t the man I’d loved. Was this who Griffin truly was? Had everything we’d had together been a lie?

“You never loved me,” I said. “You just wanted a way into the court.”

“I do love you,” he said. “But you can’t run from who you are. You are a Lady of the Court, and now you will be queen.”

I’d never seen Griffin like this, bloodthirsty and single-minded. “I won’t be a part of this,” I said. “I won’t help you destroy kingdoms for your own greed. Too many people will suffer.”

“And you think they don’t suffer under the Bloody King’s rule? Frasia belongs to Daybreak. Only under Daybreak can she prosper.”

“You don’t care about the citizens. You only care about the power.”

Griffin rolled his eyes. “I won’t argue anymore with you, Reyna,” he snapped. “There’s no stopping fate. It’s time for you to stop running from it.”

“Fate?” I asked. “None of this is fated!”

“*The daughter of the Stars will marry the Bloodied King to bring back the Shining Ones,*” he recited, then raised his eyebrows at me.

“Where did you hear that?” I stumbled back.

“You aren’t the only one who can do research,” Griffin said. “Your father was told of this prophecy when your mother first came to Daybreak. The Daybreak priests have kept it safe.”

I swallowed. I refused to believe it. I *couldn’t* believe it. “If that prophecy meant anything, the king would’ve chosen Adora of Starcrest,” I said.

“You can’t be serious,” he said.

“What?” I asked. “I am a daughter of Daybreak, not Starcrest.”

“And yet your hair shines blonde,” he said, “and your wolf’s pelt is white as snow, and her eyes glow silver.”

“And I am still a daughter of Daybreak.” My stomach dropped. “The prophecy has nothing to do with me.”

“You are of the Daybreak pack, but not by blood,” he said. “You are the bastard child your mother carried in her womb when she married the duke.” He shook his head. “I can’t believe you didn’t know.”

I was stunned to silence. My head spun. Surely, that wasn’t true. Surely, my father would’ve told me.

“This is your fate,” Griffin continued. “Yours and mine are intertwined. When I take the throne, I will be the Bloody King. And then, with the daughter of the stars at my side, we will bring back the fae to learn their magic. Together we will create

a stronger race of shifters. Unstoppable wolves. Wolves whose blood sings with the power of the fae.” His eyes glowed with eagerness. “You wanted to see this world—together, we will conquer it.”

“You’re crazy,” I whispered.

“No,” he said with a grin. “I am the future.”

I turned on my heel and ran.

“You’ll see!” he called after me. “After the Challenge, you’ll see!”

He was crazy. He was crazy if he thought he could kill the king. He was crazy if he thought that old prophecy meant anything. It was just an old children’s story, something the nursemaids told the pups to get them to behave. *Go to bed, or the Fae will come take you away!* I was a daughter of Daybreak. He had no proof. There was no reason to believe him.

My father had never taken an interest in me. I reminded him too much of my mother. That was why—wasn’t it?

I shoved those thoughts from my mind. That didn’t matter. The prophecy didn’t matter. Even as it sat like a shard of ice in my chest. I made my way back down the narrow hallway, to the secret door into the tunnels.

So much for my escape. So much for our life together.

With the door to the dungeons sealed behind me, the cool air of the tunnels fell over me like a shroud.

Growing up in Daybreak, I’d felt isolated and misunderstood.

But now, for the first time in my life, I was really and truly alone.

The long incline back to my quarters left me sore and exhausted. It was dark in the hallways, and my room was empty when I got there. I reached up and grabbed the sapphire hanging around my neck, then tugged it so hard the latch broke. Griffin had given this to me as a promise—a promise he'd broken. I tossed the necklace carelessly into my trunk. At dawn, the challenge would begin. I washed the dust from my body and eased my aching muscles, but nothing could calm the turmoil raging in my mind. All I could do was try to steal a few moments of sleep.

As scheduled, Amity and Rue entered my quarters an hour before dawn. I dressed in a black and deep purple gown—the colors of Nightfall.

My heart ached as I looked in the mirror.

“Do you feel any better this morning, milady?” Amity asked. “Was yesterday restful?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m looking forward to the wedding planning.”

Amity hummed in acknowledgment. The Challenge was exciting to the citizens of Efra, surely, but both my handmaidens knew this wasn't easy for me. Even if my connection to Griffin wasn't well known—he was still a wolf of Daybreak.

Griffin didn't seem to think that was the case, though. He didn't know what he was doing. Somehow, that made it worse. As angry and betrayed as I was, I at least wished he had the

sense to know he couldn't beat the king. I didn't want to be with him, but I didn't want to watch him die. No wolf wanted to watch her packmate die.

But—was he even my packmate anymore?

My father had planned all of this. My father had used me as bait, placing me in Efra to give Griffin a reason to challenge. Would a pack leader do that to one of his own?

Did I have nowhere I belonged?

The only thing I knew for sure right now was that the only wolf I could trust was myself. There was nothing I could do to stop this challenge, and with Griffin's admission, I had no reason to, either. At least the king hadn't lied to me. He'd confused me, challenged me, irritated me—but he hadn't lied to me. I sighed. It was a low bar, but he was one of the few men in my life who hadn't crossed it.

So today, I would look the part of the engaged queen. I would stand in the box of the arena and watch the Challenge, and I would not react when it ended. Griffin didn't come here for me—he came here for himself, to chase some foolish dream of endless power and meaningless prophecy. Now, he would face his consequences, and he would face them alone.

“All of us here in the manor are looking forward to the wedding,” Rue said as she brushed out my hair. “It should be quite the event.”

“I'll be moving quarters, I assume,” I murmured. This was all slowly becoming real.

“Of course,” Rue said.

“Will you two still be my handmaidens?” I asked.

“Well, that's up to you, milady,” Amity said. “Typically the queen has a dedicated staff who have been trained specifically for the royals—”

“If it's up to me, I'd hope you two will continue to be my primary handmaidens,” I said. “I can't imagine being here in Efra without you two.”

Rue nearly bounced where she stood. “Oh, milady, we’d be honored!”

“I was *so* hoping you’d ask us,” Amity said, with a huge grin. “It’d be such an honor to be your handmaidens when you’re queen. We usually just work in the kitchen—never before the Choice did I think we’d be at the queen’s side! Oh, this is so exciting!”

The queen. That was really going to be me. I managed to give them a small smile in the mirror. If they noticed my hesitation, they said nothing about it, too wrapped up in their own excitement as they finished brushing out my hair and adding my jewelry to my outfit. Then, just as they finished, there was a knock on the door.

“Your escort!” Amity said. She hurriedly opened the door, revealing Barion dressed in a plain tunic and pants, standing side by side with Roth in the leather armor of Nightfall.

I blinked, slightly wide-eyed to see the both of them.

“Forgive the formality, milady,” Roth said. “You must understand, with what Griffin of Daybreak has done—”

“She gets it,” Barion interjected, with a wave of his hand. “I’m fine being babysat instead of kicked down to the dungeons. No complaints here.” He stepped across the threshold and spread his arms wide at the sight of me. “Lady Reyna, you look beautiful. Fit to be the queen.”

“Thank you,” I said, casting my gaze to my feet as I did a small bow.

“Let’s get this show on the road, huh, Roth?” Barion said with a grin. He stepped back to clap Roth on the shoulder, who cringed at the touch. “Nothing like a good challenge for the throne to start your day.”

They both walked me to the front of the manor. In the rosy predawn light, the air was still and chilly, but the city seemed to thrum with captured energy in the anticipation of the challenge. Roth stepped away to summon the carriage over, and Barion approached me. “How are you, milady?”

“As fine as I can be,” I murmured. “All things considered.”

“Don’t worry too much,” Barion said. “Griffin’s been training. This may go differently than these beasts of Nightfall expect.”

I blinked at him. Griffin’s been training? How would he know that? And—did he know Griffin was training for this in particular?

Had everyone known about his plan except me?

Before I could question Barion, the carriage pulled up. We rode in silence to the arena. Barion’s presence usually comforted me, made me feel safe, but now I wasn’t so sure. His anticipation was palpable.

At the arena, Roth and Barion bowed and made their way to the staging area, the same place where I had prepared for my battle with Rona. A servant of Nightfall led me up the back stairs to the box overlooking the Arena, where the duchess and the council members sat in their fine chairs.

“Good morning,” I murmured, and took my seat next to the duchess.

The duchess cut her sharp gaze to me, looking briefly murderous before her expression returned to careful neutrality. It struck fear into my heart—as so many things did recently. Did she think I was a part of this scheme? I folded my hands together in my lap and looked out over the arena.

The sun began to break over the horizon, casting golden rays of light over the area. Despite the early hour, the arena was packed full of people murmuring in quiet conversation as they waited for the show to begin.

That’s what this was. It was a show. My heart clenched, and I resolutely ignored it. I wasn’t going to let any emotion show on my face. I would get through this, and then decide what to do next.

Horns blared, and then a young wolf dressed in bright purple bounded into the center of the arena. He spread his arms wide, and the arena erupted into cheers and shouts so loud it sent me flinching backward. The force of the sound

was like a wave. People stood up, waved their hands, and threw paper into the arena in excitement.

“Good morning,” the announcer called in a voice as bright as a bell. “To my Ladies of the Court and my lovely council members.” He swept into a bow, then straightened up and spun gracefully on his heel to see the arena. “And to the wolves of Nightfall!”

The people stomped on the stands, creating a thunderous effect that made the entire stadium rumble beneath me. I gripped the arms of my seat, shocked by the power of the response.

“Wolf Griffin of Pack Daybreak has graced us with his presence this morning,” the announcer shouted, “and challenged our king for the right to the throne!”

Boos and hisses filled the air with animal ferocity.

“Shall we see what this wolf has to offer?” The announcer waved his hand at the staging area. “Bring the challenger out!”

Two guards stepped out of the staging area, hauling Griffin with them. Even with all he’d done, my heart still broke at the sight of it—he looked dirty and wild, with his wrists and ankles shackled together. The guards unshackled him and shoved him toward the middle of the arena. The announcer jumped back in theatrical faux-fright, and the crowd tittered with laughter.

Griffin straightened up. He bared his teeth at the crowd, and they let out a collective ‘ooh’ of amused fright. His clay-red gaze met mine, and fury burned there. At me or at Nightfall, I wasn’t sure. I didn’t care. I sat impassively and met his gaze. Let him see me in the colors of Nightfall. I was not his prize.

“And now,” the announcer said, “let this challenger meet his fate by the jaws of the true King of Frasia: King Elias of Nightfall.”

Somehow the shouts were impossibly louder, and the stomping impossibly heavy.

From the opposite end of the arena, the king strode out.

He wasn't dressed like a king at all. He was barefoot, in plain slacks and a white shirt with the collar open despite the chill in the air. His dark hair was tied back, but no crown graced his forehead. No cloak on his shoulders. The only thing that betrayed his regality was his posture. Even when he was dressed plainly, he moved like a king, with confidence and power.

His eyes met mine. They flashed gold as he pressed his lips to his fingers and gestured toward me. I nodded my acknowledgment, but did no more than that, even as my wolf shivered with delight at the greeting. Then he held up a hand and the stadium fell silent as if he'd cast a spell.

"This wolf has challenged me for my throne," the king boomed. "I am not a king who backs down from an honorable challenge. But to interrupt my Choice, and attempt to claim my betrothed?" He bared his teeth at Griffin. "I will not stand for such insolence and disrespect. You and your pack will pay for your foolishness."

His ferocious words chilled even the jolly announcer. He stepped back, looked between them, then said, "Begin."

Griffin charged forward toward the king. The crowd exploded with noise again. He sprang off the balls of his feet and shifted in mid-air, clothes tearing off his body as his wolf exploded forward. I'd never seen his wolf from a distance like this, only up close when I was shifted, as well. He was a large, strong wolf, with a sleek body and a ruddy red pelt like a darker, browner version of his hair. His eyes gleamed the deep clay-red of Daybreak, and he pulled his lips back to expose his long, fierce fangs.

The king sidestepped the jump easily. Griffin's paws dug into the sand as he landed, stumbling forward as he caught his balance. Then, the king shifted himself. Even though I'd seen it a few times, the appearance of his wolf never failed to send a shiver down my spine. He was bigger than Griffin, and broader; the dawn light gleamed on his shining, dark pelt.

He wasted no time. Under the roar of the crowd, the king dug his hind paws into the dirt of the arena and lunged

forward, head down, and threw his weight hard into Griffin's side. Griffin yelped and stumbled, flopped onto his side and then his back, and the king pushed him, snarling and snapping his jaws as Griffin slammed his paws against the king's snout.

Before the king could pin him, Griffin used his smaller size to wriggle out and leap backward. His hackles were raised, fur up along his spine as he snarled at the king and then sprang forward with shocking fearlessness. Briefly, they tussled in the center of the arena, jaws knocking against each other and eyes blazing as they snarled their rage.

The king knocked Griffin to his side again, then lunged forward to pin him. This time, though, Griffin briefly shifted back into his human form. Nude and streaked with dirt from the arena, he slid effortlessly under the king's huge body and hopped to his feet behind the king. It was an impressive maneuver—he *had* been training. This was the skilled, quick shifting of a warrior. I'd never seen him fight like this. Next to me, the duchess hummed in interest; a tiny smile played on her face. The other council members had their attention still fixed on the fight below, but the duchess looked almost amused. Was she impressed by Griffin's performance?

Did Griffin actually have a chance here?

Griffin shifted back into his wolf form, just as quick as he'd shifted out, and closed his jaws over the king's hind leg. The king howled his pain and rage, then kicked back hard, dislodging Griffin's jaws with one hard push. Dark blood streamed from the bite wound on his flank; the crowd gasped.

Now the king was angry. I could sense it radiating off him, and my wolf could feel it, too, hunkering down in my chest. He'd been playing with Griffin before, and now Griffin had proven himself a stronger challenger than the king had expected. The king growled, stalking closer. Griffin met his gaze steadily, head low and lips drawn back.

Then Griffin lunged forward again. In his confidence, he jumped high, aiming to get his mouth around the king's neck. But the king saw it coming. He ducked low, so Griffin was nearly on top of him, then slammed his jaws closed hard on

Griffin's front leg, right at the top near the shoulder. The bone crunched under the pressure and Griffin yowled, high and pained. My skin crawled at the sound, and I leaned forward slightly in an attempt to see better. Blood stained the dirt of the arena.

The king released him, his teeth stained red. He growled again, hackles up and his head low—another space in the battle for Griffin to submit.

I squeezed my hands into fists so hard my nails bit into my palms. Griffin lurched heavily to one side, his mangled front leg dragging uselessly in the dirt. His eyes blazed with anger, and spit frothed at the corners of his jaws, giving him a look of madness as opposed to the king's calm, bloodstained anger. He growled, low and furious, and the fixated crowd shouted their excitement.

