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# THE STOLEN THRONE

HEAVY LIES THE CROWN.

ABIGAIL OWEN

ALSO BY ABIGAIL OWEN

DOMINIONS SERIES

*The Liar's Crown*

*The Stolen Throne*

THE  
STOLEN  
THRONE

A decorative rope with a knot and a circular medallion. The rope is braided and loops around the letters of the title. At the bottom, it forms a knot and is attached to a circular medallion with a textured, possibly metallic, surface.

ABIGAIL OWEN

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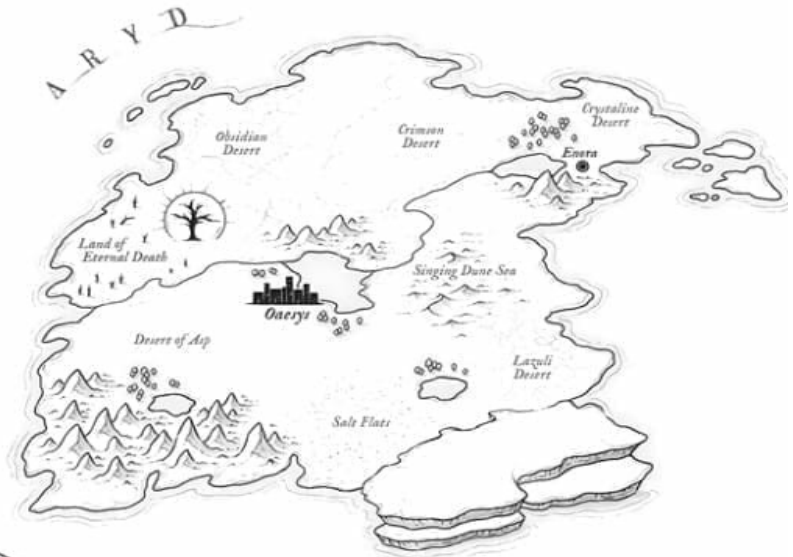
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*To Liz Pelletier—for your support, your friendship, your brilliance, and for creating *Entangled*, which has made such an impact to my life and writing career!*



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NOVA



The heavens are empty because  
all the souls are missing.  
The hells are next.

# PART 1

## THE ISOLATED PAWNS

# 1

## THE BROKEN SHADOWRAITH

### Reven

You'd think stealing a queen would be easy for a Shadowraith.

Considering I once kidnapped a princess from this very palace and no one stopped me, it *should* be. But that was before Eidolon, the king of Tyndra, moved in. He is why, instead of using my power over shadow to get to her unseen, I'm standing in a forgotten room at the top of a set of dark stairs that lead down into an underground cistern. He'd know if I used my shadows.

As my maker, he can use them, too.

"*Goddess help me,*" a voice whispers in the darkness, and for a heavy second, I think it's her.

Meren.

My heart surges to life as I listen, waiting, straining to hear that voice again. To make sure it was actually her.

Nothing.

The breath of hope I'd been holding rattles out of my chest. Who am I kidding? I'm not that lucky. Besides, there are plenty of other things that whisper to me. Most aren't good.

I don't think it was one of Eidolon's Shadows—the fractured, evil pieces of the king's soul that I carry inside me. The voice would have sounded like my own because I'm one of those Shadows, too. The one to get away. To stand against him.

It could have been a desperate stranger crying out for help. I hear them every night, their voices coming from all over the six dominions of Nova—despairing people who whisper pleas into the dark that they think go unheard, but the shadows carry their words to me. I used to find them—the Vanished, people would call them—and take them to the safety of the Shadowwood for a chance at a new life, but the Shadowwood isn't safe anymore. I can't save anyone.

"*Pathetic.*" A new voice rings in my head. This one I recognize, because it

comes from within. *This* is one of Eidolon's Shadows. "*If you can't save them, why could you save her?*"

"Shut up," I mutter.

That sets the other Shadows off. Their voices in my head blend and blur as they talk over one another. The foul things I carry fight for control every second of every hour of every day. If my tenuous control slips, the Shadows will gleefully bury my consciousness down deep in a tomb made of my own body and take over. There's no telling what they'd do after that.

Tightening my hands into fists, I force them back down.

It works—for now.

Luckily, Cain, who is with me down here, doesn't seem to notice any of that. He's too pissed off about what we're about to do.

In the history of bad ideas, kidnapping the woman everyone believes to be the queen of the dominion of Aryd out from under the nose of the powerful king they think she's married to, especially when I can't use my powers to do it, ranks right at the top.

But it's the best we could come up with.

I refuse to wait even a second longer to get Meren out of there. I've been hiding and waiting for what has felt like an eternity—every plodding, torturous minute spent healing after the wounds I sustained in the last battle with the king. The battle where I lost Meren.

We've been hunted the whole way, constantly having to evade Eidolon's soldiers, keeping out of their grasp by moving all over the blasted dominion. Almost every single one of Aryd's different deserts, in their varied colors and landscapes, has seen our ragtag band of misfits. The king's men have been relentless.

Granted, I have Eidolon's Shadows...and a few other things he needs. He wants them back.

But he has something I want back, too.

Standing beside me, Cain snorts an unamused laugh. "This is a joke, right?"

I grit my teeth.

After all this time in the desert, endless sand and heat are now my idea of what the seventh hell must be like. After three weeks traveling here together, just the two of us, having Cain's ugly mug in my face every single day might be the eighth.

"If you haven't noticed, I'm not much of a joker."

Cain grumbles something under his breath and stares at the inky water the stairs lead down into, expression dubious. “Let me get this straight. You want me to trust you to get us into the palace by swimming through an underground labyrinth—a *dark* underground labyrinth—that you’ve used once. Once. And that one time, you weren’t in control, and you couldn’t see anything in the pitch black, and Meren was the only one who actually knew the way. That about right?”

We’ve already discussed this. A lot. “Yes.”

“No.” He crosses his arms, jaw taking on a stubborn cast.

I train a hard gaze on Cain. In his early twenties, like me, he’s as tall as I am but lankier, leanly muscled thanks to growing up in the desert. Black hair. Nearly black eyes. The guy laughs a lot, when not among enemies. Which, to him, I mostly am.

He and I are...complicated.

Meren sent us to Cain for protection. As the son of Zariph Cainis, who leads a zariphate of Wanderers—proud, nomadic people who thrive in the desert—he could offer us a unique form of protection. This man is the entire reason why the people of the Vanished I try to protect, Meren’s twin sister, Tabra, who is technically the true queen of Aryd, and I aren’t dead yet. Cain has sheltered us all while putting his own people at risk.

I should respect the man. Feel grateful.

I can’t stand him.

I hate him because he’s known Meren most of her life and wants her for himself. I hate him because he’s had *years* with her, years when he could see her face or touch her, when all I had was her voice in the darkness, begging for a different life, and a few stolen weeks with her at my side. I hate him because I know he would be better for her than I am. He could protect her, cherish her, keep her safe. She could grow old as his heartmate.

I, on the other hand... I bring only death.

It also doesn’t help that all he’s done is doubt me and argue with me all the way here. He’s lucky I haven’t disappeared him yet. I could. I’ve done it before.

My control over shadows is a blessing and a curse. I can manipulate them to do my bidding. I hide in them, travel by them, wield them as weapons. I can also obliterate everything within leagues when I lose control.

Right now, though, I can’t do any of that well. I’m better than I was, but I’m still weak.



Something Cain knows.

Eidolon's Shadows know it, too.

The dark corners of the room shift restlessly around us. Cain snaps his gaze to me, body tensed and ready to defend himself.

I force the darkness to still. He doesn't relax, though.

He's smart not to.

"What's the real plan here?" Cain asks with narrow-eyed suspicion. "Get your shadows to drown me? Hide my body in darkness?"

Is that my plan? No. Tempting as it is.

Could it happen anyway? Maybe.

Hells, a few weeks ago I came a hair's breadth from accidentally killing Cain's father, the zariph, for refusing to let us leave to rescue Meren sooner.

If Cain knew that...

"Do you have a better way in?" I know he doesn't.

A tic sets off in his jaw. He despises this plan, but we have no better option. We need to get into the castle grounds undetected, and I can't use my power to do that.

We agreed—and by we, I mean Cain strongly pointed out and I eventually agreed—that I shouldn't use my shadows to get us in and out of the palace. Not with the way it drains me. Not with Eidolon likely able to sense it, waiting like a spider in a web.

I'm saving my power for "in case this goes sideways" and I need to get us out quickly. And the likelihood of that happening is high. We haven't been the only ones with time to plan.

Months. Meren's been trapped with that monster for *months*. Who even knows what sort of protections he's put in place? Or what he's done to her.

Tabra was with Eidolon less than two weeks, and look at what shape she's in. Wasting away. Prone to violent fits. With Meren's face, it's been very easy to picture the same happening to her, too.

Screw waiting.

I imagine stuffing the king's Shadows into a box made of indestructible stone with a heavy lid. I shove all of what I feel in there with them. Every strong emotion. Emotions are dangerous for someone like me. "I'm going. Stay here and wait if you want."

Cain flashes out a hand to stop me before I can do more than shift my weight forward. "Hold on."

"What *now*?"

He straightens with a light in his eyes I don't trust and a cocky grin I've seen way too often. "Actually..." He holds up his hands, palms glowing a cheerful yellow. I'm not the only Imperium—humans who were born with powers gifted to them by the goddesses—here, though he's Hylorae while I'm Enfernae. Just another reason to hate each other. His light bounces off the water but doesn't penetrate beyond a few feet into the tunnels.

I cross my arms. "Seeing won't help all that much." Breathing is the bigger issue if I get us lost down there.

He ignores me, focusing on the water, which begins to bubble like a current, pushing toward us from the sunken passages beyond. The level in the chamber where we stand rises, coming up the stairs until I have to back up to keep my shoes dry.

Then, suddenly, the water parts, clearing a small, walkable path for us down the stairs and into the exposed hallway beyond.

I glance at Cain, who shrugs. "Better than drowning."

At least he's handy for something. His power to draw water from the driest part of the desert saved our asses more than once these last weeks. Handy for the zariphate, too.

Together, Cain and I descend into the dark and now dripping tunnel only to encounter a wall of water before us. As we get closer, the water behind us moves, slipping across the walls and ceiling but not touching us until it fills in at our backs, locking us in a bubble of sorts.

Cain cocks his head at me with an air of expectation.

"What? You want a pat on the back for creativity?"

"Wouldn't hurt."

"Your ego doesn't need any help."

"What can I say? Self-confidence is part of my personality the same way asshole-ness is part of yours." Then he sobers, the warrior in him focused. "Since I don't know where I'm going and space is limited in here, I can't move all of it. Just enough air so that we don't immediately die if you get us lost, but it will only last so long."

Between the two of us, we make it through the cistern—dry, I might add. Yes, thanks to Cain. It only took two wrong turns that would have killed us if we'd tried to swim it. Peering through the crack in the door that leads out of the cistern and up to the patrolled grounds between the outer and inner walls that surround the palace, we wait, timing the guards, like Meren taught the Shadow that was in control of me when she showed him this way into the

palace.

Finally, we take our shot, running across the open land that protects the palace like a dry moat, softly lit by only the third moon, then up and over the inner wall to drop into the private royal gardens.

Which is when we hear it.

Music. Laughter. Talking. Far enough away that no one is near us, but still, a big problem.

Hells and damnation. “A party,” I whisper. Quite the occasion by the sounds of it.

Cain thinks for a moment, then grimaces. “Sandrats. It’s Meren’s name day.”

Wait. Her birthday is *today*? Perfect. Just perfect. “And you didn’t think to mention that?”

He throws his hand out, waving around us. “I’ve been a little busy to keep track of the day. And what about you? If you’re so arrow shot for her—”

“Arrow shot?”

“So taken you’ve lost your wits.”

Before I can blast him with shadow or at least punch him in the face for that one, a shout rises up nearby.

“Hey!”

On sheer instinct, without even blinking, I will the shadows behind the guard running at us to grab him and slam his head into the trunk of a tree. He falls to the ground in a heap. The purple glow of my palms douses immediately.

Cain and I both go silent, waiting for any other guards to pick up on the alarm, but the garden remains peaceful.

“I should have handled that,” Cain grumbles after a bit.

The glint of moonlight on his knife blade tells me he was ready. I’m not apologizing, though.

Scaling the side of the palace itself, we make our way up to the balcony. Instead of going left toward Meren and Tabra’s old rooms, we go the opposite direction, wrapping around to an even wider terrace. Every room in this wing opens onto the private balconies.

At least the queen’s name day celebration means the people in the palace are distracted—and probably gathered in the ballroom, which is in another building. Except that includes Meren. The thought of having to wait for her is already an itch under my skin.

“*Let us out!*”

The scream comes from within, exploding the metaphorical box I had locked the Shadows inside.

Fuck.

I put a shaking hand behind me and form a fist, the Wanderer signal to stop, while I wrestle for control. Damn it. I had the Shadows buried so deep that they shouldn't have seen anything or known where we are.

But they do. They know the king is near. Our *maker* is near.

Their screams are like ragged blades shredding my insides as they try to claw their way out. If I look down, I know I'll see their faces bulging out of my skin, even under my clothing. Seven hells. Eidolon doesn't need to find me—the Shadows want to find *him*. Especially now, while I'm weakened. I went up against Eidolon once, when I was physically whole...and I lost.

There's no way I can face him and live. Not tonight.

We need to get Meren out of the palace before Eidolon realizes I'm here. That's the only way this works without us getting dead.

Cain taps my shoulder.

“Don't.” The word comes out as a snarl that even I don't recognize.

The sharp blade of a knife slides against the skin of my throat. “Just give the word,” Cain's voice says in my ear. Not a threat. A mercy killing.

He means it, too.

I hold up a hand, and neither of us moves. I need to be in control before we take another step.

I slip a hand into my breast pocket and run a finger over the perfect, smooth glass of the flower, the one Meren made and gave me one night in a moonlit wood when we pretended we were the only two people in the world.

I'm so close. Damned if I'm going to let the Shadows win tonight.

I take a long, slow breath, stuff the grinding fear that I'm already too late to save her in the box with the Shadows, and pull the metaphorical lid back over it, containing the evil. “I've got it.”

Mostly.

The knife doesn't move. “You sure?”

Meren probably wouldn't like it if I pushed her best friend off this ledge. “Yes.”

The knife leaves my throat, but I don't miss the way Cain releases a breath of his own. I'm pretty sure I scared the life out of him. These past months, he's seen what happens when I lose it. More times than I like to

acknowledge.

We continue on until we reach the biggest balcony with alabaster columns leading into the room beyond, rather than the usual black marble, reminding me of stripes on a banded alder vulture from home. The curtains are thrown wide open as if in direct defiance, daring anyone to try something with this queen.

This *has* to be Meren's room.

It smells of her—fresh and subtle and clean.

Inside, beyond the columns, is a massive bed covered by a gauzy netting, empty. So is the rest of the ridiculously opulent room, one large enough that a small house could fit inside it. It feels hollow in here. Cold. Unfeeling. Not like Meren. She must hate it. Feel so alone.

That's assuming she hasn't succumbed to Eidolon the way her sister did.

"We'll have to wait," Cain whispers. "Somewhere no one will see us."

We both look around. There aren't many places to hide one of us in this breezy, wide-open space, let alone two of us. Not that I can see.

"Wait. The hidden room," Cain says. "There's got to be one, right?"

I know what he's talking about. In the rooms Tabra lived in when she was princess, there was a secret chamber for Meren, the hidden twin. The queens of Aryd have been concealing their second-born twin sisters for centuries, generations. Makes sense the queen's chambers would have a space like that, too.

We split up, pressing against the walls until I get to a section that looks as solid as the rest, but when I push against it, a hidden panel springs open silently.

"Here." I wave him over.

Cain grabs a candle.

As if that's going to protect him from the Shadows if they break free. Or me if I accidentally lose my temper. We're about to lock ourselves in a small room together, though, so I decide not to point that out.