My heart sank. The king had offered Griffin two opportunities to submit—that was two more than he had to, by tradition. It was well within his rights to slaughter Griffin where he stood, and yet, he had given him the chance to leave this challenge alive. Yet Griffin either still clung to the fantasy that he could beat the king—or he would rather die than return home defeated.

Griffin charged forward, as best he could without collapsing onto his broken leg. With his jaws open and froth of spit and blood flying, he careened forward toward the king. The king shifted his weight to one side, then slammed his shoulder into Griffin's body, easily knocking him off balance. Griffin yelped in pain as he crashed to the ground on his bad side, and then the king was on him, pinning him down. Griffin's back legs pawed at the king's body in a desperate attempt to claw him off. The king was unmoved and indifferent to Griffin's desperate thrashing.

Then the king closed his jaws hard on his throat.

Griffin's yelps and growls turned to gurgles as blood gushed from the wound. The king kept his jaws in place, then shook his head twice, hard.

The snap of bone echoed through the arena. Griffin's body slumped lifelessly to the dirt. The crowd exploded into noise and the stomping of feet. The king raised his head toward the morning sky and howled his victory, a long sound that was mirrored by the crowd calling out their own shouts and howls in their human voices.

The noise was muffled in my ears, as if I was suddenly plunged underwater. Distant. Separated from the chaos of the arena. The king stayed in his wolf form, howling and pacing, staking his claim around the bloodied heap of motionless fur that was, once upon a time, the man I was going to marry.

The council members, and the duchess, all looked at me for my reaction.

Well, I wasn't going to give them one. They didn't understand this—this wasn't just the death of a Daybreak wolf. This was the death of the life I'd thought I'd had, and all the plans I'd had laid out in front of me. I wasn't going to give them the satisfaction of seeing me upset.

I stood up briskly. "I'll take my leave," I said curtly, and turned on my heel before anyone respond. No more was I just a visitor for the Choice—I was the king's fiancée.

What that meant, I still wasn't sure.

When I opened my eyes, there was coffee cooling on the table in my bedroom, and a breakfast that had surely gone cold under its silver cover. For the past two days Amity and Rue had slipped in to provide meals and coffee and water, occasionally encouraging me to eat and bathe, but I rarely acquiesced. I could do nothing but sleep fitfully, tossing and turning under the heavy covers, waking up to pick at the toast left for me and wipe the tears I'd shed in my sleep.

I'd left a part of my soul on the bloody dirt of the arena, alongside the motionless heap of Griffin's body. Our last moments together had been—harrowing, to say the least. It'd been the realization that all we'd had together was a lie. Somehow, that made the loss of that past hurt even more. Not only did I mourn the man I loved, I mourned the life we had together in Daybreak. Griffin had been my only friend. The only one who listened to me. He was my foundation in Daybreak, my hope for a different and better life.

Even if it'd all gone to shit in the end, the years we'd spent together growing up—those were real. He'd cared about me once. He'd seen me as more than just a means to an end.

And now that man was gone. I'd never see him again. He'd sacrificed our relationship and then his own life in a stupid quest for the throne. It wasn't just our past that had died—it was our future, too.

I wasn't leaving Efra to see the world. I was still here, in Nightfall.

Still betrothed to the Bloody King.

I sat up and pushed my hair off my face. I wasn't quite ready to get up, not yet, but the coffee was enticing even if it was cold, and I did need to eat something.

A soft knock on the door caught my attention. I glanced over at the door, then sighed and settled back against the headboard. I didn't want Amity and Rue to know I was awake. Eventually, I'd have to face them—there was a wedding to plan, after all—but so far they'd respected my need for privacy. At some point they'd insist I face the court, but I was putting that off as long as I could.

There was another knock on the door, sharper this time. More insistent. Maybe it was Fina or Adora, but I wasn't quite ready to face them, either. I gazed out the window, as if I ignored the knocking enough, it'd stop all together.

That was not the case. Another series of sharp, demanding knocks. I heaved a sigh and finally stood up. Whoever was at my door wasn't giving up. I pulled on my robe and cinched it tight around my waist, then turned toward the door.

Before I could take a step, it swung open.

The king stood at the other side of the threshold, and he looked *terrible*. He had dark circles under his eyes, like he hadn't slept at all in the past two days. His tan complexion was pallid, his eyes bloodshot. He'd pulled his cloak on, but it was haphazard, unfastened and hanging loose over his broad shoulders.

“Why didn't you answer the door?” the king said. “Are you unwell?”

I took a step back. I'd never seen the king look so unwell himself. He was typically so regal and unflappable, it was jarring to see him otherwise. And shouldn't he be happy? He'd won the challenge, after all. I pulled my robe tighter around my shoulders.

“Answer me, Reyna.” The king stepped into my room and closed the door behind him.

The lack of honorific shocked me out of my head. No longer was I Lady Reyna—I was just Reyna. “I’m not receiving guests right now.”

He laughed, low and surprised. “Receiving guests? You’ve taken to your new role quite well.”

“I’m not the queen,” I shot back.

“Not yet.”

I knew that, but hearing him say it made it worse. Realer. I swallowed. “Of course I’m unwell,” I said. “You killed my friend in front of me.”

His nostrils flared, and he stepped closer, until he was nearly looming over me. I stood my ground. “Friend?” he asked. “You call that boy your friend?”

I said nothing.

“He wasn’t here to save you,” the king said. “He didn’t care about you. He wanted the throne. You were just the excuse. He wanted to tear down everything I’ve worked so hard to build—and he wanted you as the prize.”

He wasn’t saying anything I didn’t know already. I didn’t need him to tell me what Griffin had done. I knew more about that than he realized. I was too exhausted to argue with him, and I’d learned there was no point in doing so, either. He didn’t listen to me. He just made decisions and dragged me along for the ride, just like every other man in my life.

I turned toward the window instead. Outside, on the other side of the city walls, the wolves of Efra were going about their daily business. Airing out laundry, haggling at food stalls, laughing outside of pubs. Their lives had no mention of treason, of royalty, of prophecy. That was the life I’d thought I would have—a simple life. A commoner’s life.

“I’m sorry,” the king said suddenly.

I started, then whipped around to look at him. “What did you just say?”

The king smiled sadly at me. “I shouldn’t frame it that way,” he said. “Even if it’s true. I know it hurts to lose a wolf

of your former pack, regardless of the context. But I couldn't stand that he dared to use you as an excuse to seek power. He didn't care about you."

"Don't tell me why he did what he did," I snapped. "I don't need you to explain it."

To my surprise, the king shut his mouth.

"We had many years together," I said. "That doesn't just go away, despite what he did. He showed me—" I paused and closed my eyes hard, willing away the prickle of tears behind my eyes and the tightening in my throat. I took a few deep breaths and it passed. "He showed me I was more than just my role in the court. More than just a lady. And even if it wasn't real, it was real to me. I believed we had a future together. That's what I'm grieving—the future I thought I had. My freedom."

The king said nothing. After a long silence, I glanced back behind me, half-expecting to see him absent from the room. But he was still standing there, watching me, a soft sadness in his tired eyes.

"I didn't mean to belittle your feelings," he said. "But I still couldn't let him take *our* future away."

Again, he was right. We did have a future together, whether I wanted it or not. I could only hope that the king would let me have a hand in crafting it. I sighed and turned away from the window, tracing my hand around the edge of the small table instead.

"I don't know if I can love you the way you expect," I admitted.

"I'm not sure if you know what I expect," the king murmured.

"I thought I was fully committed to Griffin," I continued. All the frustration and grief of the past few days bubbled inside me, spilling over like bile. "I trusted him—I loved him. What happened between you and me, it—it surprised me. I don't know what it means. And now everything I thought I did

know turned out to be a lie. If what Griffin said is true, I'm not even a daughter of Daybreak."

"What do you mean?" the king asked, his expression sharpening. "When did he say that?"

"Before the challenge," I said. And he'd said it with so much certainty, like I was the only one who *didn't* know. But he was speaking nonsense, wasn't he? Or maybe what I thought was nonsense was the only real truth he'd ever told me. Everything in my mind was so turned around.

"Griffin was in the dungeons the entire time," the king said. His voice wasn't accusatory, more interested and curious. "When exactly did you speak to him? The guards never informed me that you paid him a visit."

I blanched. Right—well. If I wasn't fleeing Efra, I had no reason to keep it to myself, and my foggy mind wasn't up to crafting a lie.

"I used the tunnel system under the manor," I said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Did you not know about it?"

The king raked one hand through his hair. "Do you have any booze in your chambers?" He cast his gaze around imploringly.

Despite it all, I bit back a small smile. "I'm not much of a drinker."

He opened the door and stuck his head out. "Go fetch me some brandy, will you?" Then he closed the door and dropped into one of the heavy armchairs by the low fire. "How exactly did *you* find out about these tunnels? The system isn't common knowledge among the court."

"Isn't it a bit early for alcohol? They're on the maps of the manor. I didn't break any rules."

"It's nearly dinnertime," he said with a sigh. "Where exactly did you find this map?"

"Why?" I asked. "So you can make up some rule I broke to punish me? History and cartography are some of the only

things I have left that bring me joy, and you would—”

“No,” he interrupted with a shake of his head, “so I can add it to my collection of shit not to leave around the manor for anyone to find.”

He sounded almost petulant. I snorted, surprised, and he raised his eyebrows as he glanced toward me.

Something unsure and strange hung fragile in the air between us. The king inhaled, about to speak, but then was interrupted by a quick knock on the door.

He stood and answered it, opening the door only enough to take the brandy and two glasses from the guard. He walked back over to the chair and waved me over.

“Why not have them bring it in?” I asked as I watched the king struggle a little to balance the two glasses in one hand.

“I don’t want anyone to see you like this,” he said.

I reared back. “Like what?” I asked. “Like a sniffling, depressed woman?”

“No,” he said. “Grief is private. I wouldn’t let my guards stomp into your quarters like that.”

Of course, the king had stomped into my private quarters without asking—but I supposed it was different when he was my fiancé. Strangely, that small bit of respect warmed me enough to let me take a seat across from him by the fire.

He poured us each a small amount of brandy. He handed me my glass, and I accepted it, then tucked my feet up under my body in the overstuffed chair. He assessed me under his gaze, and my wolf preened under the attention. No matter what the king did, she never felt threatened by him. She always wanted to be closer.

“So,” he asked, “where exactly did you find this map?”

“In the library,” I said.

He sighed. “Trouble always seems to occur when you’re there. Was this near my study?”

“Yes,” I said, “you know, where all the maps are.” Now, it was my turn to smirk. The king almost rolled his eyes.

“It looked like it hadn’t been used in a long time,” I said, “but it wasn’t hidden. Just stuck on a high shelf.”

The king rubbed his chin. “Manor blueprints shouldn’t be lying around in the library where anyone can find them. Especially if they list the tunnels.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Your Majesty,” I said. “That’s where I found it. If you wanted—”

“Please,” he cut in. “Call me Elias. I don’t want my title to divide us.”

The argument I was preparing melted on my tongue. I hadn’t called him Elias since the night we’d spent together—the night I tried not to think about, lest my body betray me with its desire.

“It’s not just your title,” I said. “It’s who you are. You *are* the king. It’s not just a role you can take on and off like your cloak. It’s like your wolf—it’s always there.” I took a tentative sip of my brandy. “And you’ve already divided us. You killed a member of my court.”

“Your former court,” the king noted.

“And,” I said, “you didn’t tell me that this Choice was about fulfilling the prophecy.”

“If that were true, you would not be sitting here with me right now,” the king said. “The council chose Adora.”

I nearly dropped my glass. “What? What do you mean? Then why is she not queen?”

“I don’t believe in the prophecy,” the king said. “Those old superstitions don’t matter to me. They matter to my mother, and to the council. But not to me. I meant what I told you, Reyna. I made my final decision for love.”

“Love,” I repeated softly. He’d said it once, and I hadn’t believed it. I still wasn’t sure if I did. But why else would he reject the council’s choice? I felt similar to how I had in the arena—like I was suddenly plunged underwater, distanced

from experience. It couldn't be real. I gripped my glass hard and gazed into the brown liquid.

"I understand you don't feel the same for me," the king continued, "but it will come in time. I'll prove myself to you, just as I've proven myself to be a good king to the citizens of Efra. I have no doubt about that."

"How would you know my feelings?" I asked. "You've never asked. This whole Choice has just been me being forced around, over and over, with no consideration for what I want. It was never meant to bring us together. The council wanted to fulfill a prophecy, and you wanted—I don't know, to defy them like a teenager. You only think of yourself."

My wolf whined internally. I'd never spoken like this to anyone—least of all the king. In my grief, I didn't care. Consequences be damned. He needed to realize the extent of what he'd done.

"Reyna, please," he said softly. "What can I do to fix this?"

"Nothing," I said. "Not now. I just—I need time. A lot has changed. I have to accept that."

"Am I that bad?" the king asked. His expression was soft and almost hurt. "Is marrying me such a nightmare?"

"I don't know," I admitted. I set my glass down and washed my face in my hands. "I don't know anything right now. I thought I knew where I fit in this world, but that's all been taken away from me. I have to figure out who I am—what I'm supposed to be. If the queendom is only about death and blood—I can't do it. There has to be more than that."

Again, I expected the king to argue with me. But when I looked up, he was just watching me with a furrow in his brow and that same curious, sad look on his face. He nodded. "I understand."

"You do?"

"You're right, in that being king is more than a title. But in the same way I am the king, I'll be your husband, too. And I

will listen to you—as your husband.” He stood up, bowed, and took his leave before I had a chance to process that.

Then I was alone in front of the low fire with only the brandy to keep me company. I stood up to place a fresh log on the dying fire, then poked it into place and watched the flames grow and crackle. Then I took a seat by the fire, this time in the seat he’d vacated. It still smelled like him—like sweat and leather. I leaned heavily against the back of the chair and sighed as his scent comforted my wolf.

“So glad to see you feeling a little better this morning,” Amity said as she fastened tied the laces on the back of my gown. “Dinner tonight will be lovely. And I’m sure you’re excited to see your father.”

My stomach turned. “Yes, of course I am.”

The last thing I wanted was to see my father—not with the new knowledge that he had worked with Griffin on this plot to take the throne from Nightfall. But if I acted strangely, he’d know something had happened. I needed him to see me only as his obedient daughter, at least until I had a better idea of what his new plan was. Griffin’s challenged had failed, but surely the duke had a backup plan. I just had to figure out what it was. I certainly couldn’t indicate I knew about Griffin’s scheme, or the prophecy and my role in it.

“And I’m sure he’ll be delighted to see you, as well,” Rue said. “Especially dressed in such fine Daybreak colors.”

I nodded. The gown was beautiful, eggshell white and pale blue with golden stars stitched along the wide neckline. My hair was loose over my shoulders. In the mirror, I looked just the same as the woman who had left Daybreak for this Choice, save for the new determination in my blue eyes.