Before closing the door, I pause and look across the room toward the passage that leads deeper into the palace. To where Meren is celebrating. Now that I'm here, I don't know if I can make myself wait. She's so close.

I've waited months. Months I've been forced to exercise patience I don't claim to have. Months of roiling terror for her as I waited and planned and prayed to the goddesses that she wasn't dead or being tortured. Months of being drip fed news about her.

I'm not sure what I'll do when I finally see her. Hopefully keep my head and get all three of us out of here safely. But the fact that I can hardly make myself wait in her room until she returns should be a warning.

I will do anything, kill anyone, sacrifice everyone—including myself—to get to her. To keep her safe.

*Because she is mine.*

“What are you doing?” Cain snaps.

I don't answer. Instead, I close the door, and we wait.

## 2

### The False Queen

#### Meren

Fear is like sand.

It's impossible to get rid of once it touches you. The tiny grains in small amounts might only chafe, but if it's left to build, to collect more and more, those grains turn into massive dunes that are exhausting to scale, or worse, become quicksand that will swallow a person whole.

I sit stiffly on my onyx throne, an inane half smile pinned to my mouth as before me, my kingdom dances.

Highborn authorities currently in favor with the crown—my *sister's* crown—are dressed in fancy costumes that mimic flowers that only grow for a single day after a rain in our desert dominion of Aryd. The dancers swirl by in a kaleidoscope of color, blurring together until all I see are flashes.

Cunning eyes turned my way, always watching.

Smiling mouths that look more like bared teeth.

Jangling laughter that sets my nerves on a knife's edge.

They're all here to celebrate my nineteenth birthday. Mine and Tabra's. Only my twin—the true Queen of Aryd—isn't here. I am. And they all think I'm her.

A large hand lands on mine. Gently, or so the people looking on will think. What they don't know is there's always purpose in the way Eidolon touches me, and I have to try hard...so bloody hard...not to flinch. I force myself to face him.

Turquoise eyes.

I don't like meeting his gaze. His eyes remind me too much of—

I cut myself off from thinking the name and focus instead on the man at my side right this second.

King Eidolon. My husband as long as I continue to play this role of queen in my sister's place.

His lips draw back in a smile. "Happy name day, my queen."

Name day. What a joke.

My name was erased from the Book of Names on the day of my birth. Until recently, no one has ever known that our line of queens produces twins. One to rule. One to forfeit.

I'm supposed to be the forfeit. The second born. The body double. The decoy. The fake.

Look how well it's working.

A shudder slithers down my spine and I have to consciously try not to pluck at the material of my gown. I'm supposed to look like a cactus rose, all pale pinks and soft petals, as a foil to Eidolon's ice blue costume. But the skirt is so flouncy it annoys me, the mask itches, and the bodice presses my breasts up practically to my chin. Every breath makes them heave.

All of which make sitting beautifully still for the king at my side near impossible.

He knows I'm not Tabra. He knows. And he and I are both putting on a show together for my people while he hunts for my sister and everyone else I hid from him. What he doesn't know is that I'm also putting on a show for him.

Months spent pretending to be besotted with this man, just like Tabra had been before I got her away from him. Away from the man who has secretly killed our queens for centuries. The man my sister *married* after he poisoned her with a gift of an amulet—the same amulet that now hangs around *my* neck. A man *I* also happen to be magically bound to by a sand nymph's curse.

I only just found out about that.

With every passing heartbeat, I've expected to become Eidolon's puppet, my strings pulled by his every whim and wish. But I feel...nothing. No tug. No urge to follow. No sense that he controls me or my power—either with the amulet or the curse or any other magical means. I honestly don't know what's supposed to happen.

So I've been playing like one or all of those things have done their job and I'm his.

Thankfully, he doesn't seem to notice my shiver of revulsion as he leans closer. "If I haven't said so already, you look truly enchanting tonight."

I want to vomit.

"Thank you," I murmur instead, lowering my gaze in a flutter of lashes. Do I sound pleased enough? Insipid enough? Flattered enough? How did Tabra sound when she was the one under his thrall?



I force my stiff cheeks to move and smile back. “And thank you for my name day celebration, my king. Are you enjoying it?”

He gives a small hum that could be either agreement or denial. There’s a look in his eyes I can’t quite pinpoint, and I have to keep myself from fidgeting in my seat.

Then he gives my hand a squeeze. “Do you know the biggest mistake of my life was falling in love?” He leans back in his high-backed throne covered in cold-looking gemstones—all blues and whites, reminding me of the portal room in Tyndra—the picture of relaxed and casual. “The first incarnation of me.” He says this in a low voice for my ears only. No one else knows the source of his immortality, how for centuries he’s shed his shadows to create a younger version of himself. “That man fell in love.”

Looking at *this* incarnation of Eidolon, it’s hard to imagine he ever loved anyone but himself. This one is evil incarnate. Although I did fall in love with a different version of this man, the only Shadow of his to escape him.

Reven.

He’s hiding in the desert somewhere. With Tabra. With the Vanished. I should be with them. Instead, I’m stuck here.

Eidolon cocks his head. “Do you want to know what happened?”

All I can do is nod.

“His lover betrayed him. In the most ruthless, heartbreaking way. The Eidolon of that age made a vow to himself that he would right all her wrongs against him and against the world...and he would never allow himself to be so pathetically weak again.”

Why is he telling me this? In the middle of my party of all places. Is it a warning not to fall in love with him?

“I would *never* betray you.” I have to say it. He expects me to.

He hums and runs a hand affectionately over my hair, which is slicked back in a bun at my nape, like he’s petting a dog. “As sitting queen of this dominion, what do you think is your most sacred duty?”

This feels like a trick. Like a test. Or am I being paranoid? “To protect my people.”

He huffs a laugh. Does the polish of his smile tarnish a little bit? “I had hoped you would say to love and honor your husband, the *king*.”

I blanch. *Does he know?* The question rips through me. Does he know I’ve been faking being under his thumb and infatuated? That the truth is I hate him with the fires of the burning lands? But he can’t. Nothing has changed

recently.

I don't know how I hold my composure, but I don't flinch. I don't look away.

He studies me a long moment, then, "I have a gift for you."

Eidolon gets to his feet, an intimidating figure of a man—tall and lean with jet black hair silvering slightly at the temples, and with a commanding aura that most mistake for leadership but I know to be cruelty. Immediately, the music stops, and the dancers watch him and wait. He holds out a hand to me, his expression a charming mask as he gazes at me, lips tilted and striking eyes unblinking.

Everyone around us—all my viziers, authoritates, and even the servants—believe his act.

I know better.

Every day, they tell me how smart I was to align our struggling dominion with his strong one. How lucky I am, the way he loves me so much that he never wants to let me out of his sight. They tell me a lot of things about him.

They would probably find it very odd if I ran away screaming right now.

I glance at his hand.

The last thing I want to do is leave the relative safety of the crowd to go anywhere with him, but I have no choice. A girl under his spell would go quite happily.

So I let him help me rise. Eidolon turns us both to the room with a wide smile, like he's presenting us to our people, and waves his other hand. "Carry on without us while I treat my queen to her gift in private."

The expressions all around us are variations of delighted or sly. Immediately the music resumes, and so does the dancing, as he leads me down the steps of the dais. The crowd parts as we walk, bowing and murmuring things like "joyous name day" and "many happy summer solstices, domina" as we pass.

We make it out of the throne room, into the gardens between it and the palace. I can't walk through here without thinking of the night a certain Shadowraith kidnapped the wrong princess.

Reven won't come for me tonight, though. It's been so long that I don't anticipate it every second. Not anymore.

I haven't given up. Just...settled in.

We enter the palace itself, our footsteps echoing off the smooth obsidian floors. Eidolon takes me to his chambers in the royal suites, next door to my

own. With what I can only describe as a flourish, he opens the door and ushers me in. The light of the brazier fire casts a warm glow over the king's massive bedchamber—

I jerk to a halt, my lungs freezing in my chest.

*No.*

Standing before me is my handmaiden, Achlys—the woman my sister loves deeply and my only friend in the palace. She stares at me with wide, terror-filled green eyes as Eidolon's trusted general, Quinten, holds her at sword point.

*Goddess save us. He knows.*

### 3

#### Ashes, Ashes

I stand very still, Eidolon beside me. Watching my reaction.

What I *don't* do is babble. I've learned to control that particular nervous tell these last few months in the palace.

"Achlys?" Her name punches from me in a way I don't have to fake. I turn to the king with equally authentic wide-eyed horror. "What is going on here?"

He gives me a pitying look, then waves a hand in her direction. "Isn't it obvious, my queen? She is your gift."

Wait, what? Panic sets in, the tremble of my hands spreading to my shoulders. I can't fall apart now, not when I don't know what's happening. How would a girl who was supposed to be under his thrall react?

As if he senses my struggle, he narrows his gaze. "Rather...her life is your gift."

Bile churns in my stomach. The air in the room...it's so thin. Or am I hyperventilating? My breasts strain against the tight bonds of my dress with each inhale. Can he see how fast I'm breathing? I can't slow it down. "I still don't see—"

"She was found riffling through my chambers."

My heart plummets to the floor. I knew it. I *knew* I shouldn't have told her about that book. Eidolon kept a diary for centuries. Reven described it to me once. That book *has* to have answers. Answers for why Eidolon steals and kills our queens. What his end game is. Maybe even how we defeat him.

We've fought him and failed once already.

The book is *important*.

I would have been looking if I could, but the king has a way of keeping me locked up without anyone else knowing. I'm not even sure how. But any time I leave any room, he appears at my side. And of course, I have to pretend like I'm thrilled at his attentiveness rather than alarmed.

This "under his thrall" thing has been a pain in my royal ass.

I told Achlys about the book only a day or two ago. I'm guessing that while Eidolon and I and the rest of the palace were distracted with my

celebration, she must have gone searching in here, the most likely place he'd keep it.

The question now is, what kind of response is he expecting from me?

I try to make a show of goggling. "Is this true?" I demand of Achlys in my most queenly voice, channeling my grandmother, who was ruler of Aryd before Tabra and me.

She doesn't answer. Why doesn't she answer? Why doesn't she whimper or make a noise? Blink? Something?

After a beat, I face Eidolon. "Was anything taken?"

The way he's watching me... I can't tell if it's with amusement or suspicion. Is he toying with me? "No."

"Let's be thankful for that, at least." I fluff my fancy, floral skirt, trying to play the part of a frilly, empty-headed royal.

"But you know the punishment."

My heart rate kicks up another notch, because I do. "Are you sure she wasn't simply cleaning? I mean, she must be punished, of course, because you've made it quite clear that your rooms are off-limits even to servants unless one of your advisors is here."

He only hums. I can't get a read on him, but he's definitely watching me.

I try a tentative smile. It feels wrong on my face. "Death does seem a little...excessive."

He clucks his tongue like a nanny scolding a toddler. Then slides an arch look at Achlys. "Answer my next questions with the truth, and I won't kill her."

The words drop between us like a Devourer bursting from the ocean to swallow me whole. The truth? What does he know? What is he trying to get me to reveal?

My knees are wobbling so hard, I press my thighs together so I don't fall over.

*Pull yourself together.*

That's Omma's voice in my head—my great-aunt who raised me and trained me to be who and what I am. She wasn't what I'd call a soft woman. Stone-cold bitch is closer. It doesn't help.

Eidolon sobers, no longer hiding behind the sham of charm. "Was she in my chambers at your order?"

*Goddess save us. What do I say?*

Achlys did this without my knowing, but she did it to help me. To help

Tabra.

I touch the signet ring on my pinkie. The one bearing the striking snake sigil of our house. The one identical to my sister's. I can't let the king kill Achlys, which he'll definitely do if he thinks she did this on her own. The problem is, confessing to giving an order would expose my own deception of being on his side.

He needs me, for now, so I don't think he'd kill me. But resort to other means of making me do what he wants? Tell him what he needs to know? I'm pretty sure torture of some sort will be in my future.

I don't have any choice here.

I close my eyes. "Yes. I gave her the order."

"Quinten, you know what to do."

At Eidolon's command, I jump and open my eyes. "What?" My gaze swings between the two men and then to her. To my loyal friend, who stayed with me here in the palace when she didn't have to. She could have run. Could have saved herself months ago. Could have gone to find Tabra, who I know she worries about desperately every single day.

Eidolon unclenches his hands. I hadn't even noticed they were fisted, hiding the purple glow. Darkness unwraps from around her body, and her eyes flood with tears. She makes a gagging sound, and more shadow pours out of her mouth, like a black silk swath.

She's been bound and subdued and silenced by his darkness this entire time. I know why. So we couldn't try to communicate with each other. Warn each other. Try to think of some way out of this together.

Without a word, Quinten takes her roughly by the arm and drags her to the door.

"I'm sorry, domina," she whimpers as they pass us.

As she disappears into the hallway beyond, I lunge after her.

To do what, I don't know. Stop him. Help her. Give her a chance to run. Except a new rope of darkness wraps around me, pinning my arms to my sides, Eidolon's violet light competing with the glow of the fires in the room now that he's no longer hiding it from me.

I'm lifted into the air and deposited on the other side of the room. Before I can protest, Quinten returns, not with Achlys, but with the head butler here in the palace. Ushi. He's been a servant here for three generations of my family. He used to sneak Tabra—or me, when I was standing in for her—sweet treats at dinner, knowing she loved anything with sugar. His cragged face, aged by

time and our hot, dry climate, is as familiar to me as any in the palace.

Ushi is bound and gagged not with shadow but with linen strips. Quinten leaves, the door closing behind him with finality.

“What is Ushi doing here?” I demand. Or try to demand. Panic laces my voice like poison.

Darkness snaps out from the corners of the room and wraps around Ushi’s neck so violently his sunken eyes bulge and his face immediately turns purple.

“Stop!” I struggle against my own bonds. “Stop! You said—”

“I said the truth would save Achlys. For now.” Eidolon isn’t looking at Ushi, but at me. “However, I can’t let this transgression go unpunished. Someone must be the example.”

The example? Goddess. Ushi is the head of the servants here. He is beloved and respected and old enough that the younger servants try to help him. We tried to get him to retire, offered him a permanent home here in the palace to enjoy the end of his days. He refused.

Eidolon picked him because without him, the workings of the household will suffer. Because Ushi is familiar enough to me that I’ll feel the loss personally. And...because Ushi is old enough that his death won’t be questioned by anyone in the palace.

A secret threat for Eidolon to hold over me.

I reach toward him. “No—”

The shadows writhe, and with an audible pop, Ushi’s neck snaps. He goes suddenly, sickeningly limp. Then the shadow disappears like smoke in the wind, and he drops to the floor in a heap of twisted limbs.

## We All Fall Down

The king steps over the corpse, closing in on me, and I flinch. I can't help it.

Every scrap of the veneer of his charm is gone. The churning bile surges up my throat, choking me. The man before me isn't human. He's evil in a skin suit.

Reven was right to steal all of Eidolon's Shadows when the king shed them the last time. Someone had to try to stop him.

"I guess that sand nymph's curse didn't bind our souls after all." He says it almost casually.

Immediately, an image of the day the curse snapped into place—the first time we locked eyes—flashes through my mind. A line of glittering sand connected us, and then shadow swirled over and around those grains like dense smoke until it obliterated the light.

I thought I saw a hint of my own death in that moment. Suffocated. Annihilated.

Is that what he's about to do to me?

Eidolon's hand flashes out, and he yanks the amulet—his amulet—from around my neck in a painful snap of the chain. Then he shoves it in a pocket. "It's time for us to be completely honest with each other, Mereneith. Starting with you making me a portal."

The first time Eidolon saw me, I used my powers over sand to create a magical glass portal that could take us anywhere. It's how I got my sister and Reven away from him and to safety.

"I can't."

"Stop lying." The "p" comes out like a pop of sound, and he rolls his shoulders like he's having to hold himself in check. Now he's letting me see the blistering anger underneath.

"I'm not." I scramble to find words. "Ever since I've been here, my powers have dwindled. They're practically gone."

It's the truth, but I see in his eyes that he doesn't believe me.

A torrent of shadow rises over me, and everything goes dark and loud, like a sandstorm, before it disappears just as fast, only now we're standing in my



chambers.

Then darkness shoots out from his hands and fills the space between two of the large white columns that lead out onto my balcony. The shadow spreads and grows, smoothing into a parchment-thin barrier until it blocks the view of the night sky and the gardens outside.

He does it again to the next gap between columns. And another. Until every window, every doorway, every single way out is blocked. Then, with a snap of his fingers, those shadows turn clear like the towering glass walls that run the entire outside border of Aryd. The ones that keep out the Devourers.

Not gone, but gone enough that no one other than me will know they are there.

So *this* is how he's kept me prisoner. He's showing me the trick now, which I admit is way more frightening than not being sure.

Why? To make absolutely certain I can't leave? Or to muffle the sounds of my screams?

"I'm not the monster you think I am. I have people of my own to protect. People important to me. You won't believe my reasons—not after a lifetime of being fed lies." He stalks toward me. "So I won't bother trying to convince you. However, if you want to live, I suggest you stop giving me excuses and do *everything* I say."

Behind him, our combined silhouettes are cast by the firelight from the brazier at my back and the glow of Eidolon's hands. I watch in horror as his shadow on the wall, in silhouette, wraps its hands around my own shadow's neck.

I can't feel it. He's not actually touching me. But it's like I'm watching what he really wants to do to me play out in shadow.

He's going to kill me. Get what he wants and then kill me.

A fresh wave of terror is chased by a hotter, more violent surge of anger that ignites every inch of my body. A vicious concoction of emotions.

I will *never* help him. I will never be his puppet or do anything that would let him gain more power or go after the people I love. Not if I can help it.

If I'm dead anyway...then, screw him.

Eidolon shoves his face close enough to mine that I can smell mint from the iced treat served at my name day celebration on his breath. "Quinten is still out in the hall with your precious servant."

I understand the threat.

I have a choice: protect her or protect hundreds of innocent lives. My

sister, Reven, Cain, the Vanished, and the Wanderers. Thousands when I count the people of Aryd. My people. Maybe even the people in the other five dominions of Nova. They think they're safe in Mariana, Tropikis, Savannah, Wildernyss, and even the king's dominion of Tyndra. They're not.

If I make him a portal, he can go anywhere. If I make him several, he can send his armies wherever he wants.

Giving in to Eidolon puts them all at risk. Every soul in this world.

I stare at the floor, trying not to give in to creeping despair, my heart growing heavier with every passing breath. I know who I have to sacrifice.

*I'm sorry, Achlys.*

"You *will* obey me," he growls.

I close my eyes, and a single name fills my mind as I search for strength to see this through.

*Reven.*

My Shadowraith. He was supposed to come back for me, but he didn't make it in time. Or maybe Eidolon got to him already. Either way, I'll never see him again.

Almost as if Reven answers, a cold breeze unfurls in the room, stirring the sheer curtains that hang between the large, buttressed columns. The prickle that skates over my skin hardens my resolve, and I open my eyes and glare at the king. Maybe if I can get to one of the knives hidden between my mattresses...

"Obey you?" I scoff. "The hells I will."

## 5

### About Bloody Time

The fury that descends over the king's face now that he's not hiding himself from me sends me scrambling backward until I tumble onto my bed on my ass.

"I've been gentle and patient until now," he snarls in a voice like broken glass. "After the celebration is over and our guests have gone, you'll find out exactly how much."

On that very real threat, Eidolon disappears from the room, shadowing away and leaving me—chest heaving and heart pounding with terror—to agonize for another few hours over what he means by that.

Actually...forget that.

"I'll be ready, asshole," I spit at the closed door.

I crouch down, pulling out the knives I've hidden between the mattresses. I have no doubt I'll lose the fight, but I plan to go down fighting all the same.

"Meren." That voice—that velvet-and-iron voice that Eidolon shares with Reven—sounds directly beside my ear.

The king is back? Was he toying with me or something? The burst of anger tinged with fear is instant, like a snakebite, the poison of it spreading with every erratic pump of my heart.

I jump up and whirl around, a knife at his neck.

"That's my girl," someone else in the room says in a satisfied murmur, the words hardly penetrating through my shock.

Because the eyes I'm staring into aren't Eidolon's eyes.

"Meren, it's me."

As fast as I lunged, I stop, going dead still as recognition slowly dawns. I've dreamed this a thousand times, but after what just happened with Eidolon, I'm not sure this is real.

He lifts his chin, and the stubble on his cheek brushes against my hand holding the knife.

*This is real.*

On a gasp, I drop the knife. It hits the mattress with a muffled *thud*. I clap a

hand over my mouth, trying to muffle the sounds that want to pour out of me.

Reven.

“Hells,” he mutters, then drags me against his body.

Relief and elation are a burst of light inside me as he captures my lips and kisses the ever-loving life out of me.

He feels the same, hard and solid, hand buried in my hair. He smells the same, fresh like the creosus willows that manage to thrive in the deserts. Like home.

He gives a low groan, like he’s been lost in the desert and has finally found a hidden spring.

*Reven.*

Goddess. He’s here. He’s really here in the palace. He came for me.

He’s kissing me.

His taste slides over my tongue and through my blood. Everything about me centers and settles. I tighten my arms around his neck and crawl up his chest to wrap my legs around him. To burrow into him.

Only, just as fast and way too soon, reality slices through my haze of happiness.

Eidolon.

I yank back, breaking us apart on a gasp for air, his hand still tangled in my hair. “How did you get in here?”

I didn’t see him come in. Maybe if he shadowed in, we’re okay.

“The wide-open window.” The harsh, slightly accusatory grumble has me leaning to the side to look over Reven’s shoulder and straight into the deep brown eyes of my best friend.

Cain.

His expression is a sandstorm, but we have bigger problems than whatever crawled up his ass.

The window... *Oh goddess.*

Eidolon will have felt someone come into my room with those blasted shadow wards of his. He’s going to show up any second. Fear wraps around my heart and squeezes until I think it might pop.

With frantic hands, I push at Reven to let me go. At first, he tightens his grip, but then he finally gets the message and sets me down. I put a finger over my lips, then, as fast as I can, shove both him and Cain across the room.

I open the hidden panel in the wall. Swinging the door wider, I usher them both inside. Eidolon doesn’t know about this space. I don’t think so, at least,

though clearly I have no idea what the king does and doesn't know. Maybe his shadow alarm is only at the windows and doors?

I shove them in there. "Don't make a sound," I whisper.

But before I can shut the door on two sets of thundering scowls, Reven slams a hand out, stopping me. "We were hiding in this room when you and the king came in."

I stop at that, staring at him, trying to reset my thinking and my rushing pulse at the same time. If they were already here before the wards went up...

I guess that buys us a reprieve, but better safe than dead, and we shouldn't take our time.

Without a word, I rush back out into my room and reach under the mattress to grasp the amulet hidden there and slip it into the breastband under my fancy ball gown.

*My amulet, not Eidolon's.*

This one was passed down from hidden twin to hidden twin. I thought it had been helping me, amplifying my powers, but it's been cold and unresponsive since I got stuck here. Afraid he'd take it, I hid it months ago because it's so similar to Eidolon's, though mine is made of white lightning glass instead of blue.

I return to the room to find Reven standing in the doorway, watching. He steps aside to let me in, closing the door behind me.

Which is when I get a better look at him. He looks awful—the sharpness of his features now gaunt, skin tanner than before but somehow still more wan underneath, dark circles under his eyes that look almost like bruises. What have the king's Shadows been doing to him? Or is this the result of his wound? Is this why it took him so long to rescue me?

"You came." The words are a whisper.

He gives me a solemn nod, gaze searching my face. "You doubted I would?"

Did I hurt him with that question?

"No." I've been so alone...so afraid. "More like, what took so long?"

Cain clears his throat, a sound that might be a cough or a laugh.

I look over at my best friend, who wants to make me his heartmate. Who wanted me to leave Aryd and Eidolon and all our problems behind for my sister to deal with alone and disappear into the desert with him. The same man I sent away because I was hell-bent on taking down the king.

Much good that did me.

I glance between him and Reven. Wait. They came *together*?

I would have paid good money to be there for that.

Cain watches me, his expression not warm and smiling, like he normally is with me, but instead lined with a stiff sort of betrayal that penetrates my heart like a knife slipping slowly between my ribs.

But the threat of Eidolon turning back up means I can't deal with him right now. With either of them.

I cross my arms. "I can't leave."

Eidolon will know if I do.

And I'm not leaving Achlys behind.

## 6

### Get Out

If I thought Cain was scowling a second ago, his expression now could take the hide off a bull. I expected that. Reven's reaction is harder to take. He goes dead silent, dead still, but it's his eyes that kill me. The turquoise dulls with a kind of resigned acceptance.

"Fuck. She's fallen under the same spell as Tabra," Cain says to Reven as though I'm not standing right here.

I roll my eyes. "I'm not spelled. Achlys—"

Reven cuts me off. "We're not leaving you."

"Listen to me—"

"Shadow her out of here," Cain says to him. "We'll figure the rest out later. It's too dangerous to stick around."

I hop back, hand up. "Don't."

Reven took me against my will once by shadow, the night he kidnapped me thinking I was Tabra. Helpless is my least favorite feeling, worse maybe even than fear. I really should make him promise never to do that again.

When the darkness doesn't even twitch, I lower my hand slowly. "I'm not leaving Achlys. He has her."

A tic sets off at the corner of Reven's right eye. An echoing hardness expands in the scar holding my insides *inside*. A scar made of the shadows he knit my body back together with when I accidentally impaled myself on my own glass.

At least, I *think* that's him I'm feeling.

Cain looks away from me, shoulders practically cut from granite he's so tense. Achlys helped him before. She helped him find me when Reven—overtaken by the king's Shadows—locked me in the room like this one in Tabra's old chambers. Cain knows Achlys.

"She's my *friend*," I say to him.

He'll know what that word means to me. I don't have many, and Cain is one of the few.

Reven studies me, then nods once. "Then we go get her."

Cain jerks back. "We can't. You need to get Meren out of here."

“I plan to. As soon as we get Meren’s friend.”

They glare at each other.

I throw my hands up. “Oh my goddess. We don’t have time for this—”

Reven holds up a hand. “I’ll go.”

“I said *no*,” Cain snaps.

The two face off. Cain fuming. Reven unmovable. I know when Cain gives in because he crosses his arms. “Fine. We go together.” His mutter is grudging. “But you get Meren away if we’re caught.”

I shake my head, and they both give me hard looks. I don’t care. “Eidolon set up some kind of shadow ward around my room. He’ll know if I leave.”

“Hells.” Reven runs a hand through his hair, glancing toward the panel in the wall. “What about when anyone else comes in or out?” Reven demands. “Does he know?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Are you sure?”

Cringe. “No.”

Cain’s hands drop to his sides, and the two of them look at each other. I guess somewhere along the way they learned to do that guy-communication thing. Any second, they might start speaking in grunts.

Finally, he sighs. “Do you think you can get all four of us out?” he asks Reven.

“Only if I don’t use my powers until that moment. And I won’t be able to get us very far.”

I frown. Given his appearance and the fact that he didn’t shadow me out of here to start with, I’m guessing he’s still pretty weak. Is this why he couldn’t come sooner? Just how bad was he when we got separated?

“*I’ll* go get Achlys and bring her back here,” Cain says. “Meren stays in her room in case Eidolon checks, and you hide in here. When we get back, Reven gets us all out. Agreed?”

I blow out a silent breath. I hate this plan, but I refuse to leave her behind. Eidolon will kill her, or use her as bait, or something unfathomably worse. “Best guess is she’s in the prisons. Do you need me to describe the way?”

His lips quirk, a gleam entering his eyes that I’ve missed seeing so much. “Who taught you to sneak around? I’ll find it.”

I roll my eyes. “Knowing a few details wouldn’t hurt, though.”

He sobers. “Tell me.”

In a lowered voice, I explain the easiest way to get there and back safely.



When I finish, Cain shoots me a wink, then leaves, striding out of the little room, across my chamber, then out the door with a confidence I'm far from feeling. I follow and sit on my bed and make myself count to a hundred. Then do it again.

No Eidolon.

Maybe he only detects me?

I glance toward the wall that hides my Shadowraith behind it. What I want to do is talk to Reven, just in case something goes wrong getting away from here. Just in case this is the last moment we have together. It's a risk, but I go back to the hidden room, closing the panel door behind me. He doesn't bother acting surprised.

Looking at Reven, an ache blooms in my chest. *So little time.* "I could see you."

His expression flickers with confusion, his only reaction.

"The glass flower I gave you is a tiny portal, remember? The glass is too warped and layered for me to send anything through. But I could see you sometimes—distorted parts of you. And I could...listen." At first. Before my powers lessened.

He blows out a long breath.

"Did you ever hear me?" I have to know. "I called to you at night." Every single night.

That tic at the side of his eye sets off again. "Once."

My heart leaps. He *could* hear me. I don't know why that means so much, but it does. But...only once?

"For a long time, I was too weak, and all I could hear were Ei—" He breaks off, grimacing like he's in pain. I guess the Shadows still don't like him talking about Eidolon. "I thought I was conjuring you in my head or maybe hearing one of the people in trouble."

He's talking about the Vanished. They are refugees now. They need him. More than they need me, even. "If we run into trouble getting away, I want you to leave me—"

He crosses to me in two strides, hands on either side of my face, fingers slipping into my hair, expression as intense as I've ever seen, which is saying a lot. "I'm *not* leaving you again."

The dull knife of separation that has been cutting away at me all these months—I see it in his eyes, too, the determination flattening his lips, feel it in the urgent squeeze of his grip. Being away from him like that...it *hurt*.

Because of our new, untried feelings for each other, or because of the shadow rite we performed to heal me and the connection it formed—I'm not sure which. Our scars bind us, I think. Though we haven't had time to explore this...this bond between us.

Still don't.

The shadows gutter, flickering in the dim light of the single candle, and a glimmer of a face—another face—crosses his. One of the Shadows. Reven's ocean eyes take on an unrelenting glitter, sharp as obsidian glass.

No. Not Reven's eyes.

I wrap my hands around his wrists, brushing my thumbs over the silvery, puckered scars there, so similar to mine, made the same way but a long time ago. A shudder passes through him and into me and grounds both of us, and Reven returns to me, the Shadow gone.

“He needs me too much to kill me,” he manages. The “yet” hangs in the air between us. “But he can't have you. He *can't*—”

“I'm not who he wants.” Not really. My ability to make portals would be handy for him, but that's about it. “You're who he wants. You and...” Oh goddess, how selfish am I? I haven't asked about my sister. I bite my lip. “How is Tabra?”

His stillness says all I need to know. She was in bad shape last time I saw her. I'd been hoping distance from Eidolon would help. I guess not.

“Tell me—”

A subtle disturbance in the air—a cold dread seeping through my blood—warns me before Eidolon's voice fills the chamber, echoing off the walls. “I knew you'd come for her eventually.”

Reven and I both jerk around as the panel door that I am sure I closed opens wider and the king steps into the frame, blocking the only way out.

Eidolon tips his head, eyes a stormy sea of fury focused solely on Reven. “You certainly took your time.”

My heart drops to the floor. Mother goddess. I've been bait all along.

Reven lurches forward. I'm not sure if he or the Shadows are in control, but instinct has me grabbing his arm. “Don't.”

We can't repeat what happened last time we fought the king. We're not ready to take on Eidolon.

In jerking moves, Reven yanks me in tight against his body with one arm. Shadows rise around us but fall away as quickly. Like they stopped working. Reven grunts like he's in pain.