It was just dinner. Once I knew what the duke had up his sleeve, I’d feel better. At least, I clung to that hope to carry me through this dinner.

Amity and Rue shifted, then escorted me out of the hall and down the stairs to the front room of the manor. There, the

king waited for me, flanked by his own guards in their dark wolf forms. He looked so different than when I saw him yesterday evening. He was dressed neatly, in fine, dark clothes, without his cloak and with his thin golden crown gleaming under the dim lights of the front room.

As I approached, the king extended his hand. I took it gracefully as I descended the last few steps. “Lady Reyna,” he murmured. “You look beautiful this evening.”

I smiled delicately but couldn’t find any words to respond. My stomach was twisted into knots at the thought of seeing my father.

If he was really my father at all. He had barely raised me. And now I didn’t even know if we were connected by blood. If my entire life in Daybreak was built on a lie.

At his behest, I placed my hand in the crook of the king’s elbow and we walked side by side toward the ornate doors of the dining room. The guards shifted back into their leather-armored humans, then stepped ahead of us.

“Ladies and gentleman,” one called, “the King and future Queen of Frasia.”

Applause rang politely around the room. The dinner wasn’t immense, not like the balls the king had held earlier in the Choice, but the council and all high-ranking members of the court were in attendance. The court looked relieved that the king had finally chosen a queen, and the council members kept their faces carefully neutral. Did they know that I knew they had chosen Adora over me?

I was just as impassive, smiling demurely around the room. Trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. The guests were scattered about the room, sipping wine and chatting as they waited for the dinner to begin. The table was in the center of the room, wide and set with fine china, and at the head were two ornate seats. And I’d be seated at one of them.

In the corner, my father stood, deep in conversation with the duchess. My heart crawled into my throat. He looked just as regal as usual, a heavier version of his usual linen finery

with a navy cloak over his shoulders. He looked the same as he always did. The duke had never been particularly kind to me, but he'd always been fair. Could he really be the one who had led me into this trap? So indifferent to my own desires?

We made our way through the room, greeting the guests before we made our way to the seats at the head of the table. As the king was roped into a boisterous chat with Cyran, my father strode over with his wine glass in hand.

“Reyna,” he said with a warm tone I’d never heard him deploy at home. “It’s so wonderful to see you. What an honor to be the victor of the King’s Choice.” He leaned close to kiss me on the cheek, and then whispered sharply into my ear, “We must speak. Find me after dinner.”

I swallowed and reared back, but none of the guests seemed to notice, busy as they were taking their own places at the table.

The Duke of Daybreak took his place to the right of me, next to the duchess. I didn’t like how close they were seated to each other—it was making my wolf whine with displeasure. As soon as the wine was poured, my father stood up from his seat and raised his glass high.

“To the King and future Queen of Frasia,” he boomed. “I am honored to call you my daughter, Lady Reyna.”

Murmurs of agreement and scattered applause sounded around the table as the members of the court sipped their wine in recognition of the toast.

I smiled weakly as I lifted the glass to my lips but didn’t drink. I felt a sip of wine might turn my stomach and leave me too inhibited to keep my wolf under control. I’d already had her leap forward once around the court members—I didn’t want that to happen in front of my father.

The servants came out with an extravagant feast, just as I would expect with Nightfall hosting guests. Whole pigs, whole ducks, whole pheasants, crisp roasted vegetables and boats of thick gravy. The servants made our plates first, and the guests’, before the court was instructed to delve into the dishes family-

style themselves. My stomach was in knots. I ate a few bites of my meal delicately, tuning in and out of the boisterous conversation as the wine kicked in and the guests started laughing louder. It was hard to keep up—and I found I didn't really want to, either.

Near the end of dinner, the king leaned closer and set his hand on my knee under the table. He squeezed once, a comforting gesture, and my wolf calmed slightly. But only slightly.

“You all right?” he asked.

“Fine,” I murmured. “Just tired.”

That seemed to satisfy the king, and he returned his attention to the guests, leading the conversation back toward the details of moonlight runs and wild hunts. I could see the disdain in my father's eyes, even as he skillfully engaged.

As the meal came to its end, the servants swept in, taking away dinner china and replacing it with elegant dessert plates. Then, from the side door, the kitchen staff wheeled in an immense cart with a gorgeous, tiered cake on it. If it weren't for the rich dark frosting, I'd think it was a practice run for a wedding cake.

“Dessert is served,” the king boomed. “A fine spiced dark chocolate cake, from the recipes my ancestors used when sugar was a rare delicacy. I've prepared this to welcome you to our court, Duke, in celebration of my upcoming wedding.”

“Marvelous,” my father said. His smile was well-practiced, and it was only my experience in his court that let me read it as fake. “I'm most honored.”

The servants cut and served the cake with more red wine and tumblers of rich brandy. I took a small bite of mine, savoring the soft texture and delicate spices in the cake. When I looked over at my father, he was watching me eat with something akin to disgust on his face. I set my fork down.

The band in the corner began to play a bit louder than they had through dinner, something fast-moving and jaunty as was the Nightfall way. Some of the court members stood up and

moved to the dance floor, into a fast, exciting jig, their feet quickened by the good meal and the booze. I decided I'd rather watch them than try to read the minute changes on my father's face.

The women of the court moved with remarkable ease, their gowns flashing around their ankles as the men spun them. Even on the dance floor, the court members' wolves seemed to remain close to the surface, visible in quick flashes of teeth or a yellow gleam of the eye.

The king folded his hand over my knee again. He leaned closer, and his warm breath washed over my ear as he spoke. I pressed my thighs together. "I'd love to dance with you," he murmured.

"To this?" I asked. "I have yet to learn these fast-paced dances."

The king laughed, low, and squeezed my knee again. My wolf preened, comforted by his touch and warmed by the knowledge that I'd pleased him.

"Fair enough," he said. "You'll learn those moves a bit later."

He waved a hand at the band, gesturing in a circle. The jig ended, and the band launched into something slower, close to a waltz. Here was a song similar to the music of Daybreak. It sounded like home—or what used to be home.

"Is this more to your liking, my lady?" the king asked. The pleased, wolfish smile on his face made me think he knew what my answer would be.

Despite my nerves and my low mood, this *was* a better song. And the last thing I wanted was to seem unhappy, or ungrateful. After all, I'd won the Choice—I was supposed to be elated.

"It's a bit more reasonable, yes," I said.

The king stood and offered his hand. I took a breath and accepted, risking a glance toward my father where he sat. He was watching us with his expression carefully neutral, but a small smile curling his lips that looked almost pleased.

What did the duke want from me? I knew he had a plan—something was on his mind. I couldn't get my answers now, though. I had to play my role. At least my wolf had no trouble with that.

The king walked me to the center of the dance floor, where the other dancers parted easily for us to take our place. The music swept around me, slow and pleasant. The king placed his hand at the small of my back; his hand was so big it nearly spanned the width. He guided my hand to his shoulder, and instinctively I set my hand at his nape. The king's eyes flashed gold at the touch, and he hitched me a little closer as he took my hand in his to lead the dance.

Being this close, my worries began to melt away. I felt the switch as if it was happening to someone else. I knew the knots in my stomach shouldn't be loosening, and my attention shouldn't be drifting from my father—but I couldn't help it. It was like the king's touch made my body relax, which in turn eased my mind. It was so easy to let myself be led by him in a slow, comfortable waltz. Desire rolled subtly inside me, in the cradle of my hips. The memory of that night in his room lived in my body, and the closeness ignited a spark.

“So,” the king said with an easy smile. Could he sense the way I was relaxing? It seemed like he could.

“So,” I echoed.

“Enjoying this dinner?” he asked. “Your father hasn't mentioned anything about the behaviors of his court member.”

“He has not,” I said.

“Interesting,” the king said. “Does he know?”

“I don't know,” I murmured.

“Griffin didn't mention it in the dungeons?” he asked.

“Must you bring that up now? Do you want your guests to see your fiancée break down?”

He pressed his lips together hard. “You're right,” he said. “I'm sorry.”

The apology surprised me enough that my further arguments died on my tongue. “Thank you. If he’d mentioned it, I would’ve remembered.”

“Right,” the king said. He squeezed my hand once. “You know, I’m not used to these little verbal sparring sessions we seem to have.”

Despite my irritation, I chuckled, smiling half-heartedly down at our feet as we waltzed. “The women of Nightfall don’t offer such conversation?”

“Not to their king—certainly not.” His eyes flashed gold again. “It’s one of many things that drew me to you.”

My wolf positively preened, rolling around in the compliment like she might a dust bath on a hot Daybreak day. “Someone has to do something about that ego,” I said.

That made the king laugh, tossing his head back and even garnering a few looks from the other couples on the dance floor. We danced through another song, and the simplicity, the closeness, was almost addictive. A balm after so much turmoil. And yet, even the balm was a fantasy. I was still a pawn in someone’s game, pulled between what the king wanted, what my father wanted, and whatever this prophecy meant.

As the night wound down, the king led me away from the dance floor. Many of the guests had already left, and the remaining guests were wrapped up in each other dancing to the slow, delicate music, or lounging on the couches with brandy glasses slipping from their fingers and drunken blushes high on their cheeks. The king murmured his good nights in passing as he walked me toward the doors of the dining room with his arm around my waist.

“Pardon me, Your Majesty,” my father said. He stepped in front of him quickly enough that we both had to stop abruptly. My father bowed slightly, then extended his hand. “If you’d be so kind, I’ll escort my daughter to her chambers.”

“Certainly,” the king said, so low it was nearly a growl. He tightened his hold on my waist briefly before he stepped away.

The anger radiating off him was nearly palpable in the air but my father didn't seem to notice. He just smiled at me, hand still hovering out expectantly.

I nodded and took it delicately. I didn't even want to feel his clammy palm, least of all spend time alone with him. But the king had given his permission, and it wasn't like I had a choice in the matter. That was how this had worked so far and would continue to work. I was just a tool, handed off to where I was needed. The king couldn't let my father know he had any suspicions, not yet.

"Good evening, Your Majesty," I said.

The king nodded in acknowledgment. His expression was stern yet neutral, as if it was taking most of his self-control not to lash out at my father. He wasn't exactly the restrained type.

My father took my wrist with a bit more force than necessary and led me out the door. We walked in tense silence until we reached the corridor outside my quarters. Only then did my father drop his tight hold on me. I drew my hand to my chest, rubbing the red imprint of his grip.

He cast his eyes around for any signs of curious eyes and ears. Finding none, he paced restlessly back and forth across the width of the hall. He pushed one hand through his graying hair. I'd seen him like this before, wrestling with his circling, angry thoughts before he could articulate them to whatever court member had failed him this time. I pressed my back against the cool stone of the hallway as if it would shield me from the onslaught.

"Griffin was an idiot," he hissed, sharp with anger but quiet enough that we wouldn't be overheard. "I gave him *one* task, and he failed me."

Nausea ripped through me, hot and dizzying, and bile burned in the back of my throat. So my father *was* behind this all along. It was his scheme—his idea. I pulled my arms closer to my body like I could curl up and hide. I felt like a pup again, helpless and vulnerable under his seething rage.

“But that’s finished,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “I never should’ve considered that moron an option at all. Not when I had the smarter of you two already here in Efra.” He grinned, wolfish, and his eyes gleamed clay-red—I’d never seen his wolf so close to the surface before. I shivered, cold fear tightening around my heart. “I know you won’t fail me the way Griffin did, my dear Reyna.”

“What do you mean?” I asked quietly. “What do you want from me?”

“Daybreak will rule Frasia again,” my father growled. “That man—that *false king*—only sits on the throne because of the violence of his father. If he thinks he can succeed with this farce, he is more of a fool than I ever imagined. When you marry, you will be heir to the throne.”

“And I will be a wolf of Nightfall,” I said. My voice only shook minutely.

“That doesn’t matter,” my father said. From his belt, he pulled a small knife, sheathed in leather, and handed it to me hilt-first. “Take this. You will return the throne to Daybreak. This knife will kill any wolf in one strike, the closer to the heart the better.”

“What?” I asked. I didn’t touch the hilt. “Is this—is this the same poison as the knife Barion give me?”

“Of course,” my father said. “Specially formulated by the Daybreak apothecary.”

“Why would he do that?” I asked. “Why would he give me a poisoned knife?”

“Because he is loyal,” my father said, looking at me like I was stupid. “He is loyal to me, and knows I will take my place as the rightful King of Frasia.”

I was stunned to silence. Even Barion knew about this plot? Barion, who was more like a father to me than the man in front of me was? My heart shattered into impossibly smaller pieces. I hadn’t even considered that Barion might be in on this but it made sense. He was only here as my escort on my

father's orders. I was just a pawn to him, just as I was to everyone else in Daybreak.

I knocked the knife out of his hand, and it went clattering across the hall. "I won't do it," I snarled. My wolf raised her hackles, ready to leap forward and bare her teeth. "I won't rule by violence and assassination."

"You don't have a choice," my father said. "Either you return the throne to Daybreak, or you become the Bloody Queen. Either way, you have blood on your hands."

"Griffin has already put a blemish on our house!" I straightened up and squared my shoulders, staring my father down. My rage and betrayal burned hot enough to melt my fear. "I will do as I choose, not act as a pawn on your chessboard!"

"I should've known you were a coward," he said, baring his teeth. "A true Daybreak wolf would never behave like this."

Suddenly fear doused the anger just as quickly as it'd risen up. "What? I *am* a Lady of Daybreak."

"You are no daughter of mine." My father's eyes flashed clay-red. So unlike my own silver. His teeth elongated, just slightly—I'd never seen his wolf so close to bursting forth. My own wolf snapped her teeth internally, begging to charge forth before his did. "You are not of my bloodline. You are the bastard child your mother carried when she was sent to Daybreak to be my wife. I only raised you after her death because I would not let her indiscretions risk my rule. The augurs all said there would be a Choice, so I raised you in hopes that you would be the key to returning the throne to Daybreak. But I should've known no training could beat the Starcrest out of you. You were always going to be a traitor. It's in your blood."

I stared, stunned to silence.

He picked up the dagger from where I'd tossed it. For a brief, horrible moment, I thought he would unsheathe it and

drive it into my own heart—my frozen, broken, demolished heart.

This was my father. The man who had raised me, however distantly. He'd never loved me. Not even a little. I was nothing more than a soldier. A resource.

Instead, he shoved it into my hands. He needed me. "I expect you to do as I've instructed," he hissed. "Or else things will not turn out well for you."

I swallowed. "Goodnight, father." I stepped backward toward my quarters, still half-expecting him to attack me. I opened the door and slipped inside, hurriedly closing it and turning the lock.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the door. My adrenaline was still high, my heart pounding and blood rushing in my ears.

Here I was, alone in my room. Even more alone than I'd felt when I'd first come to Efra. How long had this rage been bubbling in my father's heart? How many times had he wished he could tell all of this to me? Me, his pathetic daughter that had tried so hard to please him? All he'd ever cared about was using me. Keeping me under his control.

Was there anyone in Efra who was on my side?

I hardly had any time to process what my father had said. Everything Griffin had said was true—I wasn't a daughter of Daybreak at all. What that meant for my future, I didn't know. I barely had time to feel my own heartbreak before I was awakened again, cleaned up, dressed, rushed into wedding planning meetings, meals, and then back to my room for a fitting. I hardly had time to breathe, let alone discuss what had happened with Fina or Adora.

I was paying for the two days I'd spent immobilized by grief. Now, I was floundering in the rushing surf, trying to keep my head above water. I couldn't think about my father, or Griffin, or anything that had happened over the past few tumultuous days. I had to survive this wedding, get my father out of Efra, and then—maybe—I could let myself feel.

“Oh, gods,” I murmured as Amity walked in with a dress box nearly as big as she was. “What's this?”

“It's from Camille's,” Amity said. “Tatina sent it. She designed it herself.”

Carefully, Amity and Rue pulled the dress from the box and unfurled it. It was a gorgeous gown in purple so dark it looked black, except for when the light hit it from a certain angle. Diamonds gleamed in the full skirt, threaded into it like errant snowflakes, and the bodice was tight and high-necked, though the back plunged down under my shoulder blades. It was elegant: a little sultry but not too exposing.

“And look,” Rue said. She tucked her hand into the skirt, wiggling her fingers in the opening. “Pockets.”

In the box, a note rested at the bottom of the box, where it had been hidden by the silk. I picked it up. *A gift for the future Queen of Frasia*, it read in fine cursive script. *May this be the start of the rest of your life.* Tatina herself had signed it, alongside Camille’s seal.

Behind my dressing screen, the girls helped me into the gown. Then they braided my hair into a fine plait, wrapped around my head like a crown, and set my tiara into it. It exposed the pale expanse of my shoulders, a striking contrast to the rich dark color of the fabric. It was elegant. Fit for a queen.

“Where are those rings?” Amity asked. “The moonstone ones?”

“Oh, I saw them in the bathroom,” Rue said.

As the girls hunted down the jewelry that would be the finishing touches to my outfit, I pulled my small knife from my trunk and slid it into my pocket. There was even a hole at the bottom of the pocket that the sheathed blade slipped perfectly through, as if it was made with self-protection in mind. I wondered again about Tatina—if she knew more about this situation than she let on.

I left the poisoned knife where I’d stashed it among my things. I would defend myself if necessary, but there was no way I was going to try to assassinate the king. I would never knowingly kill another wolf—what had happened with Rona was my father’s fault, too. Besides, I would no longer be his pawn. If I murdered the king, I would be just as bad as he was.

“Remind me what this ball is for?” I asked the girls. I rubbed my temples, careful not to smudge my makeup. “I’ve been doing so much planning, I can’t seem to keep it all straight.”

Amity laughed. “The dinner last night was to welcome your father,” she said, “with only the high-ranking members of the court. This ball is to introduce you as the future Queen of

Frasia—the official announcement of the King’s Choice. There the court members and other important high-ranking wolves of Nightfall will officially meet you and make their greetings.”

“Wonderful,” I said. My head already hurt. This was going to be a long night.

Both of them escorted me down to the main hall. But instead of leading me in through the front doors, as I had entered before, Amity shifted back into her human form and led me into a small side door. Then, we went down a narrow hallway and into what appeared to be a staging area. The side of the dais was visible, and the king was already seated on his throne on the dais. He lounged there like a pleased jungle cat, regal in his heavy cloak and fine black silk clothes. His crown gleamed in the dim light.

I swallowed, bracing myself.

Lady Glennis appeared seemingly out of nowhere, giving me a brisk once-over and then a nod of approval. Before I could say anything, she stepped out of the staging area and into the hall. She stood on the dais, commanding the room without saying a word. The chatter of the guests fell silent.

“Wolves of Nightfall,” she said, “I present to you, the future Queen of Frasia.”

I stepped out onto the dais.

The room was full of court members and high-ranking citizens of all ages, all dressed in their finest clothes of black and rich purple. The room broke into applause as I stepped out. My gaze swept over the room as I kept a neutral smile on my face. *Play the role.*

The only two not in the colors of Nightfall were Fina and Adora, dressed in their respective court decor like two beautiful stars in a dark sky. My heart soared. More than anything I wanted to talk to them and explain everything that happened. We hadn’t had a moment of privacy. Surely speaking to them would help clear some of the chaos in my mind.

The king stood from his throne and stepped down. He smiled at me, his brown eyes warm and open—closer to the man I'd seen privately in my quarters than the fierce king I'd been beside at similar events. I took his hand when it was offered and let him walk me up the few steps to the dais. We took our respective seats on the thrones. The king took my hand and pressed a kiss to my knuckles. It was theater, for the audience of court members watching us, but his eyes flashed gold when he looked at me, anyway.

It felt good. Just being beside him seemed to lift some of the weight off my shoulders. Even though his Choice was the reason all this had happened in the first place.

He released my hand and I folded both neatly into my lap, then I turned my attention back out to the crowd. The band began to play a jaunty song but no dancing began. Instead, Lord Nylander approached the dais.

“Lady Reyna,” he said, “I am honored to have been a part of this Choice. You have performed honorably and earned your seat by the king’s side.”

“Thank you,” I said.

Lord Nylander swept into a bow. From his pinched expression, I could tell it had taken a lot of effort for him to say that—especially since I knew the council had chosen Adora.

After him, Lady Marin stepped up and offered similar sentiments. I thanked her as well.

And then Lord Elfriede and Lady Oleta. And Lady Glennis. And Cyran. And Roth.

Then other court members, ones I didn't know, began to step forward and introduce themselves. They offered congratulations, and small tokens: elegant jewelry, ornately embroidered handkerchiefs, fine chocolates.

Quickly, it all began to run together. The words “thank you, I'm honored, you're so kind,” quickly lost any meaning in my mind. By the time I had finished all the requisite greetings, I was exhausted and desperately in need of a glass

of wine. My father had not moved from his own seat at a table across the room. He was fixated more on the brandy in front of him as he made idle conversation with some of the other guests. He did not look happy to be in the room at all—our last talk hung over me like a thundercloud.

“I need some fresh air,” I said to the king. “I’ll be just a moment.”

He tilted his head. “Of course.” I’d half-expected him to stop me, but he only pulled his cloak off his shoulders and wound it around mine instead. It was bigger than my cloaks, heavier, and the fur lining seemed to carry his familiar scent just like his wolf’s pelt did.

I wasn’t sure if that was theater or care, but I was grateful for the warmth, and my wolf settled at his closeness. I stood up and hurried down the steps to the dais. Across the room, I caught Fina’s eye and nodded subtly toward the balcony. Fina beamed, then took Adora’s wrist. Adora was mid-conversation with one of the guests, who looked mildly irritated by the interruption. Adora’s expression did not brighten as Fina’s had, but she glanced toward me and nodded.

I stepped onto the balcony and pulled the king’s cloak tighter around my shoulders against the biting air. It was a beautiful, freezing cold night, and my breath emerged in clouds of steam. I was getting used to the temperatures though. I found it almost refreshing now. Did that come with the knowledge that I had never belonged to Daybreak at all? Did the new realization that I was by blood a wolf of Starcrest make it easier to bear the cold?

Fina and Adora stepped out onto the balcony and pulled the door shut behind them. Both were bundled in their heavy cloaks as well, and Fina’s looked like it was pulled directly from Adora’s own wardrobe. She immediately rushed forward and pulled me into a hard hug.

“Oh, Reyna,” Fina said. “Are you well? I’m so sorry about the challenge. It must’ve been awful to watch.”

Grief twinged in my chest like I’d been struck, but it wasn’t as overwhelming as it was a few days ago. I nodded.

“Thank you,” I said. “Griffin was—I’ve learned some things about him since then. Things are complicated.”

Adora folded her arms over her chest. Her blue eyes shone as she watched me and Fina, like she was unsure of how to proceed.

“You two are my most cherished friends,” I said. “I don’t want to lose you. Adora, you know this isn’t—this isn’t what I wanted. What either of us wanted. I know you’d make a more deserving queen than me.”

Her frown only deepened. “That doesn’t exactly make me feel better.”

“It’s not like we had a say in it,” Fina said. “Our fates were always in the king’s hands.”

“It’s just not fair,” Adora said. She sighed, like she realized how petulant it sounded even as she was saying it. “I was so *sure*. Everyone in Starcrest knew there would eventually be a Choice, and I was primed to compete in it since I was a little girl. This was supposed to be my future. I failed my pack.”

“You didn’t fail,” I said. I stepped closer to her. I didn’t know if telling her the truth would make it better or worse, but I didn’t want any lies between us. “The council chose you, Adora. You proved yourself over and over. The king overrode them for me.”

She exhaled a small laugh, then gazed up toward the moon like she couldn’t believe it. “They did, huh?”

I nodded. “They really did. I know they want to maintain a good relationship with Starcrest. I’d love for you—and you too, Fina—to stay in Efra as members of the court. I’ll need all the advisement I can get if I am to be queen. I don’t know what I’m doing in the slightest.”

Fina clapped her hands together. “Yes!” she said immediately. “I’d love to. My brother is heir to the Duskmoon Court. I’d much rather stay in Efra and build a legacy of my own. Perhaps bag a viscount while I’m at it.”

That made Adora laugh again, and she nodded in agreement. “Better stay and remain on the court than return

and marry a boring wolf of Starcrest.”

Having members of other packs on my court would be good for my reputation, as well. If the king wanted to establish better relations to lead Frasia, this was one way to begin. Some of my anxiety released, knowing that Fina and Adora would stay. Being queen wasn't going to be easy, but having their guidance and support would make it just a little bit easier.

“Listen,” I said. “There's something else I need to tell you.”

In the freezing cold air on the balcony, I did my best to explain what had happened. Griffin's betrayal, my father's role in their attempted coup, and the prophecy.

“I don't understand.” Adora furrowed her brow. “How could you be a daughter of Starcrest? You've spent your life in Daybreak.”

“I know,” I said. “My father—the duke—is not my real father. He told me himself. My mother was pregnant when she traveled from Starcrest to Daybreak to marry him. He raised me as his daughter in the same way you were raised, Adora. To eventually be a player in the Choice. I just hadn't known it.”

“It makes sense,” Fina said. “You two look so much alike. And you don't look anything like your father, Reyna. I'd assumed it was just that your mother's genes were stronger.”

Adora and I glanced at each other. We *did* look a lot alike—which was a fact I tried not to consider too much.

“I'll contact my court,” Adora said. “I'm sure our augurs have information about this prophecy. And perhaps there's even information about your mother.”

The implication hung in the air. If there was information about my mother, there may be information about my real father, too. “Thank you,” I said. “Really. This—this wasn't how I expected this Choice to turn out.”

“Me neither,” Adora said with a sigh. “But it seems a lot of this is out of our hands, doesn't it?”

“More than I ever imagined.”

“We should get back,” Fina said. “You’re the future queen, Reyna, your guests will be looking for you.”

As much as I wanted to stay out in the cold catching up with my friends, I knew Fina was right.

We slipped back into the party. My father’s gaze found me as soon as I re-entered the hall. I whispered a thank you to the girls and hurried away from them as quickly as possible, moving through the crowd as graciously as I could. I didn’t want the duke to see me with them. If he saw my friends, I had a feeling he’d try to use those friendships against me.

The king was still seated on his throne, in conversation with Cyran, seated in the low chair next to him. I returned to my seat at his side. As I started to return his cloak, he held up his hand.

“Keep it,” he said. “It looks lovely on you.”

I pressed my lips together. But with all the guests watching us, I couldn’t find a reason to push back. So I simply nodded and took my seat. A servant swept in with wine and I shook my head. If I were to have a drink in this ball, I’d want to see the bottle it was poured from.

The king paused in his conversation with Cyran and leaned toward me. “Do you need anything, Reyna?” he asked. “You’re well?”

I nodded. “Yes. Just tired.” Tired of playing this role. Tired of tamping down my grief. Tired of smiling for all these strangers. “There’s been so much wedding planning, it’s hard to keep up.”

The king searched my face but I kept up a carefully impassive expression. My wolf whined internally, longing to open up to him and seek comfort. But the king couldn’t bring me the kind of comfort I needed. All I could do was smile, and hope this night ended quickly.

“Welcome, welcome!” Micah said brightly as he waved me, Fina, and Adora into Camille’s. His shoulder barely reached my waist. I hadn’t seen the dressmaker’s assistant since our first day in this shop, but he still greeted us like old friends. “Camille and Aerika are both thrilled to have this opportunity. We all are. Please, come this way.”

Even though Micah was small in stature, he bubbled with energy and moved with quickness. I couldn’t help but wonder—did he have Fae lineage? I knew the Fae worked here, though I hadn’t seen them in person. I itched with the desire to ask him, though I knew that wouldn’t be polite at all. Even if he wasn’t Fae, he had to know more than I did.

I was dying to ask what had happened to the Fae in Efra, what neighborhoods they had lived in, and what had happened to their homes—but I couldn’t ask those kinds of questions while I was preparing for the wedding. It wouldn’t reflect well on me, and it might be offensive to them. What if it was a sore subject? Or what if my interest in the topic raised suspicion? Was the king attempting to bring back the Fae on purpose, or were they doing this under his nose?

My questions would have to wait. First, I had to survive this wedding. Exploring the history of the Fae would be a lot easier with the strength of the crown behind me.

We took our seats on the couch in the center of the shop, and Micah arrived with crisp champagne and delicate canapes.

As he poured the wine, Aerika stepped out of the back room. She looked as striking as ever, her silver hair matching the color of her silk jumpsuit as it glowed in the warm light of the shop. She smiled, her warm brown eyes sparkling.

“Good afternoon, ladies,” Aerika said. “We’ve been hard at work since the king first requested we make the gown for your wedding. I do hope you’ll be pleased with the result.”

“I have no doubt,” I said with a smile.

“And we received the request from your escort as well, Lady Reyna. It should be no trouble.”

“Request?” I asked. I hadn’t asked Barion to send a request. I hadn’t spoken to Barion at all since that fateful conversation with my father.

“Yes,” she said, then shot me a conspiratorial wink. I was supposed to be in on this, I assumed, so I just nodded in agreement.

Camille herself stepped out of the back room. She was wearing a similar jumpsuit to Aerika, and with her dark hair cropped to her shoulders, they looked like opposite sides of the same coin. Both striking in their beauty. Again, I wondered about the influence of the Fae. I didn’t have time to think much about it, though, because Camille was pulling a dressmaker’s mannequin behind her.

“Oh, wow,” Adora whispered.