Eidolon's expression tilts into something smug. "Having trouble?"

Arms of shadow whip out from the king like the tentacles of the Hollow—the only Devourer I've ever encountered in person—coming straight at us. At me. At Reven.

"No!" I cry out.

What happens next comes so fast, I hardly know it before it's over. I raise my hands like I can stop Eidolon. On a feral, otherworldly snarl of sound from Reven, darkness comes up and over us.

The last thing I see is Eidolon's astounded fury as his shadowy arms barely miss us.

## Part 2

### A Waiting Move

We Left  
Them Behind

We disappear in shadow...a whiplash blink of darkness. I can't see us moving, but I've done this with Reven before—traveled this way. It feels the same, though last time, I had a chance to take in the sense that we were moving. This time, it's faster than a twinkle. I know it happened, but I'm standing outside the city of Oaesys so suddenly, if the view hadn't changed, I'd think we hadn't gone anywhere.

I stare at the skyline of the city, a stark relief in the starlight, a league or more from where I stand.

Realization of what just happened hits, and a bubble of panic squeezes through my shock. A sound I don't even recognize bursts from me as I surge forward to run back to the city.

Reven wraps an arm around my waist, and my feet kick into the air as I try to get away.

"We left them!" I yell, flailing and pushing against his hold. We left Cain and Achlys behind.

His grip only tightens the harder I struggle.

I jam an elbow into his side. At his grunt that sounds pained enough to get through my panic, I still and swing my gaze to the man who yanked me out of the palace with shadow. Only, it finally sinks in that Reven looks as dazed as I feel.

Now that I've stopped trying to run, he lets go, giving his head a shake.

"We have to go back." I point.

His lips flatten in a grim slash, but I can tell it's less to do with who we left than how it happened. "We can't."

"What? Just—"

"I can't."

I stop. Reven looks like death on a stick. Sweat beads his forehead, and the pallor under his skin is visible even in the light of only one of the three moons.

He's completely drained.

Teeth gritted, I leave him behind and start trudging through the sand in the direction of the city. If Cain returns with Achlys, they're going to find a bad situation in my rooms instead of Reven and me. Eidolon will... Goddess, I don't know what he'll do to them. "They're walking into a trap. They won't know he's waiting there—"

Reven catches up with me quickly, taking me by both arms. He leans over, face right in mine, even as I strain against his hold. "Think, Meren. Cain would be furious if I let you go back. If I let you put yourself at risk for him."

"But he'd do it for me." The words tear at my throat. I push at his chest. It barely moves him. "I can't leave them."

A clamor of bells goes off, able to be heard throughout the city and even here, far on the desert outskirts. The palace alarm.

"You can't go back," he says quietly.

I glance from Reven to the city and back, heart cracking with each peal of those wretched bells. He's right. We can't risk either of us falling into Eidolon's hands now. I'm helpless all over again.

Powerless.

Goddess, I hate this feeling. One I'm all too familiar with—after all, my purpose in this life was written in stone before I was ever born—but that doesn't mean I deal with it well.

Frustration pulses through my blood, and I have no place to put that pent-up energy other than clenching my fists into Reven's shirt. I can't do this. I can't—

"We have to go. Now." He takes off, and I have to scurry to follow.

As usual, when the man is on a mission, Reven walks with purpose, like a Devourer slicing through the ocean for a meal floundering in nearby waters. Unfortunately, I have shorter legs, and, even used to the desert, I'm stumbling along beside him.

"Wait. We're going by foot?" I pointedly look down at my fancy and extremely impractical party dress.

"I have clothes."

"Good for you." Did he miss the point? I wave a hand at myself. "I don't."

"I meant clothes for you."

"Oh." That's something at least. Even if his things will swamp me.

"What about Cain and Achlys—"

He doesn't slow down or look at me. "Cain and I spent days traveling here together. We had time to work through a lot of different scenarios. I showed

him the way through the cistern you used to sneak in and out.”

“Achlys knows the palace maybe even better than I do.”

“Then they have a chance.”

I’m huffing and puffing now. “A little slower if you want to keep me around.” I want to stop them even as the words are leaving my mouth. He’s trying to help me, and I’m back to pampered-princess mode.

It’s a defensive instinct. Or that’s what I tell myself.

Reven says nothing. He does slow, though not by much.

Is it me? I know we’re trying to get out of here fast, but he’s being a little...twitchy.

“You did this when you kidnapped me the first time, you know. Walked really fast. Of course, we could have been followed then, too, which was probably why you were in such a hurry. And I guess this time doesn’t count as kidnapping...”

I trail off as he slows more, though he *still* doesn’t look at me. And the way his face is a mask of...nothing...makes me hesitate.

“You still talk when you get nervous.” His slightly crooked mouth doesn’t so much as tilt as he says this.

No, I don’t. Not anymore. Or maybe it’s just around him now. Or because...what happened to the man who kissed me breathless in the palace? I can’t even tell if he’s mentioning this with affection or irritation.

“Who said I’m nervous?”

He huffs a laugh that I’m pretty sure is disbelief and speeds up again, muttering something under his breath.

I stumble, then have to trot to catch up again. “What?”

He doesn’t answer for a second, then says, “If Cain beats me back to where we left the horses, I’ll never hear the end of it.”

I’m pretty sure that’s not what he said, but I get that now’s not the time to have a chat about our relationship, so I leave it. Except he’s walking too fast again. And acting grim in a way that’s starting to make me as twitchy as he is.

“Hey.” I reach for his arm.

He stops entirely and steps away from my touch in a deliberate way that is impossible to misinterpret. That stings. “Okay. What is going on with you?”

His hands move to his hips, but he’s staring at the ground. Why won’t he look at me?

“Reven?” I don’t try to touch him again.

His jaw works. “That wasn’t me. That got us out of the palace. I wasn’t the one who controlled the shadows.”



## 8

### If Not You, Then...

I don't understand. Reven didn't make the shadows get us out of the palace? Sure as the sun rises, Eidolon didn't do it. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know." He looks at me finally, and I can see the worry etching lines around his eyes.

He doesn't know. How is that possible? "Are you trying to confuse me?"

"No."

"Scare me, then?"

He gives a little growl of frustration. "No. Although, as usual, you should be more afraid than you are."

"I hide it better than most," I quip. I'm not entirely being sarcastic, either. I have been flat-out terrified for months straight with none the wiser.

His snort is unamused. "I knew my control was shaky, but I didn't know it was this bad."

"How bad is bad?"

"I tried to get us away, but it didn't work."

That's bad. "Did the Shadows stop you, or Eidolon?"

"I don't know."

"Did the Shadows get us out of there?" It makes no sense, but I have to ask.

He runs an agitated hand through his hair, standing it up in spiky chunks. "Meren, I'm telling you I have no idea."

I think he might be really shaken up about this.

Except why? Whatever happened, it got us safely away, right? "Maybe you did it on instinct?"

I've done that before, when I was first coming into my powers over sand.

"Maybe."

I give a frustrated huff. "The Shadows want to return to Eidolon, so they wouldn't. The only other one who could use the shadows is Eidolon, and he definitely wouldn't..." I trail off. Then give him a closer look. He's been taken over by Shadows before without me figuring it out.

He catches my guarded stare and grimaces. "It's me."

"Me, who?" I sound like a bad joke.

"Reven."

How do I believe that? "We really need some kind of secret code or something to help us both be sure."

He says nothing.

"I'm not joking."

"I get that." He pauses, then taps at the silvery scars on his wrist with two fingers.

I raise my eyebrows. "Is that supposed to be—"

"The signal. Yeah." He glances off toward the city. "We need to keep moving."

In other words, stop stalling because the king will come for us sooner rather than later. Hopefully Eidolon has no idea where we are. Does shadowing leave a trail? I open my mouth to ask, only to close it again. Honestly, I'd rather not know.

We complete the next half hour in silence, although I keep sneaking glances at his face. I feel more than see similar glances coming my direction. He's more subtle than I am.

Like me, he doesn't say anything.

After awhile, he points off into the distance. "There."

Sure enough, four horses wait for us on the horizon. One is a pack horse, so if Cain gets to us with Achlys, we'll have to figure that out. They're standing beside what looks like a hole in the ground filled with water. Cain's doing, no doubt.

Imperium split into two types—Hylorae, whose power is over tangible elements like air or rock or fire, and Enfernae, who wield powers over intangible elements like souls or minds...or shadows. Like me, Cain is a Hylorae, only he manipulates water while I control sand.

I'm still not used to the fact that the boy I idolized as a child has powers. It's not that I'm surprised, since both his parents were Imperium and powers are passed through blood. It's more like we've both grown up suddenly, and I'm not used to the changes.

There's no sign of him or Achlys.

"Here. Change into these." Reven pulls stuff out of one of the satchels, then turns his back.

I make a face at him. It's not like he hasn't seen my body. I quickly dress.

He gave me Wanderer clothing, though the rust-red color tells me it's borrowed from a zariphate in the Crimson Desert rather than the Singing Dunes, where Cain's zariphate usually roams. They must have had to move—a lot—to get way up there.

Still, this is more appropriate for the desert than my name day gown, which I leave in a heap on the sand, happily able to breathe better without the torture contraption they call a corset. My new clothes don't fit well, but I don't care. I'm grateful the man thought to bring me some at all. "It's safe to look now."

I don't miss the way his shoulders tense, but I pretend not to notice and scan the horizon in the direction of the city. "How long can we wait?"

"Not long." He glances toward the horizon where the first rays of sunlight are starting to peek through the night. We walked for quite a while.

I cross my arms and keep watch.

*Please let them make it out.*

The sun starts its gradual climb into the sky, lighting the world first with grays and lavenders, then pinks and yellows, and finally the brightness of full sunrise.

And still Cain and Achlys haven't shown.

Reven makes me eat but otherwise doesn't talk. I'm so distracted I barely taste the dried meat and dense bread he handed me, washing it down with surprisingly cool water from Cain's makeshift well.

Reven's not going to wait much longer. I can tell that much.

"Let's wait in the shade," he says.

With deft movements, he sets up a long piece of cloth, using one of the horse's saddles as an anchor and two telescoping sticks to create essentially what is a miniature tent.

I clear my throat. "That's a Wanderer trick."

"I know."

Right. Because he learned it from them like I did. "Did you know most of Nova's math system came from them?"

Oh goddess. What am I talking about? Math systems?

Rather than answering, he beckons me over.

We lean back-to-back. Also a Wanderer trick. In the distance, a telltale undulation of the land catches my eye. I squint at it a second to be sure. "Do you see that?"

He shifts against me to look. Then another grunt—interest or acknowledgment, I'm not sure which.

“It’s a terravore. They can move entire dunes.” As we watch, the huge underground creature makes an appearance, the sands parting way for a dark, leathery beast that arches its shovel-shaped head into the skies on a trumpet of sound we can hear from here. Triumph or warning, it’s a coin toss which.

“I know.”

*Okay then.* “Then you know that if they don’t bury you alive, they eat you.” The terravore in the distance burrows back into the ground with every appearance of glee. “But don’t worry. It’s too far away.”

“I’ve encountered one already.”

My jaw drops, and I’m glad he’s behind me and can’t see. “You have?” Lucky. I’ve only seen them far away, their massive bodies churning the land like ocean waves.

“It didn’t end well for the terravore. Or the platoon of Eidolon’s men in the area.”

“Oh.” There’s a lot to unpack in his answer. I want to ask more questions, but a growing bout of shyness stays my tongue. I mull over why that is.

It doesn’t take much mulling.

A thousand doubts built up inside me during my time as the king’s captive prize in the palace. Months to wonder if what Reven and I had was real, or just in the moment, or a reaction to the pressure we were under, or worse...it was more real for me than it was for him.

I gave myself to this man. Body and soul. And have dreamt of him every night since. I can still feel his touch, his lips, hear his voice... I try not to squirm, but now I’m picturing the way he touched me, the way he *looked* at me. Like I was something precious.

Other than that kiss in my chambers—which I’m starting to think might’ve simply been a result of relief—his behavior this night has been confusing. Distant in a way that is tying knots of unease in my gut.

Maybe I should tell him I missed him? Because I did. It’s all been so fast between us, but that’s the truth. I *missed* him.

But what if he doesn’t feel the same way?

Awkward does not even begin to cover how I’m feeling now. “So,” I try, sifting my fingers through the sand. “What did you spend your time in my desert doing?”

After a beat of silence, he huffs a laugh. “Your time in the palace has reduced you to small talk.”

I mean, what else should I say? *Hey, remember that time you made me*

*come apart in your arms right before everything exploded around us? Any thoughts? What do I call you? My boyfriend? My lover?*

Forget that. It's awful, even in my head.

"You're not exactly giving me much to work with," I grumble.

"Of the two of us, I'm not the talker." His voice is so dry I can't help but chuckle.

"I missed your kind of not talking these past months." The words are out as they come to me, before I can think them through, and I bite my lip.

Maybe we shouldn't be dealing with my emotional insecurities right now anyway. The timing to bring this up is all wrong. Cain and Achlys are in danger. We left them. Eidolon could follow and find us any second. And here I am sitting thinking about...

Heat seeps into my cheeks.

Because what I'm thinking about is crawling into Reven's lap and going back to that kiss from earlier. Like I need that contact to calm me down, which is not like me at best and pathetic at worst. If I could, I'd bury my face in the sand to hide the embarrassment warming my skin, but then he'd know something was wrong.

My friends might be dead, and I'm worried about my romantic status.

*I. Am. A. Terrible. Person.*

"Hells," Reven mutters behind me.

At least, that's what I think he mutters. "What?"

His back against mine tenses, and he's silent long enough that I'm starting to squirm inside all over again.

"I said hells," he finally says. Louder. Snarly, like I remember him being. The way he was in the Wildernyss forests after he kidnapped me, the same way I hear his voice in my dreams, and it makes me smile.

Even as those knots in my stomach tighten a tiny bit more.

"What about the hells?" I try to sound casual and start drawing a nonsense pattern in the sand with my fingertip.

"I'm in one. Right now."

My smile broadens, mostly on a gust of relief. Because he sounds as awkward and as bothered as I feel. Maybe I'm not the only one dealing with this. "Now why in Nova would you—"

In an instant, I'm not sitting with my back to him anymore. I'm not entirely sure if he used shadows or his arms, but I'm straddling his lap, and his fingers are burrowing into my hair, and his aquamarine eyes are lit with a

blue-green fire as he stares at me in that fierce way he does. “You *know* why.”

*Thank the goddess.*

Belly turning squishy, I lift a hand to trace his cheekbone, run it over the texture of the scruff on his jaw, over lips that are the only soft part of his face, which is all harsh angles and slashing lines. “I missed you.”

His throat works.

“Is it possible to miss someone I hardly had time to know so badly that I had to force myself to eat?” Every single day I was without him.

Something off, hesitant, stirs behind his eyes.

After a stark pause, his body taut under mine, he groans and tugs me closer, kissing me. Not hard and fast and desperate and worried, which is how I feel. This kiss is *soft*.

Exquisite.

I sigh into him. Yes. This is what I needed—

He suddenly pulls back, his face a study in conflict that strikes at my young, inexperienced heart like a dagger.

“We shouldn’t. *I* shouldn’t.”

I stiffen, leaning back against his hold, searching his face. Shouldn’t? What was that just now, then? I open my mouth to ask, only my amulet—which has been cold and unresponsive almost since the moment Eidolon put his own amulet around my neck—flash-heats against my skin.

In a rush of sensation like a full-body shudder, I feel my power come back to me. It’s as if every single grain of sand, even in the hard-packed ground where we are, is alive and mine to sense, mine to command. The ground vibrates beneath me. Or it feels that way.

I put my hand over the hard lump under my breastband. Goddesses almighty. Was my amulet the reason? It can’t be a coincidence that it got hot and my powers came rushing back. I couldn’t wear it around Eidolon—is that why they stopped? But no, that can’t be right. I spent years making flowers in the desert before Omma gave me the amulet.

And yet, after months of not wearing it, I tuck the thing into my breastband and my powers return.

None of this makes sense.

“Meren?” Reven’s hands tighten on me, worry edging his voice. “What’s wrong?”

Something hard smacks me in the back, then drops to the sand by my knee

—a ball of mud. I snap my head around to find Cain standing twenty feet away, two heavy-looking bags on the ground beside him, his face a study of anger and...yup...once again, betrayal.

“You *left* us there.”

## Amends

Cain glares at Reven. Clearly, all the blame is going to my Shadowraith for the way we got out of the palace. And probably the kissing, too.

Relief, apparently, can be almost as painful as worry and guilt, threatening to split me wide open.

Reven's hands dig into my hips where he's gripping me. "Were you followed?"

"Screw you," Cain shoots back.

My shadowy scar twitches ominously. I think because Reven twitches, too.

"Thank the goddess you made it," I rush to say. I'm off Reven's lap in a heartbeat, hurrying over. But Cain is still busy glaring over my shoulder.

"No thanks to him." He's looking past me at Reven, who I can hear also getting to his feet. "I think you pulled that on purpose."

The low growl from behind me is a bad sign. "Listen, you spoiled—"

I wedge myself between the two men squaring off like dogs over a hindquarter of meat, but I keep my gaze trained on Cain. "Eidolon discovered us. Reven had no choice."

Cain leans back as though I shoved him, gaze darting over my shoulder, then back to me. After a moment, while he still doesn't say anything, the way he relaxes slightly tells me he accepts that.

"Where is Achlys?" I demand.

She leans around from behind Cain, eyeing Reven with visible trepidation. It's no wonder, if I think about it. The last time she saw him, he was Shadow. And what Eidolon did to us...that was only hours ago.

"It's okay." I reach out a hand. "Are you okay?" If Quinten touched a hair on her head, I'll send him straight to the hells.

After a second of glancing between the two of us, she focuses on me. "I'm unharmed."

Thank the goddesses. In my relief, I've never seen a more beautiful sight. The sun picks out blazing copper colors within the short strands of her hair. Plus, she sort of...glows. Her heavily freckled, almost alabaster skin might as well be a beacon in the light.



I practically shove Cain out of the way, reaching for her hands, but she throws herself down, prostrate before me. “I’m so sorry. I was trying to help you find the book.”

“The book?” Reven’s question is sharp.

I ignore him, dropping to my knees. “I know. It’s not your fault.”

The tears running down her cheeks when she lifts her head make my heart squeeze hard. “I thought they’d assume I was in there doing my work.”

“You were trying to find his book?” Reven demands.

Cain jumps in, too. “Uh, what book are we talking about?”

But Achlys is still crying. I scoot closer and wrap my arms around her, which makes her gasp. She may not be from my dominion, originally from Tropikis, but she’s been here long enough to know touch is important in Aryd. Plus, I’m her sovereign. Technically.

“You were only trying to help,” I whisper to her. I shouldn’t have told her about it anyway. That was my burden and mine alone. I let my frustration at not being able to go anywhere without the king knowing get to me.

After a second, Achlys takes a breath, then nods. Letting go of her, I lean back, and we smile at each other as she wipes her tears away with her sleeves. Then we both get up.

I look at Reven. “We didn’t find it.”

After a long stare—is it sad that I even missed his intense stares?—he nods. “Did anyone follow you?” he asks Cain.

Achlys—probably because Cain’s fists ball at his sides—decides to step in. “I got us to the cistern, and he got us out. We navigated the city together. No one followed.”

“You’re sure?” Reven is scanning the stretch of desert behind them. At least the sun is out. No shadows for Eidolon to use out here on this relatively flat part of our deserts. The bigger dunes where Cain’s zariphate tends to remain are off to the south and east of us.

“As sure as we can be,” Cain snaps. “But we should definitely clear out now.”

After another beat of searching, Reven gives a jerking nod and they both head toward the horses.

I step in front of Cain, though, shooting a glance at Reven, willing him to understand what I’m about to ask next. “Can you start on packing up and give us a minute?”

He doesn’t take his gaze from Cain. “Not too long.”

The instant he leaves, I feel...cut off. Different from the distance. It starts in my belly, or maybe my scar, and spreads outward.

I watch Reven's back as he stalks away. What's going on in his head?

But I can't fix it until I get a chance to talk to him alone. Meanwhile, my best friend, who I hurt, is behind me, so I face him. I can hear Reven moving around, breaking down our temporary tent. Achlys goes to help him.

Cain doesn't move, dark eyes studying my face but no smile. Where is his smile? "You're unharmed?" he asks.

I shrug. I wasn't harmed physically, and Eidolon never consummated "our" marriage. But some wounds don't show on the outside.

He sort of nods to himself at that.

"Were you scared?"

He asked me that once. The time his sister, Pella, shoved me into a well and I almost drowned. Part of me wants to confess that I spent every waking moment terrified. I would make a terrible spy.

But I don't tell him that, because I want the boy back who doesn't frown at me like this, who teases and cajoles and charms. Is he gone? Or did I make it too hard for him to be like we were before?

"I wasn't scared," I say, hoping he'll remember how that was my answer after the well. "Princesses don't scare easy. Were you scared?"

After a beat, Cain huffs out a laugh, shaking his head. Does he remember? Then he shoots me a smile that is full of his particular brand of arrogance, but one I can tell is more teasing than truth. An expression so Cain that I have to smirk back. I've missed him, too. "Of course I wasn't scared," he says. "I'm \_\_\_"

"Indestructible," we both say together.

He remembered.

That's when I finally move closer, wrapping my arms around his waist. He smells of sand and the spices Wanderers bake into their bread, and it's so familiar my eyes sting. I've only hugged him like this a handful of times, mostly when I was a little girl. I hope he understands that this is my way of apologizing and also being relieved that he made it out okay. After a beat, he relaxes, arms coming around me.

This is the second time he's come to rescue me. Third if you count that time in the palace before Reven's shadows knocked him out. "Thank you."

His chin drops to the top of my head, and we stand there like that until Reven says something to Achlys behind us. Nothing important, but we both

know we don't have time to waste.

Eidolon is still too close for comfort.

With a reluctance I can feel, Cain lets go. Then he glances at Reven and lowers his voice. "Be careful of him."

I frown. "I know—"

"You don't. He's gotten worse." And in Cain's eyes I can see that he means it.

What happened out here in the desert while I was trapped?

"Just...be careful." He reaches out to tweak a lock of my hair. "Okay?"

Slowly, I nod. "Okay."

For a second, he looks like he doesn't believe me or he wants to say more. Instead, he raises his voice. "Get a move on, shadow man. I don't want to be left behind again if the king shows up."

## 10

### Wandering the Deserts

We've been riding for days, but despite the danger I know is following us, I'm almost giddy. I've definitely been cooped up in the palace too long. The desert, *my* desert—my personal escape since childhood—feels like freedom to me. Actual freedom and not just a temporary reprieve.

There's no telling how long that freedom will last. So far, we've been lucky.

I study the back of Reven's head as he and Cain take the lead together. Neither will let the other ride alone with me, which is its own brand of entertainment. I swear those two turn into toddlers arguing over a toy when they're together.

I wipe the sweat from my brow with the back of my sleeve. Apparently, when he and Reven came for me, Cain left word for his father that we would meet the zariphate in one of several places only known to them. The first two were a bust. We're headed for the third location now.

And for all these days, I've been trying to figure Reven out.

I can't quite put my finger on the subtle way Reven's been shutting me out since we got going. There's a distance to his silence. Like when he was my kidnapper, he only speaks to me if he has to. It's a gap I can't seem to bridge—one I worry is real because that sensation of being cut off earlier hasn't let up. The shadowy connection between us is no longer stretched thin like before, but it's not cold or empty, either.

More like...not moving. Still.

Intentional.

Best guess, the shadowing-us-out-of-the-palace situation is still worrying him. So is getting me safely to the zariphate. Legitimate concerns, which is why I haven't cornered him about it. As soon as we get to Cain's people and I can get Reven alone, he and I are going to have a talk.

We round a massive burnt-red rock formation we've been skirting for a few hours now, and the desert opens up in front of us, changing from the red, rocky terrain of the southern reaches of the Crimson Desert to a flat and

cracked space that looks desperate for water. On the other side of this, we hit the bottom of the Singing Dunes to the east, where the sands turn tan again, like it is near Oaesy, where we started.

Cain's zariphate is somewhere out there in the dunes.

No matter which desert I'm in, I can *breathe* here. I could live here forever and thrive.

Reven and Achlys, not so much. Partly because we're plodding our way along under the scorching, relentless eye of the sun. How Reven, with his need for night and darkness, is handling this, I don't know. At least he's had months to adjust. Even I'm a little toasted, my golden skin taking on more of a bronzed base than usual. Achlys, on the other hand...

Where she's riding beside me, Achlys gives a wheezing cough, and I send her a concerned glance. "Do you need to stop?"

After years in the palace, she's not acclimated to being under our harsh sun all the time. She's burned to a crisp, all the skin I can see bright red. Her lips are visibly cracked, and I guarantee sand has worked its way into every crevice of her body. She's used up almost all the skin butter that the Wanderers make from the milk of barongs, terrifyingly ugly and yet gentle creatures, but not a single complaint has passed her lips.

"I'd rather keep going," she says.

"I hope you're not too miserable." First stuck in the palace with me, and now out here.

"I appreciate that, domina."

"Nope." I wag a finger at her. "None of that *domina* stuff. Not anymore."

Her eyebrows raise.

"I'm Meren to you from now on. Not queen or princess or domina." I refuse to be what I'm not when I don't have to, and especially with people who really know.

Doubt still twists her lips.

I heave a dramatic sigh. "Don't make me give an order."

Achlys loosens up enough to roll her eyes, something I've only ever seen her do with Tabra. "All right, Meren." She says it in a dry voice, but at least she acknowledges that things are different now.

*Everything* is different.

I'm nineteen. A girl with an inconsistent power, my kingdom in the hands of a monster, a lot of people to protect, and a sister who is supposed to be queen but isn't.

It's...a lot.

All I was supposed to do was die for Tabra. This is way more than that, and I can't do a bloody thing about any of it until we find Cain's zariphate and figure out a plan together.

"You're thinking like a Wanderer, not an authority." The low rumble of Reven's voice up ahead, talking to Cain, has Achlys and me looking at each other. We both heel our horses to move closer quickly. Those two really shouldn't be left alone together.

"I'm telling you," Reven is saying as we near them. "A Tyndran queen would never be seen in the getup you brought for her."

They're arguing about my clothes? Seriously?

I glance down. They're a little large but still the typical Wanderer garb. It's difficult to see where one layer ends and another begins with the way the garments are designed to wrap around the body. I'm not even wearing the razor-thin armor strapped to my legs, torso, and shoulders that most Wanderers do.

"It's what we wear in the *desert*," Cain argues through gritted teeth, drawing the last word out in an exaggerated way. "Where you happen to *be*."

"Exactly. She's dressed the way a Wanderer would be."

Cain looks around like someone else could explain this to the Tyndran Shadowraith. "Meren practically *is* a Wanderer. She even wears her clothes the way they're meant to be, like a desert born."

He glances over his shoulder and shoots me a wink. I only know because Cain taught me how when I was a kid. Reven, on the other hand, is not wearing his correctly, which is obvious in the once-over Cain gives him.

Reven snorts—actually snorts. "That doesn't mean she's a Wanderer *now*."

I saw it coming, and even so, the impact of that statement hits me harder than I'm ready for. I give my horse's neck a slow pat, trying not to let it bother me. Almost my entire life, a Wanderer is the only thing I ever secretly wished to be. But Reven's right. I'm not and will never get to be that. Despite the fact that Cain sort of proposed.

There's still a tiny ache of what could have been inside me. For both of us. I could have been happy with my best friend once. Before all this.

I'm glad Reven's ahead of me—both of them, really—so they don't see my reaction. Achlys catches it, though. I see her glance over from the corner of my eye.

"Meren is the *queen* now," Reven continues. "Ruler of *all* Aryd. Even over

your father.”

I bite my tongue. I’m not queen, I’m a princess. Tabra was the one officially crowned and also wed to Eidolon. I’m just a stand-in. Strictly speaking, I’m not even a princess because of how the hidden-twin setup works, with the second born being erased from all existence. I’m a nobody. Not a queen and not the waif who wanted to be a Wanderer. Not anymore.

I honestly don’t know who I am.

“So you want to truss her up like some overblown authority?” Cain demands, flinging a hand in my direction.

Ugh. No thanks. I’ve been trussed up for months, and I’m not particularly keen to go back to restrictive clothing I’m terrified to rip or, goddess forbid, get a crumb on. Especially not in the deep desert. Think of the sweat marks.

“To make a statement? To ensure your father knows who is in charge?” Reven’s voice leaves no doubt about his opinion of the zariph. “Absolutely.”

In charge is the last thing I want to be. On the flip side, though, I’m suddenly picturing Pella’s face when she sees me give orders to her almighty father—her lips pinched and white and eyes narrowed in that snotty way she does. She doesn’t like me. The feeling is mutual.

Come to think of it, that alone might be worth it.

“Fine, but not the full regalia,” Cain huffs after a moment.

As if we have a closet full of garments to select from out here in the middle of nowhere. It’s not like we had to escape from the palace in a rush or anything. I swear, when these two get together, our collective intelligence drops.

Reven just shakes his head, visibly disgusted that Cain can’t see how important it is that I not show up like the poor city girl the zariphate knew before.

“I brought clothing for *both* my dominas,” Achlys says.

Both men turn in their saddles to look at her. Reven’s gaze skates right over me in the process. Deliberate? Not enough to call him on it. I mean, what would I say? “Hey, you didn’t look at me when you looked at her.” The tug on my slowly fraying nerves makes me shift in my saddle.

“*That’s* what you were filling those bags with when I was trying to drag you out of the palace?” Cain’s expression is beyond disgruntled.

My turn to snort. “At least she had the foresight to think of it *before* she got to the middle of the desert.”

A comment that makes both men stiffen, glance at each other, then face

forward abruptly. Achlys catches my grin, and her lips tilt up.

My own smile slips when a tremor deep in the ground catches my attention. My amulet, now around my neck and tucked between my breasts under my clothes, is asleep again, but my power over sand isn't. Which means if there's enough movement, I can *sense* it. From terravores to herds of jerombi, the mouselike animals with bat-like ears that hop around on their hind legs, to...a zariphate.

I straighten in my saddle, looking off to our left. "Cain?"

"Yeah, Mer?"

At the shortened version of my already shortened name, Reven mutters something I'm pretty sure I don't want to catch. Something that makes Cain grin as he glances at me to see what I want, then looks off the same direction I am. I squint against the sunlight, so bright against the sand. Searching. And then I see it. A long distance away, a tiny plume rises into the air.

Not a mirage.

It's a zariphate of Wanderers, in number and on the move in daylight. They don't do that unless they have to, usually resting during the day and moving in the cool of night. Cain and Reven already told me that Zariph Cainis has his people moving in daylight as a countermeasure to being tracked by Eidolon's men.

It has to be them. At least another day's ride across these flats and into the dunes, but still... Thank goddess.

Cain pulls up so that Achlys and I direct our horses around his. When we're next to each other, he sets his mount walking again. "I hope you're ready to face my father."

Ahead of us, Reven's shoulders tense, and I silently will him to turn around. Say something. I'd even take a glare at this point. "*Look at me,*" I think at his back.

My breath catches when he angles his head slightly to the side, like he might.

I wait, watching.

He urges his horse forward faster instead.



## The Zariph

We're set up outside the zariphate camp, separated by several dunes so I can't see it. Waiting should be my middle name instead of Evangeline, since I do so much of it.

The crispness of desert night air surrounds me as the land transforms from the sunset shades of magentas and pinks to the navies and blacks of dusk under the two crescent rising moons. I had a whole day to work myself up for what is about to happen—what I will say to Zariph Cainis. Plenty of time for the doubts to build.