My jaw dropped. I’d seen a lot of beautiful gowns during my time in Efra, many more than I’d seen in Daybreak. But this was beyond anything I’d ever seen or worn. Camille and Aerika had designed a masterpiece.

It was colored an elegant white, with a mermaid style skirt that would hug my legs just enough, leading to a delicate train. The bodice was fitted like a corset, detailed with white lace and moonstone across the neckline. The silk of the bodice ended just above the breasts, and the gown was made only of white lace from the sternum to the neckline, as well as the sleeves. It was so delicate I could hardly imagine wearing it at all.

“It’s gorgeous,” Fina sighed. “Wow.”

“And of course,” Camille said, “it’s quite detailed.” She turned the mannequin slightly, and the light of the shop caught the tiny moonstones embroidered into the gown. It glowed the pale blue of Starcrest under the light.

Starcrest colors. And only Starcrest. Not a mention of Daybreak at all. Aerika smiled at me, small and secretive. “Come,” she said. “Let’s ensure it fits.”

Micah set up the dressing screen around the platform at the front of the room, shielding me from the girls and the mirrors. Then, Aerika stepped behind the screen and carefully helped me step out of my simple daywear gown and into the surprisingly light wedding gown. The fabric was surprisingly soft swishing around my legs, and light, despite the crystals and gems woven into it. The ethereal feeling was almost magical. Or maybe I was imagining it—just hoping there was some kind of Fae magic woven into the fabric, crackling over my skin.

Aerika finished fastening the hook and eye closures on the back, then smoothed her strong hands over the lace on my shoulders. “There you go,” she said. “What do you think?”

Micha rolled the screen away and I turned to face the mirror.

“Oh,” I said quietly, and covered my mouth with my hand.

Seeing it on the mannequin was one thing, but seeing it on *me* was completely another. It was gorgeous, molded exactly to my body, accentuating the curve of my waist and thighs, while still allowing ease of movement. The lace was subtle and finely detailed, crisp white against my skin, and even my hair seemed to shine brighter against it.

“Oh, Reyna,” Adora said. “You look so beautiful.” She blinked hard, then cast her gaze up at the ceiling as she tried to hold back her tears.

Fina didn’t even try. She sniffled hard, a few tears leaking from her eyes even as she beamed. “You really do!” she agreed. “You look stunning! It was made for you. I mean—I

know it literally was, but it really looks incredible.” She dabbed carefully under her eyes. “I’m so happy I get to be here to see this. I’m so thrilled to be in your court. Never in a century did I imagine something like this.”

“Since you are to be members of the court,” Camille said, “Barion of Daybreak has requested that you both stand with the bride as her wedding party.”

“Oh!” Fina gasped. “Reyna, you didn’t have to!”

My heart broke anew. I knew this was Barion’s way of apologizing. He was loyal to my father—that much was obvious. He would continue to do what my father asked. But at least he, unlike my father, did care about me. In his own way, he did want me to be happy. I couldn’t even imagine a reality in which my father would give a thought to Fina and Adora, other than to find a way to manipulate them and use them against me.

“In Nightfall tradition, the family stands with the bride,” Camille said. “But Barion has suggested that you two have become close to family. And in a wedding as extravagant as one that is the culmination of the King’s Choice, we can bend a few rules.”

Aerika hurried into the back room, and then returned with two more dress mannequins. Both were a deep dove gray, sewn from heavy, decadent velvet. Adora’s had a cinched waist and a full skirt, accentuating the curves of her figure, and Fina’s had a plunging neckline and straighter skirt, highlighting her height and elegant frame.

“Oh my gods,” Adora said. “Reyna, this is so—this is so kind of you.”

My own heart swelled. I stepped off the platform, careful not to step on the hem of my gown and wrapped them both in a hug.

“There’s no one else I’d rather have beside me on my wedding day,” I said, and I meant it. “Thank you for everything.”

For the first time since Griffin had broken my heart in the dungeons, I felt like I might actually have a future. It wasn't the one I'd planned for, but there was something there for me. I'd make sure of that.

"Wonderful," Camille said. "We'll have everything ready for the ceremony tomorrow."

When we returned from the shop, I said my good evenings to Fina and Adora and made my way to my quarters alone. I dismissed Amity and Rue. Tomorrow was the big day.

My wedding day.

I needed time alone. In the quiet of my quarters, I stoked the fire until it was crackling merrily in the hearth, and then brushed my hair out. As the fire cast its light over the room, a sparkle in my trunk caught my eye.

The necklace. I'd tossed it so carelessly back into my trunk when I'd returned from the dungeons, after pulling it from my neck hard enough to break it. I pulled it from where it'd fallen in the mess of clothes, and where it sparkled like a treasure at the bottom of the ocean. I smoothed my thumb over the garish sapphire—I could admit that to myself now, it was *garish*.

When Griffin had given this to me, it was with the promise that we'd be together again. I'd come to Efra buzzing with anticipation—the excitement of adventure, of seeing more of the country. I'd thought this was to be the start of something. I'd leave the Choice with an independent life ahead of me, far from the complexities of the courts and the packs. A life of travel, where I would find myself through the freedom of exploration.

Coming to Efra *had* been the start of my life, I supposed. Just not the one I expected.

I wrapped the necklace in a handkerchief and tucked it the far corner of my trunk. I wasn't ready to get rid of it, not yet. It wasn't just a gift from Griffin, it was a relic of my previous life.

Now I was about to start a new life. I was going to marry a king who everyone had told me was a monster. I had seen him

behave monstrously. And yet I had seen a deep humanity in him, as well—both in the privacy of his quarters, and on the arena pitch, when he had given Griffin two chances to submit.

He was the monster who was a man. My father was the man who was a monster. My father was the one who had orchestrated all of this—the coup, the lies, the disregard for what I wanted. He'd never cared about me. Never loved me. All he'd wanted was the throne, and he'd used Griffin in an attempt to get it.

How could I tell who I could trust? How could I even begin to imagine the future ahead of me?

I had barely fallen asleep when I was awoken by the commotion of Amity and Rue hurrying into my room. Amity threw the curtains open, casting sunshine into the room, and Rue poured the coffee.

“Good morning, milady!” Rue said. “It’s your big day! Are you so excited?”

I pushed myself up onto one elbow and rubbed my eyes. “Uh-huh,” I agreed, squinting into the bright sun. I felt like I’d barely slept at all, trapped in my circling thoughts going round and round in my head into the deepest, darkest part of the night. I’d been trying to pinpoint moments in my youth where my father may have suggested any of the truths I’d uncovered. But there was nothing. All I’d managed to do was dig into some of my worst memories, reliving times when he’d been dismissive or casually cruel, seeing them through a new lens.

But the girls were right. It was my big day.

I had to leave the past in the past. There was nothing I could do to undo what my father had done, or to make him love me the way I’d thought he had to in some deep part of his heart. It’d serve me better to focus on the people who did care for me—my friends who would stand with me today, the handmaidens who were so eager to take care of me.

And, perhaps, the King of Frasia.

“We have a lot to do!” Amity said. “Get up, milady, have some coffee. Rue will start the bath.”

I sipped at my coffee, waking up slowly as I gazed out over the quiet landscapes of Efra and the wolves starting their days. I squinted and leaned closer to the window. Servants from the manor were moving into the tree line, carrying lights, chairs, and decorations. “Amity?” I asked. “Where is the ceremony to be held?”

“In the forest, of course,” she said. “As Nightfall weddings are.”

“In the *forest*?”

“Yes!” she said. “It’s easier for your wolves to bond while in the presence of nature. Is that not how things are done in Daybreak?”

“Not at all,” I murmured. I couldn’t imagine a Daybreak wedding held outside of the sunny chapel by the sea. It was lovely, with a big window overlooking the ocean, but the ceremonies were so buttoned-up. Never held at the mercy of the elements.

Amity corralled me into the ensuite, and the girls then guided me into the steaming water. This bath was already more extravagant than the ones I’d had previously, with the water fragrant with soaps and rich with oils. They washed my hair, then bundled me into a towel. Then, they led me out of the bath and dried me off.

Rue knelt at my feet. She toweled them dry, then carefully began applying a thick lotion, with an earthy fragrance that left a strange prickling sensation in its wake.

“What’s that?” I asked. “Feels strange.”

“It’s cold today, milady,” Rue said as she rubbed the lotion into the soles of my feet. “This will keep your feet warm during the ceremony.”

“Will I be barefoot?” I teased.

“Yes,” Rue said seriously.

I blinked. “Really?”

“Well, yes,” Rue said. “You want to be connected to the earth when you complete your union, don’t you?”

“I supposed I do,” I murmured.

Amity began to carefully towel dry my hair with gentle hands. “I apologize, milady,” she said. “There’s much about the traditions of Nightfall you aren’t familiar with, isn’t there?”

“That’s an understatement,” I admitted. “This Choice has been a bit of a whirlwind.”

“Well,” Amity said, “once we begin as your royal handmaidens, Rue and I will ensure to fill the gaps in your knowledge.”

“The king said I have to learn how to dance like a Nightfall wolf,” I said. “I don’t know if that’s possible.”

Rue laughed brightly. “It’s much easier than it seems, milady,” she said. “Most things in Nightfall are. It comes naturally.”

I could only hope she was right. Once my hair was dry, Rue styled it with her skilled hands into a half-up, half-down style, while Amity did my makeup. It was more dramatic than I was used to wearing, with a shadowed eye and mascara. She put no tint on my lips, though, forgoing color for a simple dab of moisturizer.

“You don’t want to leave any color on the king,” she said with a smile. “Though a red lip might look nice on him, too.”

When I was finished, I felt a bit ridiculous, all made-up but still wrapped in a big, comfortable robe. I padded out into the bedroom to sip at my coffee again, when a knock on the door surprised me.

“Ah,” Amity said. “Right on time.”

She opened the door. Waiting across the threshold was someone I’d never seen before—a beautiful young man with tan skin that almost glowed in the low light.

“Delivery,” he said in soft, almost musical voice. “From Camille’s.”

“Thank you,” Amity said. “Please, hang it behind the screen.”

He had to be Fae. Right? But before I could get close enough to see if I could feel any magic, the delivery boy swept into a bow and left the room.

“I’m so excited to see it,” Amity said. “I heard it was made custom, just for you.”

“It was,” I said. “It really is beautiful.”

Before Amity could close the door, Fina called, “Did we miss it?” She stuck her head in the gap in the door and the doorframe. “The final fitting?”

“No, no,” I said with a smile. “Come in.”

Fina and Adora both hurried into the room. It was mid-morning, and they’d been dolled up by their own handmaidens. Both looked gorgeous, in their lush gowns and simple makeup. Fina swept me into her arms immediately in a hard hug, and I laughed as she spun me around.

“Please don’t smudge the makeup,” Amity said. “We don’t have a lot of extra time!”

“I won’t, I won’t,” Fina said as she released me, grinning.

Adora gave me a hug as well, and an air-kiss on each cheek. She was a bit flushed, but she looked happier than she did yesterday. That was about all I could hope for, considering how things had shaken out for the both of us.

“We wanted to be a part of the big day,” she said. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not in the slightest,” I said. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

Fina and Adora perched at the foot of my bed. Amity and Rue ushered me behind the dressing screen, and carefully helped me into the gown. Somehow, it was more real than the fitting had been, with my handmaiden’s attentive fingers fastening the closures and smoothing out the lace, instead of Aerika’s.

When I stepped out from behind the screen, Fina and Adora jumped to their feet. They both stepped closer, guiding me to the full-length mirror in the room. Having my two friends at my side in their beautiful gowns made mine appear

even more striking. The light caught the gown, my hair—I almost seemed to glow. My naked feet peeked out from under the hem of the mermaid skirt, just a flash of pale flesh under the lacy hem of the dress. Strangely, it seemed to fit and look right—bare skin where I would usually expect to see a delicate heeled shoe.

I wished my mother was here. I wished I'd known her. I wished I knew if she would be happy with how all of this had turned out. If she'd wanted a wedding like this—maybe even a wedding to my *real* father, whoever he was.

There was a knock on the door. I pushed that thought away. Adora waved off Rue when she stuck her head out from behind the screen, where they were both folding my robe and towels, and hurried to answer it herself.

“Good morning, ladies,” Lady Glennis said. She was dressed in her wedding finery as well, an elegant deep purple gown with shimmering silver detailing. In her hand she carried a white box.

Lady Glennis stepped over the threshold. She smiled and sighed, pleased, when she saw me. She almost seemed relieved. Surely planning this Choice wasn't easy for her—she was probably just as glad as I was that it was all coming to a close.

“You look beautiful, Lady Reyna,” she said. “The king is truly lucky to have had a Choice with such fine contestants.” She nodded at Fina and Adora, too. “The Court of Nightfall is pleased you've chosen to stay.”

Both Fina and Adora nodded gratefully.

Lady Glennis stepped closer and opened the lid of the box. “This is for you,” she said. “The ceremonial crown. Of course you will have a simpler one made for everyday court duties.”

“Oh, Lady Glennis,” I murmured. “It's gorgeous.”

The crown was pale white-gold, inlaid with moonstone and diamond. It was so intricate, like a spiderweb—I couldn't imagine the skill necessary to spin the metal into such fine,

careful shapes. Lady Glennis lifted it from the box and placed it carefully into my hair. It was subtle and sparkling.

“It suits you,” she said. She smiled again, kinder than I’d ever seen her. “Are you ready?”

I nodded. My heart pounded in my chest. I was ready as I’d ever be.

Lady Glennis led Fina, Adora, and me out of my quarters, with Amity and Rue following behind in their wolf forms. The stone floor was smooth and polished under my bare feet. Glennis led us toward the back of the castle where the doors opened to the back gardens. A small path led to the tree line. The garden was so quiet, absent of any guests, servants, or citizens. It was empty and silent, save for the rustle of the wind through the branches, and the occasional chatter of the birds.

Lady Glennis led us into the tree line. We walked single file on a path so narrow I could hardly see what she was following. The rich, earthy scent of the woods filled my nostrils, making my wolf perk into alertness in my chest. The trees were so tall overhead, topped with green despite the cold weather, and the sun fell in golden columns through the overhead branches, dappling the earth in light. The dirt was soft under my bare feet, save for the winding, knobby roots. I held the hem of my dress up just enough to keep it from the ground, though from what I could tell, none of the Nightfall wolves would’ve been displeased to see a bit of dirt on the hem. It might even be expected.

“Where is everyone?” I whispered.

“Shh,” Glennis said.

I saw no one, but I felt them. My wolf knew there were other wolves nearby. A *lot* of wolves. I could feel them, their presence prickling over me and making the hair on my arms stand up. Where were we going? I’d run through these woods once, but the woods as a human and as a wolf were very different places.

Finally, after walking for what felt like nearly a half hour, we reached a small, unfamiliar clearing. It was not a natural clearing—it had been grown this way, with the trees planted in a half-circle around the open, mossy space dotted with mushrooms.