Cain is out there with them right now, preparing the zariphate for my arrival.

*My arrival. The queen's arrival.*

What a cosmic joke. This is a hundred times worse than pretending to be Tabra in the palace. There, no one knows that a second one of us even exists. To them it's not even a question that I am Queen Tabra. The immediate response upon seeing either me or my sister, regardless of which, is respect or some variation of that. But this zariphate—I've essentially grown up among them—they see me as a city waif. As Cain's pet. And now, because of the way I had to send my sister and Reven and all of the Vanished to them, and the way Eidolon has hunted them...every single person *knows* I'm a twin. They *know* I'm a fraud, a phony, a charlatan.

A liar.

I try not to fidget with my clothes or glance down. Queens don't do that. I'm all trussed up again. Achlys was incredibly clever in the clothes she grabbed, given that she was in the middle of escaping the palace. I'm wearing black robes—fashioned after the Wanderers' clothing, but fancier and fit for royalty—with small jewels of all colors woven into the material in a colorful zigzagging pattern. The skirts are flared out behind me over my horse's rump. Achlys even managed to twist my hair up into some towering, headache-inducing concoction. And none of it makes a single bit of difference. No way in all the seven hells are the people of this zariphate going to accept me as any kind of leader.

Maybe Tabra and I together could sway them, but I suspect that's even more unlikely. Both Cain and Reven—in some misguided version of protecting my “delicate” sensibilities—have remained close-lipped about my sister. I'm not oblivious or deliberately ignoring that. I've tucked my worries away, waiting to see her in person and decide for myself how bad of a state she's in. Until then, I'm queen.

Ish. Queen-ish.

Maybe what I should do is hand all my troubles over to the zariph. A true leader. Experienced. Wized. Tell him what I know and let someone older, tried, and proven step in to handle this mess.

*Except he ran*, a tiny memory whispers inside me. When Reven and I went up against Eidolon, the Mighty Cainis took his people from the palace and left.

“Sit up straight, domina,” Achlys whispers from behind me, sounding like Omma suddenly. Knowing we likely have an audience, she's back in servant mode.

I mind my posture and tip up my chin, calling on every last ounce of my practiced ability to transform myself into the queen to get me through this.

We agreed—more like I was informed—that when we entered the zariphate camp, I would be in the lead, Achlys and Reven behind me like servants. I don't like it, but they all, Cain included, insisted that the posturing is critical to set the right tone from the start.

It's not going to help. The tone was set a long time ago. Cain, Reven, Achlys—none of them listened to that argument. So here I am, preparing to do this on my own, mostly.

I press a hand against the amulet under my clothes. It's helped me before—with the Hollow, with my fear of heights, in the Shadowwood the night we fought Eidolon's soldiers, the morning we fought Eidolon, even in quiet moments when I'd be doubting myself. Or that's what it seemed like. I could really use help now.

“Wait.” Reven's call rings with reluctance.

I look back to find him dismounting, handing his reins to Achlys, who looks as surprised as me. Especially when he comes over to me.

“Your stirrup needs adjusting,” he says, not looking me in the eyes.

No, it doesn't, but I let him slip my foot out of it and fiddle with the buckled straps anyway.

“You can do this.” His low voice skates over me in a hushed murmur.

Possibly the most words strung together that he's aimed in my direction in days. He says it with his head bent over his task, and I almost ask him to repeat it, except I realize before I open my mouth that he's trying to make sure no one else can hear this conversation. No one...as in any Wanderer sentries hidden among the dunes around us.

"You don't need help," he tacks on.

I want to make a face at him, but I don't.

"This isn't going to work." I also keep my voice low. "There's too much history here."

He shakes his head, the black tangle of his hair falling into his eyes. I tighten my grip on the pommel of my saddle just so I don't reach out to brush it back. He needs a haircut. "Doesn't matter. *You* are Arydian royalty. They are your subjects. Period."

Right. He's right. I know he's right. "It doesn't make me feel any better." That comes out more as a grumble.

"There you go, *domina*," he says overly loudly.

With a hand around my ankle, he slips my foot back in the stirrup. Under my skirt where no one could possibly see, his thumb brushes against my skin, sending delicious, ill-timed shivers through me. Days without his touch, and I'm craving him in an instant. That can't be normal.

The way he stills, then drops his hand quickly to his side, sucks all that craving right out of me as fast as it came on. "Can I do anything else for—" He lifts his head, and whatever he sees in my gaze has him biting the words off with a grunt.

Then I see it. I see the flash of wanting in his eyes, and suddenly my scars shift inside me like a physical touch, a caress, and I almost laugh on a swell of relief. Because the distance between us isn't there anymore.

That craving spirals. Sharper. Hotter. Thrumming.

But just as quickly, he schools his features, and the sensation inside me disappears, going cold, and those shivers change—and not in a good way.

Seven hells in a handbasket.

I feel like I'm a horse on a lead rope being jerked around. Now I'm sure I wasn't wrong. He is shutting me out. On purpose.

Frustration builds like a geyser in the Crystalline Desert, ready to spew scalding words all over the man.

"What are you doing?" I manage to keep the question soft even though the words are out of my mouth before I can stop myself, but I don't take them

back. I'm calling him out. Even while I'm aware that we're being observed and listened to.

He takes a deliberate step back. "Can I do anything else for you?" he finishes his earlier thought. From before that scorching look. Pulling back into the role of servant that he's supposed to be posturing.

How convenient for him.

Heat now crawls up my throat and into my cheeks. What I want to say is, "This isn't over." But I can't. Now is not the time or the place, so what I actually say is, "No." Through clenched teeth.

He nods and walks away.

I don't wait for him to mount before I prod my horse forward. He can damn well catch up.

Even before we round the last dune, the orange glows of hundreds of campfires reflect off the pale sands. The zariphate is currently set up near where the Singing Dunes meet the Salt Flats. The minerals glitter at me from everywhere, white but also iridescent. I've heard of the salt glacier that sits at the southern edge of the flats—not white at all, but striped and all the colors of the rainbow.

The natural beauty all around me mocks my staged pageantry.

I take a deep breath as the camp comes into view and try hard not to turn my horse around and run. The entire zariphate has gathered together to greet me. Rows and rows of faces, people all lined up to see the false queen.

I was wrong. This is a million times worse than the palace, not a hundred. There, the expressions aimed my way were interested or happy or at least polite, maybe even a little fearful after my grandmother's style of rule. But the Wanderers... Right now, I'm looking at a sea of hostility, suspicion, or, at best, indifference.

Terrific.

And I can't even crow to Cain and Reven and Achlys about how I was right. Not without losing more ground.

The first familiar face my gaze picks out from among the crowd is the last one I want to see. Cain's sister, Pella, stands apart.

A true Wanderer, her midnight hair hangs in a thick plait over one shoulder, contrasting with the oatmeal shade of her clothes. She's the zariph's only daughter, and he dotes on her like a proud papa should. Only, she's not some pampered princess—she's an incredible horsewoman, deadly with a bow and arrow and a staff, and she knows these deserts like the land is close

family.

It doesn't help that she's also one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen, which is saying something. Or she *would* be if she weren't always snarling. I'm sad to say her father's indulgence has turned her into, well, a bitch.

What Pella wants, Pella gets.

Usually, what Pella wants is me out of her brother's life, never to return to their zariphate. Not this time, though. This time, she's not the zariph's daughter looking down on poor Meren from Enora. She's the zariph's daughter who must bow to Mereneith Evangeline XII, Princess and acting Queen of Aryd.

I'm looking directly at her when the zariph booms out, "Our long-lost daughter has returned!"

Mighty Cainis holds his hands high in the air in a gesture of celebration and welcome. Daughter? Really? A few months ago, when I was merely "Cain's little friend" to this man, I probably would've fallen off my horse at that greeting. Who does he think he's fooling? Before this, he pretty much pretended I didn't exist.

Pella's lips twist like she sucked on the bitterest of lemons. Years of dealing with her antagonism all pile up, and I can't resist. Holding her gaze, I tip my head ever so slightly and smile. Yes, a smug one.

Her brows snap down so low over her dark eyes, she looks like she's squinting, and that only makes my smile widen. Especially when I deliberately turn my gaze away, effectively dismissing her.

I aim my most dazzling royal smile at the zariph instead.

A mountain of a man, but so leanly muscled he reminds me of the half-starved coyotes that scrounge around near the rivers in Aryd—whip-smart, deceptively strong, and mean. Their leanness makes them meaner. Even after all these years, I haven't made up my mind if the same is true of the zariph.

Here's the tricky thing with this man—he is an *Enfernae*, and his power is subtle and important to be aware of. He can tell when someone is lying. Not omitting, but when their actual words are not true.

A tremor of apprehension chases its tail down my spine as my imagination brings up images of the fourth hell, where all the souls of liars are bound in eternal silence. I am a liar. I was born to *be* a liar. Hopefully that hell is not the fate awaiting me at the end of all this, but I've wondered ever since I was a little girl. I asked Omma once. She can see what level of the hells a soul

will end up in, but she refused to tell me my fate.

Regardless, I'm going to have to be careful with what I say to this man if I have a chance of pulling this off.

"Mighty Cainis!" I greet him loudly so that those toward the back of the gathering can hear.

According to etiquette, I'm supposed to thank him for his hospitality and give a small bow of my head, the most a queen would do for a zariph...but I'm not a queen. And while, other than Cain, I wasn't entirely welcomed warmly by this group of people, they were still my refuge from my life. My only source of happiness. They have also risked their own lives and changed their ways to protect Tabra, Reven, and the people of the Vanished who *I* sent to them.

I dismount in a smooth motion, dropping lightly to the ground. The tiny jewels sewn into my robes tinkle as I move toward him. Arguments fill my head. Words exchanged earlier with Cain and Reven and Achlys about the best way to approach this.

I ignore everything we agreed on.

"As the current ruling Queen of Aryd, I know the protocol," I say, again loudly. "What I should say and do in this moment, but I owe you and your son and your people a great debt. I come to you only with the clothes on my back, our kingdom in the hands of a shared enemy, asking for your continued help and protection."

Cain, standing slightly behind his father, is shaking his head no.

Too late to stop now. "There is nothing I can give to show my appreciation but this." I drop to one knee before the zariph.

I can't tell if the shocked gasp that travels through the crowd is good or bad. Queens don't kneel to anyone.

The zariph's head snaps back like I surprised him, only for him to smile again, even broader. The man isn't a natural smiler, and the expression sits uneasily on his face.

A sensation moves through my scars across my belly, in the shadows that connect us. What I wouldn't give to see Reven's reaction.

"Finally!" the zariph says warmly. "A queen who intimately knows and appreciates the Wanderer peoples. A ruler we've been waiting for."

Wait. What? Open arms is not what I expected.

"One we might call 'domina.'"

My lips part on a silent gasp. For a Wanderer to call the ruler of Aryd that

is true honor.

Then again, he said *might*.

Zariph Cainis helps me to my feet but doesn't let me go, placing his other hand over mine and tugging me closer. "Perhaps we should combine our strengths through your marriage to my son."

## Priorities

Abruptly, an unnatural darkness sweeps over the gathering, dimming the light of the fires. With it, a second gasp sweeps through those gathered around us. The zariph snaps his gaze over my head and stills, his hands clamping down on mine hard, face a study of a warrior staring down a threat.

I don't have to look. I know what's happening.

Reven.

I barely have time to brace to fight the Shadows if they took control of him, because as quickly as the darkness rose, it fades away again. As I search him out, my Shadowraith visibly appears to diminish, like stopping that darkness took too much out of him, or like defeat is weighing him down. Or is he still fighting the evil inside him?

I don't relax, studying him, waiting. Until he subtly taps the scars on his wrist and relief leaves me in a *whoosh* of a breath.

He's still Reven.

The erratic thumping of my heart tells me that was close, though. I haven't seen him struggle like that before. Trying to be subtle about it, I slide the knife strapped to my arm under my robes back into its sheath. Beside me, I hear a soft *snick* as Cain does the same with his. After a beat, so does the zariph, followed by several similar sounds from all around us.

Which is when it finally sinks in that no one is standing near him, like there's a moat of space keeping everyone else away. His doing? Or are they all too wary to get close?

How often has Reven lost control around them? Across the way, his mask is back in place. An emotionless expression that makes me want to shrivel with him. It's like he's determined to feel nothing. To separate himself.

The need to go to him is a living thing, but he gives me a tiny shake of his head, gaze flicking to the zariph still holding my hand. And I get the message. My only job right now is to secure Zariph Cainis as an ally. I understand. I really do.

His rejection feels like a slap anyway.

Feeling more alone than I have since before I was kidnapped, including



when I was with Eidolon, I release the zariph's hand only to tuck mine into the crook of his elbow, drawing his attention back to me.

I have no intention of commenting on his proposal. Yet.

I doubt he'll let me keep my answer to myself for long.

Cain told me that the zariph was informed about exactly what happened. Cainis knows Tabra married the king, not me, and that I am merely the second-born princess.

Which means everyone in the zariphate knows, too. After all, they've been carting around a woman who looks like Cain's city waif friend for months, along with a whole bunch of other people. At a risk to their lives. Explanations would have been demanded. Besides, as many things as he is, I will say the zariph is transparent with his people. He doesn't hide anything if it affects them.

"Before we discuss anything," I say, "I need to see my sister."

The zariph hesitates. "Tomorrow morning is perhaps a better—"

"Tabra is firstborn, technically queen. I rule in her place, but I need to know what I'm dealing with," I tell him firmly.

Under my fingertips, he tenses, no doubt at the interruption. I'm sure no one except maybe his zaripha dares to interrupt this man.

Too bad.

"As you wish," he eventually murmurs.

I allow the zariph to lead me through the crowds and into what amounts to a city of tents and structures that make up the camp. As we pass through the people standing at the very edges of the gathering, a familiar face looks back at me, and I have to tamp down on the immediate urge to stop and hug her.

Tziah.

The last time I saw her, she'd taken a spear to the stomach during the attack on the Shadowwood. Thank the goddesses she survived. I wasn't sure. Younger than I am by a year or two at most, she's striking, with the most unusual coloring that, every time I see her, reminds me of the sky before dawn when it turns from black to a deep, mysterious navy blue. Add to that shoulder-length white hair and narrow-set entirely black eyes that appear to frost around the edges, and she puts me in mind of starlight nymphs.

Cain used to tell me stories of them. Pella would then make fun of me for believing him, but sand nymphs are real, so why not starlight nymphs? Given what I've learned and seen in a few short months, maybe Pella's the one who should be more open-minded.

More familiar faces stand out in the crowd around Tziah—Vos, Horus, Vida.

I want to run to them. Check on them and make sure they're well. Except they're bowing, and I am queen. I limit myself to reaching out and squeezing Tziah's arm as we pass.

A silent promise that we'll talk soon.

Cainis takes me to a tent set far away from the others, well past the outskirts of the camp itself. I have to swallow down angry words of displeasure for leaving Tabra in such a vulnerable place. At least he left two guards outside her tent. They exchange an odd glance before one draws back a flap, allowing us to enter. It takes my eyes a moment to adjust to the dimmer light of a single candle.

The second I see her, I gasp, the sound a painful rip in my throat.

*Mother goddess.*

They have my precious sister chained to a stake in the ground with a pallet, water, and a pot to piss in within reaching distance. I'm not gasping about that, though.

We look like our mother, my sister and I, with our long, black hair, amber-colored eyes, and chins with a slight indent that smacks of stubbornness. Same scars, even, which is not something I'd ever brag about, given how we *both* came by our matching marks. But right now, we look nothing alike.

*Nothing.*

My sister is skin and bones. A skeleton left to bleach in the sun has more meat on it than Tabra does. Her eyes are sunken into her head, cheekbones so sharp she looks grotesque. Skin drawn and sallow. I hardly recognize the girl on the ground.