It was in a half-circle because it was on a small cliff, no taller than a two-story building. Even from where I stood with Glennis, Fina, and Adora behind the tree line, I knew where the sensation was coming from. The wolves were under the cliff. It felt like all of Efra was here, the same crowd that filled the stadium for the challenge, but this time they were in their animal forms. My own wolf roused with anxiety, wanting to spring forth, as if she was pulled by the presence of so many others.

A violinist in the clearing began to play a delicate tune, the strings lilting through the air as if following the birdsong overhead. Fina and Adora walked into the clearing first and took their places a few paces from the edge of the cliff, to an audience of high-ranking court members in their human forms.

Then I was standing at the tree line with just Amity and Rue in their wolf forms at my back. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do—no one had told me exactly how this was supposed to go. I couldn't see the king either, half-hidden as he was by the officiant as they both overlooked the crowd under the cliff. I glanced around, looking for some sort of instruction, when my father stepped into the tree line with a scowl on his face.

“What is this?” he hissed, sneering at my gown. He was dressed in his ceremonial finery, linen layered against the cold along with a cloak, all in the pale colors of Daybreak.

“It was designed for me,” I whispered back, briefly and thunderously frustrated. That's what he was worried about now? The color of my gown? “Take it up with the king if it bothers you.”

It clearly did, what with the way his eyes flashed clay-red. He squeezed my wrist hard enough to hurt then roughly

dragged my arm into the crook of his own. “Fine,” he said. “Try not to embarrass my court any further.”

I swallowed down my anger and steeled my expression into a pleasant neutrality. After today, I’d be rid of this man who called himself my father for good. There was no point in causing a scene over his childish behavior now.

The music changed into something even slower, more romantic, and my father led me out of the tree line and into the clearing.

The guests all turned to face me. There weren’t many guests in the glade itself, maybe two dozen, but I could feel the wolves beneath the cliff moving and peering up, their presence calling my own wolf as she reached out curiously toward them. Her interest warred with my sudden swooping panic.

What was I doing? Marrying the Bloody King of Frasia? Was this really happening?

He was supposed to be a monster. And yet now, given the choice between him and ruling alongside my father, I could only choose the king. If I couldn’t have my freedom, I could at least be free of the duke.

But how was I supposed to rule? I barely knew the intricacies of the Daybreak court. I knew nothing of the Nightfall court, of the wolves who filled the forest below the cliffs, with their strange rituals and flashing eyes. And now I was expected to rule them along with the other unfamiliar wolves across the country. Marrying the king was only part of the expectation. Panic tightened my throat as I stepped one bare foot in front of the other in small, delicate steps toward my fiancé.

Finally, the king turned away from the crowd below the cliffs. The turning away was marked with a few yips and short howls from the crowd below, which quickly faded into the anticipatory silence broken only by the delicate calls of the birds.

He looked *stunning*. He was dressed in all white, so unlike the dark clothes I'd grown used to seeing him in, with fine loose trousers and a silk shirt. Over his shoulders hung a heavy cloak, lined with fur and fastened over his chest by a delicate white-gold chain. The chain matched the crown resting across his forehead which tamed his dark hair. It wasn't the standard gold crown he'd worn at the finer events, but a white-gold crown like mine, with the metal weaving together like vines.

There was an openness to his expression too, one that I'd never seen before. I'd gotten a little better at reading his face, cataloging the quirks of his brow and twitches of his lips when something amused him, but this was different.

As he watched me, his lips slightly parted, and the king's eyes widened and sparkled with a hint of gold. There was no amusement, no hidden agenda I could detect. Just adoration. Something like awe. Something closer to the way he'd only looked at me in the privacy of his quarters.

And now, that expression was on display in front of all his guests, and all the wolves of Frasia.

What that meant, I wasn't ready to grapple with. But the panic in my chest wasn't so intense under his gaze. My wolf settled instinctively when he was close.

He extended his hand. Even as frustration radiated off my father, he dropped my arm and stepped back into his place with the guests.

I took the king's arm. He smoothed his thumb over my knuckles and smiled.

"Welcome," the priest said warmly.

Finally, I looked up at him, ready to return his smile, and almost reared back in shock. I'd been to plenty of services in Daybreak venerating the gods, but the priests there were human, just like the rest of us. This priest was a lycaon – an in-between. He wasn't fully human, nor fully wolf, but hovering in the place between them. His eyes glowed yellow, his teeth were elongated, and his fists were big and knobby

with sharp claws at the end. His hair was closer to the texture of fur, extending down his cheeks, and it grew across his shoulders like a ruff.

I'd heard stories of lycans like these, from the storybooks in Daybreak, but I'd never thought they still existed. Lycans were supposed to be out of control, not fitting in life as either wolf or human, and eventually torn apart internally by the tension between their forms. But this man seemed perfectly comfortable, standing barefoot in plain brown pants and a shirt, in a place of honor at the edge of the cliff.

What else had I learned in Daybreak that was a lie?

"Your Majesty," the priest said, "my lady. We gather here today under the watchful eyes of our gods to join both of you together in matrimony as leaders of Pack Nightfall and the Kingdom of Frasia. The Choice has guided you to your queen, and now you may enter the rest of your lives together." He cast his yellow eyes around the guests. "With your court and your pack as witnesses, you will begin this journey."

My father was nearly vibrating with anger as he watched, though if any other wolves noticed it, they made no comment. Fina was already crying as she watched, dabbing under her eyes delicately from where she stood. Even the duchess, stern in her rich purple gown, seemed minutely pleased to see the culmination of the Choice.

Lady Marin stepped forward to the priest's side. In her hands she held a plain wooden box. The priest opened it and carefully took out a heavy piece of thick, plain rope. "Face each other," he said.

We did as instructed, and the king took both of my hands in his. The priest's long, bony fingers moved with surprising dexterity as he wound the rough length of rope around the king's wrists, then our joined hands, then my wrists. Tying us together. The rope was surprisingly heavy. Was I imagining the faint crackle of magic emanating from it, or was that the priest's in-between status? The king caught my gaze. I held it steadily, my wolf pleased under the attention, and my heart galloping in my chest.

The priest laid his palm over our joined, tied hands.

“This rope has bound the wrists of every Nightfall mate pairing for generations,” the priest said. “Now, it binds you, Lord Elias of Nightfall, and you, Lady Reyna of Daybreak. The rope represents your contract to each other. Lord Elias, do you swear to love and support your queen as you lead with the heart of a wolf?”

“I do,” the king rumbled. His eyes flashed gold.

Pleasure raced through me.

“And you, Lady Reyna, do you swear to love and support your king as you lead with the heart of a wolf?”

The vows were the same. Equal. Strange—so unlike a Daybreak wedding. I kept my gaze on the king’s, and I felt my wolf flash in my eyes as I said, “I do.”

“Will you remember this vow as you walk your path together and lead both this pack and this nation?” the priest asked.

“We will,” we said in unison.

The priest smiled, showing a flash of his sharp teeth. “Face your pack, then,” he said.

The priest stepped to the side. The king smiled, and I couldn’t help but return it, even as disbelief and pleasure danced through my veins in equal measure. I’d said the vows. He’d said them, too. The thing I’d feared most had happened—and yet it was as if a great weight had been lifted. Surely this feeling wouldn’t last. Just a mix of the brisk morning air, the cool earth under my toes, and the king’s warm hands in mine. But for the moment, it felt right.

Then the king turned and faced the edge of the cliff. I did the same.

“Wolves of Nightfall and Efra,” the priest boomed, his voice echoing over the crowd below, “I present the King and Queen of Frasia!”

Below the cliff, the wolves began to bark and shift, bouncing with excitement. Then, one wolf began to howl. The

howl rippled through the wolves below, one wolf tilting its head back, then another, another, until all the wolves below were singing in one long, low note of celebration. The sound ripped over my skin, electric. My wolf bounded in my chest, thrilled by the musical sound of it, longing to burst forth and join the howl.

Then the king used our joined hands to pull me close to him. With the howl filling the air around us, driving all from my mind, he leaned in and sealed our marriage with a kiss.

A kiss unlike any we'd had before. Warm and gentle and passionate, like a promise, with all these wolves here to witness it. He pulled back and tipped his forehead against mine.

"I love you, Reyna," he murmured.

Despite the audience, those words were only for me. I didn't say them back—I couldn't—but still something glowed in my chest.

From the ceremony, we went directly into the main hall, with the party led by Lady Glennis, the council members, and our servants. The manor was bustling with activity. The front doors were flung open, and the foyer had been converted into a dining hall of its own, where the citizens of Efra spilled in. The party was half in the foyer and half outside of it, and servants swept around the crowd with food and drinks as the wolves dove into the meal. It was a boisterous affair, with loud laughter and music and some guests already well on their way to drunkenness despite the early afternoon hour. The king smiled when he saw it, gazing at his subjects like a proud father. There were hoots and shouts of support, applause, a few howls from those still in their wolf shapes.

Then we made our way into the main hall, where the court celebrated away from the common people of Efra.

"Oh, gods above," I murmured in awe.

"Do you like it?" the king asked.

I hooked my arm into his, then gazed wide-eyed at the decorated hall. "How is this possible?"

The room glowed in the elegant candlelight. Small tables lined the walls, covered in white tablecloths, and the band played near the dais. The windows were open, curtains pulled aside, and there was a wide space available on the floor for dancing. But the strangest thing was the snow that appeared to fall from the vaulted ceiling. Fat flakes of gorgeous snow, drifting down and disappearing where they landed. It was so magical, so ethereal.

“Just something special for our wedding day,” the king said, obviously pleased by my reaction.

The guests in the main hall applauded as we walked in, cheers and hoots filling the room. The king laughed, loud and booming, and waved at the guests with his free hand as he hitched me a little closer. I hid my smile behind my hand. It was a strange feeling, being here like this, the center of attention—it almost didn’t feel real. Like I was playing a role, which I supposed was true. Finally, I felt like I was free from the judgmental, assessing eyes of the council and the court. The Choice hadn’t ended the way I’d wanted—but at least it’d ended. Small favors.

The band began to play, and the king led me toward the floor. “I still don’t know the Nightfall dances,” I whispered.

“Don’t worry about that,” the king said. “The ceremony was for the rituals of Nightfall. The rest of the day is about us.”

He squeezed my hand and then pulled me close, in the center of the dance floor. The other guests watched us as they circled around with warm smiles on their faces and champagne in their hands. The king held me close with hand at my lower back, holding me nearly flush against his body as we danced to the slow, romantic song. Our first dance. We were *married*.

I closed my eyes and let him guide me through the waltz.

The rest of the day was about us.

The day, and the night.

I’d be moving quarters. Somehow, in all my anxiety about the ceremony itself, I’d forgotten about a key part of a

marriage.

Consummating it.

His hand burned like a brand on my lower back. When he touched me, my wolf leaned into it, wanting more, more, more, and my own body betrayed me with desire. I was drawn to him like a moth to a flame, leaning closer and closer until I was burned. I'd let myself get too caught up in my desire once, but that was before Griffin had shown up at the gates of Efra.

We were married—but we weren't in love. No matter what the king said. He couldn't expect me to give myself to him, not tonight, not when the loss of the man I'd *thought* I'd marry was still so fresh.

But somehow dancing with him under the glittering snowflakes still made my heart beat a little faster.

The song ended, picking up into something a little faster. The king smiled, then took my hand and led me off the dance floor as other couples filled it, eager to dance to the high-energy music the band began to play.

“Eventually I'll teach you the jigs,” he said with a smile. “Just in case. They're not my favorite, either.”

“Seems like they might be a bit dangerous after a few drinks,” I said. On the dance floor, a young court member picked up his partner by the waist and lifted her so high she squealed with delight.

“That's part of the fun,” the king said. “Come, let's take a rest.”

He led me to the dais, and we took our seats on the thrones. Servants swept in immediately and offered us fine hors d'oeuvres and thin slices of cake—cut from the immense cake under the window, which I hadn't even noticed until now. We each got a glass of champagne, and then the congratulations started. Guest after guest appeared to offer greetings, gifts, teary smiles, long-winded stories. The king thanked everyone graciously. Finally, we'd spoken to most of the guests, and then the king led me back to the floor alongside the court members. I even danced with a few others, including

Cyran and Roth. My father lingered near the edges of the room, watching hawk-like, often by the duchess' side.

I was dancing with Roth and quickly losing ideas of conversations to have, when Barion tapped Roth on the shoulder. "Pardon me," he said, "mind if I cut in?"

Roth looked just as grateful as I did to be relieved of our awkward conversation. Barion swept in easily, taking my hand in his and setting his other at my waist to lead us in a slightly stiff waltz. He looked handsome in his soldier's dress uniform, in the tan colors of Daybreak with teal stitching along the collar. I pressed my lips together.

"Congratulations, Reyna," he said. "You'll be a fine queen."

I sniffed. "The duke seems to think so."

Barion sighed. He squeezed my hand gently. "You know," he said, "it's my duty as a soldier of Daybreak to remain loyal to the duke."

My heart sank. I knew that, of course, but it still made me ache to hear it. I cut my gaze to the side. The king lingered near the edge of the dance floor as he waltzed with Lady Marin. He raised his eyebrows at me but I shook my head minutely. I could handle this myself.

"I never thought otherwise," I said.

"Yet," Barion said, "I trained you well, Lady Reyna, and now that you are a wolf of Nightfall, you must make your own decisions. And I trust you will make the decision best for you."

I glanced up at him, surprised. He was watching me carefully, the corners of his lips downturned. Only then did I realize that Barion may feel just as trapped as I did—between the duty he had to my father, the wolves of Daybreak, and my safety here in Efra. He'd practically raised me, and he'd wanted me to win this Choice. Maybe he hadn't known about my father's plan until it was too late.

I couldn't ask; I'd never know for sure. But it was a relief, a balm, to know that maybe he didn't want my father's plan to

succeed, either.

“Thank you,” I said. “And thank you for suggesting Fina and Adora stand with me at my wedding.”

His concerned expression melted into his usual jovial smile. Maybe he felt the same slight relief I did. “I’m glad it was a good decision,” he said. “It’s lovely to see you with some real friends, instead of that worm Griffin.”

I laughed, suddenly surprised. “I suppose I didn’t know what I was missing.”

The song ended and Barion stepped away with a bow. “Thank you for the dance,” he said, “and good luck, Lady Reyna.”

That was his way of saying goodbye.

Outside, the sun had dipped down below the horizon, and the evening edged into night. The wine and champagne flowed, the band sweated through their clothes, and the cake was served down to the glass stand. I was still on the dance floor with the king, exhaustion beginning to nip at my heels like a pup.

A bell sounded from somewhere in the room. The king pulled me close to his side. “That’s our cue,” he said. His voice was low, rumbling from all the talking he’d done to the guests. He looked just as tired as I felt, with his crown a little askance and sweat gathered at the collar of his fine shirt.

I leaned against him, like my body was about to give up standing on its own since he was here to hold us up. “Cue?”

The crowd began to hoot and shout out their well wishes. Scattered throughout the crowd, guests held sparklers, passed out by the servants. The lights glimmered as the crowd parted, leading us to the main door.

My father stood at the edge of the crowd, watching us leave. He caught my gaze and his eyes flashed clay-red as his hand fell to the sheathed knife on his hip.

I swallowed and looked straight ahead.

I was not my father's pawn, and I was not going to kill the king. At least—not tonight.

Lady Glennis led us up the stairs, away from the crowds, where Amity and Rue were waiting for me. “The maidens will escort you to the king’s quarters shortly,” Lady Glennis said curtly.

“Thank you, Lady Glennis,” the king said, fighting back a smile. He dismissed her. Then he pulled me into his arms and kissed me hard on the mouth. “As much as I’d like to tear that dress off you,” he growled, voice low in his chest, “some things are customary. I’ll see you shortly.”

My wolf wanted that—to be claimed—while my mind reeled back at the ferocity of his desire. I was so conflicted, pulled in every direction, overwhelmed by longing and fear and exhaustion.

“R-right,” I stammered. “Yes. The girls will bring me to your room.”

He nodded, pleased, and then strode down the hall to his quarters.

Amity and Rue shifted back into their human forms. They were both grinning enormously as they hurried me back to my quarters. “Oh, gods,” Amity squealed, “he is so romantic! Was the wedding just marvelous? Wait, don’t answer that, you must be exhausted from talking to people—we’ll be quick and get you to his room so you can finally relax.” She opened the door and pushed me inside.

Relaxation would not be happening, that much I knew. Away from the crowd and the noise of the wedding, my

anxiety began to creep back up.

Amity and Rue carefully undressed me, hanging the wedding gown up behind the dressing screen. In the ensuite, they washed the dirt from my feet, but when I moved to submerge myself in the tub, Rue stopped me. “Just your feet,” she said.

“But I’ve been sweating all night,” I said. “Shouldn’t I...?”

A slight flush rose in Rue’s cheeks, but she shook her head again.

“Custom,” Amity said. “You shouldn’t wash yourself of the memory of your wedding day until it’s consummated.”

“Ah.” Again the anxiety flared in my chest. “If that’s the custom.”

The girls dressed me in a delicate white silk gown, closer to a nightgown than a real dress. I put on a white robe over it, cinched at the waist.

“I’m still a bit chilly,” I said as I padded back into my bedroom. “I’ll just wear this, too.”

I pulled one of the heavy cloaks from the armoire and pulled it over my shoulders. As the girls packed my dress away for cleaning and storage, I pulled my small blade from my trunk and slipped it into the pocket of my robe. It wasn’t the poisoned knife—I wasn’t going to use anything my father gave me, ever again. But if Barion had taught me anything, it was to always be prepared for the worst. I wouldn’t hesitate to defend myself from the king’s advances. I could only hope it wouldn’t come to that.

Amity and Rue escorted me through the halls of the manor to the king’s quarters. On the lower floors, the party still continued, the music and laughter drifting up toward me just as gently as the snowflakes had fallen.

Anticipation and anxiety warred within me. One step I was walking to the gallows, the next to my future. The knife in my pocket felt too sharp, too heavy. Part of me wished the girls had accompanied me in their human forms, just so I’d have

someone to talk to. But there was just the quiet of the halls, the vaulted ceilings, the cool floors under my bare feet.

I stood in front of the door to the king's chambers and took a slow, steadying breath. My wolf could sense his close by. I didn't even have to knock. He must've sensed me, too. The door swung open.

My wolf longed to rush forward and nuzzle close to him. He smiled as he stepped out of the doorway and welcomed me inside.

"Good evening," he murmured. "Have to admit I was already beginning to miss you."

I nodded and stepped over the threshold. The room was warm, inviting, with the fire crackling in the hearth.

"Thank you," the king said to my handmaidens. They lowered their heads, ears back respectfully, and then he closed the door.

We were alone in his chambers. The door to the bedroom was open, that same immense mattress and the dark, soft sheets that I'd lost myself in just a few nights before. Before everything changed. Before I was queen.

The king took my cloak delicately off my shoulders and laid it over a chair. "You look beautiful." He smoothed one hand up my arm, from the wrist to my shoulder, his touch firm through the silk. "Even more beautiful that you did in your gown."

My wolf urged me to move closer, to kiss him, to bury my face in the crook of his neck and erase all my reason and logic in the delicious familiar scent of his sweat. I wrestled her into submission.

"We should talk," I said.

The king pulled back with an interested smile on his face. "Sure." He moved toward the crackling fire, then gestured toward the armchair across from his own. He hadn't changed his clothes, but did roll up the sleeves of his fine shirt, revealing the tanned muscular curve of his forearms. He

poured us each a bit of brandy, then offered me the glass. “Let’s talk.”

“I know it’s our wedding night,” I said.

“You have a keen eye.”

I ignored that. “And I know what is—customary.”

“Right,” he said, that wolfish smirk reappearing on his face as his warm eyes tracked over my body.

“But I—I can’t forgive as quickly as some might be able to,” I said. “I need more time.”

The pleased expression dropped off his face. He raised his eyebrows. “This is about that traitor of yours?”

“He wasn’t just a traitor,” I said.

“I thought we discussed this,” the king said. “How can you still be angry after all he said? All he did to you? All the lies and the treason?”

“It’s not anger,” I shot back. “It’s *grief*. It doesn’t just go away because he lied to me. It doesn’t erase what we had before this.”

“It should,” the king said. “It wasn’t real. It was based on lies.”

“It was real to me.” I swallowed hard and looked into the crackling fire as my emotions sparked inside me just as restlessly. “He was the only friend I had for years. I can’t just get over something like that immediately. I can’t pretend it never happened.”

“What you have ahead of you is so much better,” the king said. “You’ll waste your life being trapped in the past.”

“How can you be sure of that?” I asked. “How can I be sure of anything you say? You’ve lied to me too. You hid the prophecy from me. There was always more to this competition than just the council’s opinion on my manners and your personal attraction. A marriage is about *trust*—how am I supposed to trust you?”

His eyes burned gold. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, gaze fixed on me and lips parted to show the tips of his canines. Instinctively, I pulled back in my chair, away from the show of dominance. But it wasn't just authority in his gaze—it was more than that. There was hunger in his eyes too, hunger and desire.

“If you were more amenable to me,” he said so low it was almost a growl, “perhaps I would've been more forthcoming. But since the moment you stepped into this manor, my Choice has been nothing but a game to you. Even when I informed you I was not doing this for politics, but for a mate, you ignored me. Why would I be inclined to tell you more, if you didn't listen to me when it mattered?”

“Of course I didn't believe you!” My wolf flashed behind my eyes, and the king reared back the smallest amount. “You're the Bloody King. Even if the Bloody King wants a mate, that's an arrangement about power. It's all about power—the power you hold over me, keeping me here, the power your pack wields over my mind, the power you wield over the country. You don't treat me like an equal.”

He stood up from his seat so fast the legs scraped across the floor. I swallowed, cowering slightly in my chair. I'd let my frustration get the best of me again. Running my mouth in front of the king might be more dangerous than letting my wolf out.

Then, slowly, the king leaned down. He gripped the armrests of my chair, caging me in. I felt small underneath him. His golden gaze was unwavering. He leaned so close I thought he was going to kiss me; my lips parted in anticipation.

But instead he leaned so close his breath tickled my ear as he spoke. “Think carefully next time you call me the Bloody King, Ice Princess.”

I scoffed, turning my head to avoid him. “Don't call me that.” I flattened my palm on his chest to push him away but he was unmovable as a stone.

“Then don't act like it.”

“You are such a hypocrite, *Elias*,” I said, spitting his name like it tasted foul in my mouth.

Finally, he stood up and moved from the chair. I exhaled a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. The king grabbed his brandy glass and drained it. He seemed to be just as frustrated as I was.

I stood up and smoothed out my robe. I didn’t have anywhere to go; I just didn’t want to be trapped in this room with him. Surely I could make it back to my quarters. I hadn’t expected this to go *great*, but I’d thought I could at least have an adult conversation with him. About our future together. And yet as soon as I’d tried to make myself heard, he’d turned on me in anger, closer to a wolf than a man. He was so unreasonable—how could we be expected to lead together when we couldn’t even have a conversation?

Regardless of the vows we’d made, I had a feeling there wouldn’t be much of us ‘together.’ I was supposed to simply follow him. Just as my father had wanted me to follow him, and Griffin, too.

I needed air. I needed my wolf to calm down and I needed to get my emotions under control. I moved toward the glass doors leading to the balcony of the king’s quarters.

Before I made it, though, he caught up and caught my wrist in his hand. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Outside,” I said. “I need space.”

He kept his hand around my wrist as he stepped close. “The last thing we need right now, Reyna, is more space.” He pressed his chest to my back and ducked his head closer, nosing behind my ear and inhaling. “I know you yearn for me.” His voice vibrated into my bones from the intimacy. “I can smell your desire.”

I pressed my thighs together. It was no mystery that I wanted him. I’d made that clear the last night we’d spent together in this room. “My body and mind have two different opinions of you.”

“Perhaps that’s part of the problem,” he said. “You’re so caught up in your mind that you ignore your body—and your wolf.”

“I don’t ignore her,” I huffed, even as my wolf protested. Then I snapped my mouth shut. I didn’t need to justify myself to the king. I wasn’t an animal like the wolves of Nightfall. I had more self-restraint than that.

“We cannot be equals if you keep pushing me away.” He set his hand at my waist and then smoothed his palm toward my hip. “Trust isn’t only developed through reason. Your wolf trusts me. Listen to her. Our wolves are our foundations.” Then his hand bumped against the knife in the pocket of my robe. His touch stilled. “What’s this?”

“What do you think?” I whispered. My voice was steady despite the cold fear crawling into my throat. “A lady should be able to defend herself if necessary.”

“You thought that would be necessary against me?” he asked. “You would draw a knife on your husband?”

“If I thought I could not trust him,” I said.

He released me. He stepped back so suddenly I nearly fell forward, but I caught myself, then whirled to face him. I ignored my wolf’s whining, and the present curl of desire low in my gut. I had more arguments on the tip of my tongue but they melted away when I saw his expression. He looked angry—but more than that, he looked *hurt*.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “The first step to building trust between us is for you to apologize,” I said. “I won’t be a trophy or a prize. My husband must take my feelings into account for this marriage to work.”

He stomped back to the chairs and poured himself another finger of brandy. “I won’t apologize for protecting my pack and my kingdom,” he said. “I will always do what is best for my people, even if it comes at my own expense.”

“I’m not asking you to renounce what you did!” I said. “I’m asking you to apologize for hurting me.”

“You want me to apologize because you miss your treasonous boyfriend?” he asked.

Hot tears prickled behind my eyes. “No, Elias,” I said. My voice quivered. “I only want you to *care* that it hurt me. Is that so impossible for you to understand?”

“And I want you to understand the risk he posed to my kingdom,” the king said. “I want you to be grateful that I spared Frasia from war.”

I turned my gaze toward the crackling fire. My throat tightened as I held back my tears. Why was I so disappointed and hurt? Why was I even surprised? This entire competition, the king had done nothing but show over and over again how he chose to rule. He cared about his kingdom, and not at all about me. I was a prize to be won, a challenge to be overcome. Not a partner. Not an equal. I’d gotten so caught up in the beauty of the ceremony, and the vows, and the elegance of the party, that I’d allowed myself a sliver of hope that maybe he’d be different.

I was such a fool. Such a desperate fool.

“I understand,” I said curtly, and made my way toward the door.

Again, he caught me by the wrist. “You’re leaving?”

I pulled my hand away and crossed my arms again. “Yes,” I said. “I’d like to sleep in my own chambers.”

“These are your chambers now,” he said.

“I don’t want to be here!” I exclaimed. It sounded childish even to my own ears, but it was the truth. “I never wanted this.”

“Little wolf,” he said, low, “I will not force myself on you. I would never do such a thing to any woman, royal or not, Nightfall or not. But I cannot allow you to leave the royal chambers on our wedding night. There will be talk, and I can’t afford such talk right now.”

“Of course your concern is still about your reputation,” I spat. “Fuck your reputation! This isn’t royal politics. This is

my *life*.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” he said. “Even if you deny it, those ‘royal politics’ you denounce *are* your life now. For better or for worse, we are a unit now. Our power as leaders is affected by our reputations, both separate and together. In this moment of transition, after a Challenge, my reputation *cannot* waver. Now go get ready for bed.”

I blinked. “What?”

“If we aren’t consummating our marriage” –somehow he made those words sound deliciously erotic— “I’ll be going to sleep. I’m tired of this conversation.”

A lump rose in my throat, and the prickling behind my eyes worsened. This entire affair was degrading enough. I wasn’t going to make it worse by letting him see me cry. I rushed into the ensuite bathroom and slammed the door behind me. In the immense, luxurious space, I cut the hot water on and let the steam fill the room, surrounding me with warmth like an embrace. Only when I was certain the king wasn’t going to barge in with me did I let the first tear fall.

I was trapped with him.

I’d married a monster.

When I woke up the next morning, it was to a brisk series of knocks at the door of the king's chambers. I was asleep in his immense bed, but there was no indentation on the mattress next to me, nor any trace of the king's scent on the sheets. He'd never come to bed at all.

Last night, my exhaustion had overwhelmed my turmoil and I'd passed out nearly as soon as I'd hit the mattress beneath me. I'd never expected the king to give up his quarters to me though. It made my chest ache.

I pulled my robe back on and stepped out into the main quarters to answer the door. Amity and Rue were on the other side, cheerful as ever despite the early hour. "Good morning, Your Highness," Amity said brightly.

"Wow," I murmured. "Can we stick with Lady Reyna? At least until I'm a little more used to it?"

"Sure," Rue said. "This is a big change. I think you'll love it, though."

I nodded. She had no idea how wrong she was. But, at least with Amity and Rue with me, it'd be a bit more bearable than it would be alone.

"Since the king is in his early meeting with his advisors," Amity said, "the Lady Glennis thought this would be a good time for you to get settled. We'll arrange your new quarters and have breakfast there."

“My new quarters,” I repeated. I was still waking up. But of course, I’d have new quarters. I couldn’t stay in the guest quarters now that I was queen.

I invited the girls inside, and they walked briskly toward a door at the edge of the main quarters, on the same wall as the one to the king’s bedroom. I hadn’t paid it any mind before, assuming it was to a study, or a closet. But Amity fit a key into the door, and then pushed it opened and welcomed me inside.

“The queen’s quarters,” she said. “It shares a door with the king’s, of course, so you’re never too far apart. But when you are not with the king, this space is yours alone. Rue and I have been decorating it for days—I do hope it suits your taste.”