A wellspring of bile surges up my throat, sour and burning.

"Why is she chained?" I demand.

The zariph's reply is quiet. "For her safety...and ours."

I glare at him. "Safety?"

"You'll see. Don't get too close."

If he thinks he's keeping me from my sister, he's got another think coming. "Why is she so..." I gesture in her direction.

"We feed her, bathe her, do everything we can for her." He grimaces. "When she lets us. But she's still wasting away, and we don't know why."

I glance over his shoulder to Cain, who nods a confirmation.

Looking her over again, I frown. She's dressed in Wanderer clothing more appropriate for the desert, but... "Where's her ring?"

"What?" Cain asks.

I hold up my hand, showing him the signet on my pinkie. "It matches this."

"Vida has it," Reven answers. "It kept falling off her finger."

I close my eyes for a beat, then open them again. "Do we know her power yet?"

When I got her away from Eidolon, her hands glowed the purple of an *Enfernae*, so I know she's come into them. Maybe that's what's eating away

at her. I've heard of that before. A power being like poison or too much to control.

"We don't know yet. She hasn't tried to use it." Cain grimaces. "Don't ask her about it, though."

"Why?"

"It makes her...angry."

Tabra doesn't get angry. "Can I talk to her?"

He glances from me to her. "She's lucid enough from time to time."

"Tabra?" She doesn't move. Ignoring a hiss of warning from those behind me, I'm across the space and dropping to my knees at her side. "Tabra?"

This time, at the sound of her name, she struggles to angle her head my way. Her eyes are glassy and dull, and she frowns as she looks at me. I see the moment recognition dawns.

"Meren?" she whispers.

Goddess, she doesn't even sound like herself, her voice hardly an audible rasp. Tabra is sunshine and kind smiles and has a lilting way of talking that I hate having to mimic because it's so bloody cheerful. She's sneaking out of the palace to feed the poor with baskets of food. She's knowing the name of every person who works inside the palace walls, but also all about their families. She's sparkling glass flowers and joy and light.

This is *not* her.

I offer a tentative smile, trying to blink back the sting of tears and not let her see. "Hi, sissy. It's me."

She starts to smile back, then her eyes go wide, her gaze darting past me to the others in the tent before returning to me. She leans closer, with a clink of metal chains, and lowers her voice. I have to turn my head to hear. "You can't be here. They'll know."

She thinks I'm revealing our secret? I straighten enough to look at her. "It's okay. They're friends."

Tabra frowns again. "Not all of them."

What does she mean?

"Meren..." She's searching my face like she doesn't quite believe I'm real. "I don't feel very well." I can't help the tears that escape, and her face falls when she sees them. "I made you sad."

I wipe the wetness away with an impatient swipe and shake my head. Then I take her hand in mine. Hells, I could snap her bones if I hold her too tight. She's that frail. "No. I'm just worried."

“About me?”

I nod.

She tries what I think is supposed to be a smile, except her chalky, cracked lips tremble. “You always worry too much about me.”

I huff what I hope she takes as a laugh but is really despair escaping me. “Have they been taking good care of you?”

“Yes. They’re very kind.” Even chained and dying, her heart is for others.

“I’m glad. And I’m here now.”

“Grandmother won’t like that these people know about us.”

I still. She doesn’t remember? Grandmother died. Tabra took the throne. I disappeared. And she married Eidolon before I could get back in time to stop her.

Do I tell her?

“Tabra—”

In a blink, her expression changes from glassy to feral so fast, astonishment sends the hairs on my skin standing straight up. With a strength that’s unbelievable after barely moving her head visibly taxed her, she lunges for me. In the same instant, an arm wraps around my waist and yanks me out of her reach.

“Careful.” Reven’s voice is a rumble in my ear, but he lets go and steps away before I can respond. Losing his heat at my back leaves me cold and clammy as I stare at my snarling sister, who suddenly isn’t my sister at all.

Her face is contorted with rage, teeth bared as she growls a sound that has to come from the very pits of the damned.

“Tabra?” Her name escapes me in a squeak.

Cain puts a shoulder between me and Tabra. “Don’t take it personally. She sometimes does that to anyone who gets close—”

“Tabra!” Achlys’s broken cry is nothing short of gut wrenching.

No one is fast enough to stop her as she pushes through the tent flap and rushes to my sister, dropping to her knees in the sand next to her where I’d just been. Tabra lunges again, the same way she did at me, only she lurches to a stop just as fast, staring at her handmaiden’s face, searching Achlys’s features like she’s trying to understand why they might be familiar.

“I’m here,” Achlys whispers. “I’m here, tesara.”

I recognize the word from the old language of Tropikis. She called my sister her treasure.

Tabra’s eyes grow wide. “Achlys?”

I try to push aside the cloying hurt that she would attack me but not her handmaiden. Granted, Achlys is more than that—her closest confidant and friend, her heart, her love. But I’m her sister. We shared a womb. We share secrets and lives in a way no one else could possibly understand.

Tabra takes a juddering breath, and her expression crumples as she wraps her bony arms around Achlys’s neck, then sobs and sobs and sobs.

I close my eyes against the sight of them, more tears clogging my throat. I want to put my hands over my ears, too. The sounds coming from my sweet sister are pitiful...and agonizing. She’s trying to talk between heavens but is hardly coherent. I only make out one word. *Voice*.

“We should continue our discussion elsewhere,” the zariph says behind me.

Someone tries to tug me away. Cain, I think. But I can’t.

Except, over Tabra’s head, Achlys meets my gaze and nods, telling me without words that she’ll stay and keep her safe. I don’t want to leave my sister, though. I’ve left her so many times.

But I have no choice. I have to go rule in her stead.

My amulet warms. Not a spark like before, more like comfort, and I get the feeling it’s trying to tell me it will be all right. Then it goes quiet again.

Needing to do something, even if it’s not much, I pull my power forward. Warmth and tingling cascade through my skin like fizzy bubbles, coalescing in my palm with the soft yellow light of a Hylorae. From the ground between my feet, particles of sand *shoosh* and shift, coming at my call. They lift into the air, swirling and floating, twinkling in the dim light.

I haven’t used my power for much since I got it back. This feels...good.

At a whisper of my direction, like soldiers obeying a commander, the sand fuses, forming into a ball, and then I command it to heat. The glow in my palm manifests as tiny fire sprite-like embers lift into the air like my own private collection of stars that flare bright, then fade away. The ball of sand turns a gleaming orange as I morph it into a new state of being, a clear, molten mass.

With a flick of my fingers, I form the thick liquid into a petal. Then again. And again. Until a glittering version of a snapdragon flower forms. Thanks to the sand of the salt flats, this one shimmers with iridescence, like I tucked a rainbow inside it.

I pluck it out of the air and, not getting too close, set it in the sand within reaching distance of my sister, whose face is still buried in Achlys’s neck. I

allow my gaze to linger on her a moment longer before facing the zariph, who now watches me with even more calculating speculation in his gaze.

I lift my chin, every inch the royal Omma and Grandmother trained me to pretend to be. "I will meet with the leaders of the Vanished."

Then I walk straight past him, out of the tent.

## Reunions

Outside Tabra's tent, I stop, because honestly, I need a minute. I'm surrounded by people, and yes, Reven is here, but he's not, so it doesn't count. Cain has to be careful in his role as zariphson. The Vanished are beholden to the zariphate.

I'm all alone in what I have to do.

Again.

Immediately, the entourage following before and after stops with me. After months in the palace as the queen, I'm used to this. Even so, probably because of my surroundings, it suddenly strikes me as wrong. Out of place. Like when you stub your toe in the middle of the night because the furniture isn't where you remembered.

The zariph stops at my side. "We have much to discuss. You can meet with the Vanished after, if you wish."

As though I'm a little girl to be patted on the head and told to run along?  
Ass.

With every eye trained on me, it's not the ideal time for me to lose my cool, even though that's exactly what I want to do. Is the man seriously trying to pull that right now? After what I just went through? I am not in the mood to put up with power plays and diplomacy.

And I outrank him.

I sort through at least three different ways to handle this in my head. Pitch a fit like a diva? No. Try to argue him around in a persuasive manner? No. Remind him who I am? Definitely no. Queens don't do any of those things, even if I really, really want to.

Instead, I ignore him and search the faces around us. For once I'm not looking for Reven, who's standing right outside the tent. My gaze lands on Horus nearby. Perfect.

The lanky older man is dressed in traditional Wanderer garb. He's traded out his blue clothing—an indicator that he's from a zariphate in the Lazuli Desert—for the tawny-colored clothes of this zariphate. However, the loose-fitting garments are still draped around him in the style his old southeastern



zariphate prefers.

“Is there a place we can talk?” I ask him.

Horus will know by “we” I mean the voted-in leaders of the Vanished who I consider friends, though I didn’t know them long before I ended up in the palace with Eidolon.

Reven clasps his hands behind his back and bends a look on me that hopefully to others looks as though he’s nodding, but I have no problem interpreting it as not happy mixed with a bit of a warning. Why? Because I might anger the zariph? Can’t he see that in this game of power, my only play is to establish my authority? Shove it down the zariph’s throat if I have to? If I don’t, we’ll be seen as begging for help, and that means we have no leverage.

If I really wanted to demonstrate my power, I’d dismiss the Shadowraith everyone else is visibly avoiding, that invisible moat of distance still around him.

I focus on Horus, but he glances over my shoulder in the direction of our host. His expression remains inscrutable, but I suspect he’s gauging how irritated Cainis is. Horus’s history with his own zariph likely is coloring his thoughts. “Of course,” he says slowly, still not looking at me.

No one is happy with my actions. Sounds like I’m on the right track, then.

I slide a glance Reven’s direction. “Please gather the others.”

He walks away without a word, that prowling gait of his eating up the ground.

I try not to watch him go.

I pin a pleasant smile to my face that feels carved from wax as I return my attention to Cainis. “We won’t be long.”

A string of emotions crosses the man’s face—surprise, irritation, and finally speculation—before he manages to force his features into an equally waxy smile. “As you wish.”

With a nod, I follow Horus away.

He takes me to one of the tents nearby. A new burst of anger flushes through me as I take in where the Vanished are situated within the camp—right on the edge. Cainis put all the Vanished closest to my sister, huh? Sacrificial pawns if the camp gets attacked when they come for her? After all, then the Vanished would be the first to respond. They’d be first hit if the camp is attacked from the outside as well.

I guess the zariphate’s protection only goes so far.

I try to give the zariph some credit. It's what any leader would do. Protect your people first and foremost. After all, our presence puts his community in greater jeopardy. My grandmother certainly would have done the same if she were in his position.

I'll ask my friends for their thoughts on it once we're all together.

Horus and I enter the smallish tent, the rollable sides already down for the night. It's as basic as you can get. A few tattered rugs but no other pillows or furniture, and a single candle almost melted down to the nub in a brass chamberstick holder. I'm sure finding enough material to house the large number of people I sent the zariphate with no notice was difficult. I try to hold on to my gratefulness that Cainis took them in at all. Mostly due to Cain, I have no doubt.

A debt I'm not sure I'll ever be able to repay.

I look at Horus, taking in hair the color of wet sand graying around the sides. Tawny skin unmarred by time. Gnarled hands. Weathered features and eyes lined with history and a life of sacrifice.

He's handsome in that resilient, hardened way I've always found most born into the zariphates to be. His sun-worn skin crinkles around the corners of his mouth with a smile of welcome that I feel to my center. This man was more than kind to me when I first arrived in the Shadowwood, he was a piece of home.

"You shouldn't have talked to me in front of the zariph," he chides. "I'm still an Outcast as far as all the zariphates of Wanderers are concerned."

Horus once told me how he defied his own zariph. The man wanted to take Horus's sister as his third wife. Horus disagreed, and the zariph cast him out and married the sister anyway. If I ever meet that zariph, I'll happily bring the full power of the throne down on his head.

Horus ducks. "Cainis barely tolerates my being here as it is. By law, he should throw me into the desert with no food or water or way out and leave me there to die."

This man was voted in as one of the leaders of the Vanished, the representative from Aryd, and yet he still has his hang-ups, probably made worse by being back in his home dominion.

"That's how you want to greet me?" I hold out a hand.

I'm pretty sure I shock him, because Horus goes a little stiff. Only for a moment, though. Then he loosens up and grasps my hand with his own, covering our clasp with his other hand and bending over that. "We've been

worried about you,” he says as he straightens and lets go of me.

I huff a laugh. “Likewise. And if the zariph has a problem with you, he’ll have to take it up with me. At least some good can come from being queen.”

Only instead of smiling, Horus gives me a gently chiding look and a shake of his head. “I’m not worth risking losing the safety we’ve found here, and I’m not letting you spend your political currency on me, either.”

“You *are* worth it.” I don’t know if it’s my words or the adamant tone I use, but he stares like he’s trying to figure out if I mean it.

I stare right back. “We all are, each and every one of us, worth the effort, no matter the risk.”

Okay, so a lifetime of being the expendable one might still be a hang-up of my own. Every person is worthy of consideration and dignity. Reven taught me that with what he accomplished in the Shadowwood.

Horus sighs. “I wish that were true.”

What this man has been through to put that kind of stark disbelief in his eyes makes me heartsore.

He clears his throat. “Reven isn’t like before.”

Given the way Cain has been acting and his own warning to me, I’d gathered that. “How bad?”

He shrugs. “He was also healing, but I’ve never seen him so—”

“Who picked *that* dress for you?” A familiar female voice sounds from behind me.

I spin around to find a girl standing just inside the tent flaps. She’s around my age, except her hair is silvery gray and her eyes the same, like pools of mercury. Vida.

The thrum of emotions that I don’t have time to untangle is almost as palpable as seeing my sister. Technically, I hardly know this woman—know any of them, really—and yet...they’re mine, and I’m theirs.

I glance down, smoothing a hand over what I’m wearing. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing. It’s lovely. Immaculate stitchwork. Love the sparkle, too.”

I shrug. “Royalty has its perks.”

Vida’s smile is wide as she gently pushes Horus out of her way and throws her arms around my neck. Despite Horus’s harrumph at her audacity to touch me, especially without permission, I hug her back. She was an instant friend from the moment we met, told me so herself.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” I say into her hair.

“I’m fine. We’re fine.” She pulls back and picks up a swath of my long sleeve, inspecting it with a covetous look in her eyes. “I mean, I don’t get to sew anything fun like this. These days it’s all about blending in with the sand.”

I laugh at that. “I know.”

“As if we could haul all those materials and fancy gewgaws all around the deserts,” Horus grumbles, and Vida wrinkles her nose at him. Clearly a bone of contention between these two.

With a rustle of tent flaps, Vos and Tziah walk in next.

“Well, well, well,” Vos drawls. His rich sable skin is broken by the stark lavender of his eyes and then a flash of white teeth as he grins at me.

“Voserian.” I use the Tyndran’s full name. “I didn’t see you when I arrived. Where were you?”

“A child was bitten by a widow’s assassin.”

I wince. That desert bug’s bite isn’t deadly, but after a pain like a red-hot poker being jammed under your skin, it makes the spot go completely numb for at least a day. Depending on where you get bit, that can be awkward.

Based on Vos’s grimace, he’s familiar with the insect. “Tziah was taking care of her.” And he was taking care of Tziah. As he always is. “I should have known you’d handle the zariph in your own imitable way,” he continues, then cocks his head. “Must be a ruby of a plan you’ve got in your head.”

I wouldn’t exactly say I’m working off a plan. No need to share that, yet.

Instead, I study him closer. The ashiness that seemed to be a permanent part of him in the Shadowwood has lifted, and he’s not coughing as much as he used to. Either he finally got over whatever bug he was fighting or our dry desert air has been good for him.

“The last time I saw you, your limp body was being dragged to safety through a portal I made.” I lean in, dropping the teasing. “I’m glad to see you suffered no permanent damage.”