Irritation rose like bile in my throat. It wasn’t my handmaidens’ fault, they’d been nothing but kind to me. But did I get no choice in any of this at all? No one had even asked me what I might like for my own private quarters. And now all my private things had been moved without my permission. I realized it’d been done to ease my transition into my new role, but just once I wanted someone to ask me if it was okay. Just once.

The last thing I was going to do was take that out on my handmaidens, though.

“Oh, wow,” I said as I stepped into the room. “You did a wonderful job, both of you.”

I meant it, despite my frustrations. The room *was* beautiful. It was one big room, with the sleeping area separated by a tall, elegant dressing screen decorated in a forest scene. The walls were papered in pale blue, decorated with elegant pale flowers shimmering faintly in the dim light. The hearth was pale stone with a plush white couch and gold accent table stacked with books. The door to the king’s chambers was beside the hearth. Behind the dressing screen, the bed was a sleigh style, with blue sheets and a white comforter. It was colorful, but cozy.

“You like it?” Rue asked quietly, shifting her weight foot to foot.

“It’s gorgeous,” I said. “I really do like it. Thank you both for working so hard on this.”

Both girls bit back their grins. Amity bounced on the balls of her feet. “There’s more, milady,” she said.

“More?”

Opposite the door to the king’s room, there was another, narrower door. I’d assumed it was the ensuite, but it was more than that. It was the ensuite bathroom as well as a large walk-in closet, and a vanity with a fine lacquer box on top of it. All my clothes had already been moved into the closet, and my trunk closed and set in the back.

“These all belong to you as well,” Rue said. She opened the lacquer box gently. Inside, it was filled with jewelry: fine rings, delicate pearls, golden earrings and ruby bracelets. Some matched, some didn’t. “This isn’t all of it, either,” she said. “There’s more in other boxes in the drawers. These are the queen’s jewels. The king has been collecting them for his bride since he was young. Aren’t they beautiful?” Rue sighed dreamily.

“It’s so romantic,” Amity agreed. “He’s been wanting a bride for so long. We’re all just so happy for you both.”

I hummed in affirmation and traced my finger over the edge of the lacquer box. I couldn’t muster up the strength to agree in words, or to say anything different. Better to let the girls maintain their fantasy of who the king was.

“Now,” Amity said, “after breakfast, there’s the official sendoff for your father and escort. Would you prefer to wear the colors of Daybreak or of Nightfall?”

Neither, I wanted to scream. I didn’t want to be relegated to representing the men in my life. I wanted something of my own. I wanted to be my own person for once, instead of a prize for the men to fight over.

“I’ll wear something simple,” I said. Before Amity could make a suggestion, I stepped into the closet and smoothed my hands over the fine gowns hung up for my perusal. There were so many, for so many occasions. So beautiful and well-made,

and none that I had chosen myself. I'd have to change that—if I were to be queen, at least I could get some more fine trousers to wear.

I pulled out a fine dark gown from the ones provided. It was simple, with a high neckline, long sleeves, and a full skirt. When I moved, the black fabric of the skirt revealed the under-layer of rich purple. The colors of Nightfall, but also less ostentatious, a little more modest than the gowns I'd worn in the past. I wasn't eager to draw too much attention to myself if I could help it.

“Lovely choice, milady,” Amity said.

We had a quick breakfast in my quarters, brought in by the kitchen staff, and then the two of them dressed me in the fine gown. Rue tied the laces at the back of the dress, while Amity brushed my hair into a plait resting over one shoulder. When she was done, she pulled another lacquer box from the drawers of the vanity and opened it. Inside was a plain, delicate crown, a simple band of gold like the one the king wore for most everyday ceremonies. She set it on my head with the same care and attention she did when she'd dressed me in the tiara that represented Daybreak during the Choice. But this crown, despite its simplicity, felt so much heavier.

“Gorgeous,” she said with a smile.

“Thank you,” I said. I didn't feel gorgeous. I felt *tired*.

Amity led me to the door. “We had best go send off the guests before the hour gets any later.”

Outside, it was an icy cold day, with the sun high in the sky reflecting off the snow coating the gardens. Activity bustled outside the main gates to the manor as servants loaded carriages with trunks and gifts and picnic baskets of food. Fina and Adora were busy packing up carriages as well, sending some of their escort parties back with news of their new roles in Efra.

The king was busy in conversation with one of the Dukes of Duskmorn, laughing loudly as he clapped his hand on the duke's shoulder. For a man who hadn't slept in his own bed

last night, he looked surprisingly well-rested. His gaze shifted toward mine and I quickly looked away. Maybe it was childish, but I didn't want to play the role of dutiful queen every moment, if I could avoid it—especially not in a situation like this.

My father's carriage was in the midst of being packed as well, with Barion's carriage—the one I'd ridden to Efra in—behind it. The horses stomped their hooves and tossed their heads, breath coming in puffs of steam with their eagerness to begin the journey.

“Wait here,” I said to Amity and Rue. “I'd like to speak with them privately.”

“Of course,” Amity said. They shifted into their wolf forms and lingered by the front door.

I strode toward the carriage with my head held high. The crown still felt heavy across my forehead.

“My lord,” I said in greeting.

My father looked up from where he was checking the trunks fastened to the back of the carriage. His expression soured. He stood up straight and smoothed his hands down the front of his travel wear, heavy canvas clothes and a long coat embroidered with the colors of Daybreak.

“Reyna.” His gaze lingered on the crown. “I trust you enjoyed your wedding.”

“It was lovely,” I said coolly. “I trust you enjoyed yourself as well.”

“Of course.”

The silence hung heavy between us as the other guests packed, laughed, and embraced each other during their goodbyes.

“I've come to wish you well on your journey,” I said. “The king will be sending a few pages in the next few days to gather the rest of my belongings.”

“You needn't worry about your belongings,” he hissed. “It would serve you better to focus on your mission rather than

your *tchotchkes* in Daybreak.”

I folded my hands together in front of my body to keep myself from squeezing my hands into fists. I wanted to scream and curse him. I wanted to beat at his chest like an angry toddler. My wolf growled internally, tossing her head in frustration. It took all my self-control to keep her from flashing in my eyes—flashing the silver of Starcrest instead of the clay-red of Daybreak. I wanted to tell him how deeply he’d wounded me with his lies and betrayal.

But what good would it do? He’d never cared about me, never loved me, not even as a child. It would only please him to know he hurt me. The only real revenge I could have over him was to forget about him entirely. I would never let him control any decision I made in my life. I would never sacrifice myself for the whims of Daybreak.

“Those *tchotchkes* will be moved to Efra,” I said. “So please be prepared for the pages’ arrival.”

My father narrowed his eyes. From my gown, and the gold crown on my head, and the cold tone of my voice, he knew I would not be using the poisoned knife he’d given me. And there was not a damn thing he could do about it.

“Your Majesty!” Barion hopped down from where he had been fastening boxes to the top of his carriage. “You’ve come to see us off?”

“Yes,” I said. “And to thank you for your service as my escort.”

Barion’s expression softened. He stood at the king’s side in his own fine travel wear of all-functional heavy canvas and leather. It made him look like the man I’d spent so many childhood days with as we traded blows on the manor lawn, while he laughed and corrected my form. My heart ached. It was a different hurt than the pain my father had caused me.

Part of me wanted Barion to stay in Efra with me, and to join the Nightfall wolves as part of my guard. But he’d been the one to initially give me the poisoned knife. He’d known about my father’s plot. Barion cared, but he was a wolf of

Daybreak through and through, and he'd always choose his pack over me.

There was nothing I could say to change it—nothing I wanted to say. We both knew our paths had diverged. I could never trust him the way I had in the past.

“It's been an honor, Lady Reyna,” Barion said.

My father sucked his teeth, then turned wordlessly and climbed into the carriage. Barion lingered for a moment, gazing at me. Then he nodded and walked toward his own wagon.

With my heart in my throat, I strode back into the manor. Before the doors closed, the horses' whinnying filtered in, and the familiar strike of hooves on the road as they began to move.

With the carriages went the last vestiges of my life in Daybreak.

I paused in the foyer, unsteady on my feet as that realization washed over me.

Amity and Rue trotted in after me, then shifted back into their human forms. “Are you all right, milady?” Rue asked.

I brushed a loose strand of hair out of my eyes and nodded. “Yes,” I said. “Perfectly fine.”

I was the Queen of Frasia, and I was alone.

In my new quarters, I dismissed Amity and Rue and then stood by the window, gazing out over the snowy tree line. I needed space. I needed somewhere to sit and read and think—I had a couch in these quarters, but why not a desk? Did a queen not do any work? My heart hurt, my chest ached; I was lost and confused and exhausted. I needed something familiar. I needed the library.

The door to my quarters slammed open abruptly, and the king stormed in with his expression caught somewhere between anger and concern. I took a step back, pressing my shoulders to the stone wall behind me as he approached.

“Reyna,” he said. “Where were you?”

“What?” I asked.

“We were supposed to see the guests off,” he said sharply. “Where did you go?”

“I did see them off,” I said. “I know you saw me.”

“You only saw your father off. The rest of the guests were left unable to give their well wishes. Some had traveled quite far to attend.”

“Well, I wasn’t the one who made the guest list, was I?” I snapped. “I greeted everyone at the wedding, was that not enough?”

I braced myself for the expected argument, but to my surprise, the king’s posture softened. He sighed, then pulled

his crown off his head and set it on the small table near the hearth.

“You’re right,” he said. “You were quite charming during all the events around the wedding. You must be tired.”

“Of course I’m tired,” I said quietly.

“Your quarters are adequate?” he asked.

“Where did you sleep last night?” I asked, brushing off his questioning. “Where did you go?”

“It should be of no consequence to you,” he said. “I thought you’d be pleased that I left you alone.”

“Okay,” I said. “More secrets.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Would you have rather I stayed? You seemed angry.”

“I’m still angry! I’m angry and I’m tired and—” *and I’m lonely*. I snapped my mouth shut.

“What do you need?” he asked. “How can I make this right?”

“You can’t,” I said. “You won’t. You made that clear last night.”

He sighed heavily and raked one hand through his hair. Then he removed his cloak and tossed it carelessly over the couch and gazed into the fire. In his plain dark trousers and white shirt, he looked more like the man I’d run into in the library what felt like a lifetime ago. Handsome. In control. Unreadable. He gazed into the fire.

“I need time,” I said. “Time to adjust. Time to grieve.”

“How much time?” he asked. “What is there to grieve? What is your life in Daybreak compared to your life here? It doesn’t compare!”

“We’ve talked about this,” I said. “You don’t listen. You haven’t listened to anything I’ve said.”

It hurt even more now, knowing the carriages were long gone. It wasn’t the life I’d left behind, but the future I’d really

lost. Now more than ever, I yearned for a different life. A way to leave this all behind. Even the thought made my wolf whine in dismay, but she'd get used to it—I was used to ignoring her complaints. If only I could take a horse from the stables and ride off.

But what kind of life was that, alone? I was always supposed to have someone I loved with me. Now I had no one. No one except the king, standing in the quarters I hadn't chosen, asking me to explain my grief again and again.

“You are the Queen of Frasia,” he said, low. “You have won a crown that other wolves would—and have—died for. This is who you are now.”

“You don't get to tell me who I am,” I said.

“You don't have a choice,” he said.

“I may be queen,” I said, “but I will never be happy here. Not with a king who keeps secrets from me, lies to me, and treats me like his prize without any regard for my feelings or needs.”

He stalked across my quarters toward me, his eyes blazing gold. He caged me against the wall, his hands bracketing my head, and his face tipped close to mine. “You are not a prize,” he growled. “But you *are* mine. There's no going back.”

My wolf thrilled at the claim. I closed my eyes and thought for a moment I could hear the thundering beat of his heart.

“If you think, even for a moment,” I whispered, “that you will be able to control me like my father did, you will be sorely disappointed.”

“I never wanted to control you,” the king growled. “If I wanted a mate I could control, I would've picked that suck-up Rona, or the Starcrest woman who actually wanted your crown. I chose you because you—” He reared back, eyes still blazing but with a furrow of concern in his brow. “I chose you *because* you are headstrong. I chose you against the advice of my council. I chose you because I see something in you that you refuse to see yourself.”

“You see what you want to see and only that.” I flattened my hands on his broad chest and shoved him backward; to my surprise he acquiesced and took a few steps back. “You barely know me. You only *think* you know me. Love me. I won’t bow to your desires just because you’ve forced me into this role. From now on, *no one* controls me, even if that means this marriage is in name only.”

The king’s expression became suddenly, strikingly hurt—like I’d hit him. Then just as quickly as the pain had appeared, it was gone, replaced by a stony anger so powerful that when he bared his teeth, it made my wolf whine internally. I’d pushed him too far this time. I’d gotten cocky, and now the Bloody king was going to make his title known to me, just like he’d done to the traitorous Lord, and then to Griffin.

Then, the air crackled like an oncoming storm.

The king’s wolf burst forth.

He shifted effortlessly, the clothes tearing from his back and landing in shreds on the shining floors of my quarters. He shook out his rich, dark pelt, then fixed his golden glowing eyes on me. His nostrils flared; he pawed at the floor and his claws clicked against the stone.

He growled in his chest, and my wolf slammed against my chest, desperate to leap forth and join him. I could feel her longing, her ache to run alongside him, her desperate panting thoughts of *mate, mate, mate*. But standing against the wall, I thought of how he had closed his jaws so effortlessly over Griffin’s neck, how he’d looked bloodied and victorious standing over his motionless body.

For a moment I felt suspended in time, pinned in place as the great wolf watched me, expectant and curious.

Then the moment snapped like a thread. The king turned and charged from the room. As if the spell was broken, I followed him. He didn’t leave the quarters like I’d expected. Instead he made his way out onto the narrow balcony of his quarters—and leaped off.

I gasped and ran to the terrace, gripping the railing as the wind whipped my skirt around my legs.

Below me, the king had landed on the awning of the balcony below, and then from there gracefully jumped to a sturdy tree branch, and then to the earth. It appeared he'd done this many times before. Was this where he'd gone last night, leaving me alone in his bed?

From the grounds, the king looked up toward the balcony.

I swallowed. Even with the distance between us, his gaze burned. My wolf flashed in my eyes, begging for me to release her.

He lifted his head and dropped his ears back, letting out a single long, low howl. It sounded almost mournful. Then he ran into the tree line and disappeared.

I stumbled backward until my body hit the wall, and then sank down until I was seated. I held my head in my hands, knees to my chest, as my wolf howled and howled her misery. No matter how she cried, I wasn't releasing her. Now was not the time for me to lose control.

I'd maintained my boundaries. I'd asserted my agency. The king knew where I stood in this marriage.

And yet, a small part of me—not just my wolf—couldn't help but wonder:

What had I just lost?

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WOLF KING

Lindsey Devin

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