Hard to tell in the dim light in here, but I think maybe surprise, or possibly appreciation, flickers over his features before his expression darkens. “He was a useless wreck without you.”

He’s talking about Reven, and those words catch at something inside me that needed to hear them. Without the warning this time. “I was the same.”

I’m pretty sure he could already see that. In my limited experience with Vos, I’ve figured out that he sees more than most.

“He’s not like before.”

Dang. I guess I didn’t avoid another warning after all. Cain. Horus. Now Vos. “So I’ve been told.”

Vos holds up both hands. “You two can figure it out. We just don’t want to see you hurt.”

Tziah tugs on his sleeve.

“Either of you,” he tacks on.

“Thanks.” I mean it.

Tziah has been waiting patiently, wreathed in smiles, though her lips remain carefully shut. I wait until we’ve hugged before I ask her questions, though, because Tziah can’t speak. It’s not that she’s mute, but the noise that comes out when she opens her mouth is more a weapon than a voice. I need to see her face and hands to communicate.

“Is everyone being treated well here?” I ask Tziah because I know she takes care of the Vanished. As the Vanished leader representing those from Mariana, she’s the mother hen of the group, and watches out for each person in a way the others can’t or maybe don’t see is necessary.

Tziah nods.

“Even Tabra?” I have to be sure.

Another nod, accompanied by a grimace.

I squeeze her hand. “You too, right?”

She seems to understand that I’m making sure the caregiver is taking care of herself as well and gives me a sheepish shrug. I give her a chiding look.

“See?” Vos waves a hand at me like I made a point.

Tziah swats at him.

I glance around the faces here with me. The Vanished haven’t voted in a leader to represent Wildernyss yet. That leaves two more.

“What about...um...the guy who represents the Savanahan Vanished—”

I didn’t meet him because he was on a mission in some other dominion when I was in the Shadowwood, and I don’t remember his name. I glance at Vos, who supplies me with, “Hakan.”

I nod. “Did Hakan catch up to you?”

The likelihood is slim, given where the Vanished are hiding and how they got here, but maybe Reven sent someone to find him?

Horus’s grim shake of his head answers that. Not really a surprise.

“And Bina?” I ask next, softer. Because I’m pretty sure I already know.

The woman represented Tropikis and was the librarian for Reven’s stash of

books and scrolls in the Shadowwood. I'm still holding Tziah's hand, or I might have missed the way she tenses, as though the spoken name moves through her like a ghost stealing her soul. All three of them go blank as I look from person to person.

The cold spreading through my veins leaves a dull weight of sadness behind. I didn't speak more than a few words to the older woman, but my friends in this room feel the loss, so I do, too.

"When?" I ask quietly.

"She didn't make it out of the Shadowwood the night the Tyndran soldiers attacked. We haven't had the heart to vote for a new leader from Tropikis."

Even though Vida says it quietly, I still flinch.

I was one of the last out of there that night. I saw the carnage left over from that fight, so I knew, logically, that not everyone had made it through the portal I'd managed to cobble together in the midst of the chaos. But I hadn't looked at the faces of the dead, hadn't been able to make myself.

Hells. If I'd figured out how to make that portal sooner, maybe—

"Don't." I feel Reven's voice like he's inside me, around me.

Except he's walking into the tent. My gaze collides with his—bright turquoise, almost seeming to glow despite the dim light, trained on me in that super-serious way he has—and yet still that invisible wall stands between us, growing higher and thicker by the second.

Vos claps a hand on Reven's shoulder. "Took you long enough."

That's a bit new. While he and Reven respected each other, when I first met these people, Reven was still trying to keep his distance from the Vanished. Beyond bringing the people to the Shadowwood, he was very much a loner. That seems to be less so now.

And yet his walls are sky-high with me.

"It's not your fault," he says to me. "That night is not your fault."

"I know."

He understands, though. In his position, I know he does. No matter what anyone says, *every* loss is on my head. That's what being queen has done to me. Maybe what being princess, even a hidden one, instilled in me long before now.

Heavy is the crown that was never supposed to be mine, and all that crap.

Speaking of being queen... I draw my shoulders back. "I'm sure the zariph will include his closest advisors in this discussion with me. That means I need you all there, too."

Reven's chin dips, though his gaze remains on mine, like he's trying to argue with me in his head. I frown at him, and he glances away. That chasm gets bigger.

"Leave me out." Vida holds up her hands. "I'm not one of the voted-in reps, just a simple seamstress. No one is going to want to listen to what I have to say."

I would. Though like most people in this world, she's a Vexillium—with no supernatural powers—I'm pretty sure there's nothing simple about Vida, but I nod, respecting her wishes. I look to Tziah and Vos. "You both should be there."

Tziah tips her head, and I think I know what she's asking. Why them?

I wave a hand at Vos. "He knows Eidolon, and, other than Reven, he's the leader most looked to, right?"

She nods.

"And you are the heart of the Vanished." I pause when she puts both hands up to her cheeks. "I need you both there. Please."

After a pause, she draws her shoulders back much like I had, gives a nod, then signs at Vos.

"I didn't agree to anything," he protests.

Which she ignores, tugging on his shirt to follow her out of the tent.

"You, too," I say to Horus.

Immediately, he crosses his arms. "I told you, I'm lucky they haven't kicked me out yet."

I cross my arms, too, because this is nonnegotiable as far as I'm concerned. "You understand this dominion and the Wanderers *and* the Vanished, and I trust your advice. I need you there. I won't let him do anything to you."

The zariph can choke on his own ego, and we're all going to pretend I have the power to enforce that.

Horus's jaw works a little, but after a moment of consideration he gives a jerking little bow that says he'll do as I ask. Reven, meanwhile, says not a word. Nothing. Not a suggestion or an argument or even a nod of agreement. Doesn't he know my own self-doubts are creeping in on me like an entire nest of widow's assassins threatening to turn every part of me numb?

I may have been trained to *act* the part of royalty, but I spent my entire life not actually being one, not in the "everyone follow me, I make all the decisions around here" sense. I don't know what I'm doing. Not really.

Doesn't he realize I need help? That I need him?

Fatigue tries to crowd in with everything else.

“Right. Let’s go get this over with.” I push my way through the tent flaps into the warm night air. Time to find out what kind of ally we truly have in the Mighty Cainis.



Not How I  
Pictured This Going

Turns out, Cain's father is a dick.

Sure, I always guessed this. But when I was just Meren, I was a nobody, not worth the zariph's notice or attention, so I didn't exactly spend any time with the man. Because of his position and the possibility that he would meet authorities, my grandmother, or even my sister—not to mention his power to spot lies—I made sure I stayed out of his way.

I wish I could do that now. No such luck.

The zariph's first move was to bring up marriage again. As if that would solve everything. But before we could get down to that mess, not to mention the business of figuring out a better plan than an infinite game of "run and hide" from Eidolon, I had to force myself to sit through traditional Wanderer hospitality. Ironic, since that's all I've ever wanted—to be included in the life and heart of the zariphate.

But tonight, it's just slowing me down.

From the outside, the zariph's tent is simpler than many of the rest in the camp. On purpose, I learned long ago. Cainis wants to keep from presenting an easy target to outsiders who might attack, and a fancy tent is like a beacon. Supported by poles in a simple configuration that makes it rectangular, the siding is black goat hair blending in with those around it made of stretched animal hides, woven bamboo, or some in a thinner cloth made from woven fibers.

Unassuming and impossible to identify unless you know.

Inside is a different story.

Luxurious animal skins of the softest furs, multicolored rugs, and bamboo pallets all woven in intricate designs cover the sand with mounds of matching fur, leather, and goat hair pillows and bamboo petates scattered about. Melted candles sit atop jewel-crusted pillars, and more fires burn in bronze braziers. The riches of the zariphate used for bartering in the cities and hosting guests are all here.

The private sleeping area for the zariph and his zaripha is hidden behind

more woven dividers that separate other rooms from the main gathering area where he does most of his business. Where I found him lounging as he waited for me. He is sprawled across one of those mounds of pillows when I enter but gets up immediately.

Quickly, the large group of people gathered here—me, Zariph Cainis, Zaripha Magda, six of the zariph's closest advisors, Cain, Pella, Reven, Tziah, Horus, and Vos—are all being directed to sit in our proper spots by the zaripha. Cainis notices Horus's presence and gives a small huff of a sound, but he says nothing, which is at least a minor victory.

I don't miss how I am placed beside the zariph with Cain to my right, a barrier between me and any of "my" people. Or how Reven is placed on the opposite side of the room from me, seated next to Pella.

Is it terrible that I sort of hope one of Eidolon's Shadows pops out at her and... Yeah. I have a dark side I probably shouldn't indulge.

The zariph pretends that the Shadowraith in the tent doesn't exist. Meanwhile, a hardened warrior named Ledenon, who has never said one word to me, sits beside the zaripha on Cainis's other side. Unlike the zariph, Ledenon doesn't take his eyes off Reven. Off the threat in the room.

"I am happy *our* scheme to save Meren worked, my son," the zariph leans around me to say to Cain.

*Our* plan? Did he really say that? I almost snort. Cain told me how his father forbade him and Reven from leaving the zariphate to come for me sooner. He saw both Reven and Tabra as bigger assets than me, and he wasn't about to give up the assets under his "protection" to save me. Cain and Reven snuck out to come get me.

That, combined with how he abandoned the palace to Eidolon, and already I see the zariph as short-sighted at best, a coward at worst.

But still a warrior and a needed ally.

Goddess, I loathe, abominate, and despise the need to be political.

Cainis trains his gaze on me. Assessing. Probably for my childbearing capabilities. Given that Imperium powers are inherited—and my royal status technically would be, too—I'm sure he's picturing the grandchildren I could produce for his family and what they would be able to provide this zariphate in the future.

"I couldn't have gotten Mereneith out of there without Cain," Reven says to the group at large.

It's the first thing he's bothered to say other than whispers in my ear since

we arrived, but the comment effectively pulls the zariph's gaze off me. So there's that.

Luckily, the servers arrive just then. Loaded trays of various roasted meats along with vegetables and fruits are placed in the center of the gathering. As the highest ranked guest, I am supposed to eat first.

I hesitate, because I have to shake off the strangeness of this moment.

I've only ever eaten last when I'm with the zariphate, so reaching out now feels oddly wrong. As soon as I do, the zariph picks a choice piece of meat and feeds it to his zaripha on his other side in a small, old-fashioned courtesy that surprises me. Even more when he offers a smile with it, one that reaches his eyes. One just for her. He then takes a piece for himself. Once he takes his first bite, the others may join us.

Cain leans closer to point at one of the trays, the one filled with roasted hare with pickled cactus fruit. "Look," he says. "Mother Magda remembered your favorite."

I don't say anything. I'm pretty sure Zaripha Magda didn't even know my name, let alone my favorite foods, until I sent the Vanished here with Cain.

The talk while we eat is all idle pleasantries that set my teeth on edge because none of it matters. Worse, I'm limited by convention to speaking only with the people on either side of me, mostly the zariph asking questions about my life as both waif and princess.

What a waste of time.

Eidolon is coming. Tabra is dying. Reven is...whatever is happening with him. We need to be figuring out what the hells we're going to do.

When the zariph is busy speaking to Magda, I chance a glance across the room to find Pella with her hand on Reven's knee as she leans close, seeming to explain some nuance of etiquette to him.

And he's *letting* her touch him.

Pella smiles.

*Don't trust it*, I want to call to him. Her last smile ended up with me having a black eye I had to explain to Omma. Then Tabra had to get one to match.

She laughs then, a small chuckle, and I think maybe his crooked mouth tilts a little more. I've been trying to get him to smile for *days*.

I feel my power leave my body before I even know I've summoned it. Swallowing a gasp, I brace, waiting to see what I just did, but the sand around me doesn't shift and Pella doesn't disappear into a sinkhole, so maybe

I didn't do anything bad. I almost relax, congratulating myself on a close call.

"Watch out!" The shout comes from outside the drawn tent walls, followed by a few more cries of alarm.

Everyone inside stiffens, and I try not to cringe. What did I just unleash?

At a nod from Cainis, Ledenon, who is still watching Reven closely, gets up to check. He returns only a moment later. "A sand demon," he says, talking about the whirlwinds of dust that can spring up in the desert. "Big one. It's gone now."

Oops. I casually reach for a piece of meat and pop it in my mouth.

Cain leans toward me. "Tell me that wasn't you."

He cocks his head, eyes turning warm with amusement, and a thousand memories hit me all at once. Cain laughing when I stuck my foot in my mouth or did something a Wanderer would never do while I burned hot and no doubt bright red with mortification. It happened a lot, especially when we were younger and I was still learning about this life.

"Why?" I bump him with my shoulder. "You scared?"

"Of a sweet little sand waif like you?" He bumps me back. "Never."

I arch an eyebrow. "Sweet? Have you met me?"

He hums, and his smile widens. "I know a girl who used to race the servants to a well just to be the one to fill my cup with water when we arrived at camp."

"Who?" I ask, wide-eyed, but I already know. I thought it might prove to his people that I would do anything to fit in, to help them. What I didn't know was that was a sign from a woman to a man that she was open to a relationship.

"You."

I snort and shake my head. "Doesn't sound like me at all."

I'd be lying if I didn't admit how nice this is. How at home I feel here in the desert with Cain beside me, joking around like we always have, even if the circumstances have changed.

I reach for more food, even though my stomach doesn't want it, and refuse to look at the others. Especially Pella and Reven.

We're not even done with dinner yet. Following the main course comes the heavier breads, then the wines, followed by a rice dessert—a true treat, as the crop only grows near Aryd's few water sources—served with bananas, sandalwood nuts, and a rich, sweet cream. Then, finally, tea and coffee.

This is a feast most in the zariphate won't ever get. This is the zariph

treating a guest of honor with his highest respect.

All my years meeting with this zariphate, sometimes traveling short distances for a day or two with them, help me know what to do. But thanks to Omma, I have the added bonus that royals learn the customs of *all* their people. No offensive missteps for me, thank you very much.

After making sure everyone is finished with their meals, I tip my bronze coffee cup over a sliver of sand exposed between the mats and furs behind me—a sign that I am both done with the drink and that I enjoyed every drop, as none spills into the sand.

The zariph bestows a wide, teeth-grindingly benevolent smile on me. “See?” he says to the group in general. “The Goddess Aryd knew what she was about when she led Mereneith to my zariphate and my son. She is of the desert like no queen before her.”

I’m *not* queen. And why does he keep using the longer version of my name?

Then he bends that arrogant smile my way. “An immediate marriage between you and Cain is the most prudent decision you can make at this time.”

And *that’s* how he opens the discussion.

A Rock, a Hard  
Place, and Me

Zariph Cainis must have a death wish, because if shadow rose and fell outside earlier, darkness obliterates every source of light inside the tent before he's finished that statement. In the dark, I can't see Reven. See if he's the one doing this or if the Shadows are.

By the time someone relights one of the candles, casting a dancing glow over the room, Reven's shoulders rise and fall like he's breathing hard, but, like before, he taps the scars on his wrists. I don't look away, still watching him closely.

That darkness felt...different.

"What do you say?" Cainis draws my focus back to him, lounging comfortably as if none of that just happened.

I blink at him, trying to reorient. Then his question sinks in.

*No lies, I remind myself. Because of his Enfernae power. So make the truth work for you.*

I look the zariph directly in the eyes. "I will marry no one until my sister is healed and returned to her throne and King Eidolon's remains rot in the ground."

Preferably in the Pit of Bones.

Beside me, Cain plucks at the corner of a pillow, and I don't dare look him in the eyes. I hurt him again. And I hate that. I hide a sigh. I probably should have been softer in my wording.

I don't have time for soft.

"Marriage is the only option that makes sense," Cainis insists, puffing up. "You need to secure my people to you as your protection."

Cain says nothing. I'm not sure if that's good or bad.

"What I need," I insist—possibly through gritted teeth. My jaw aches. "Are people ready to fight a tyrant for themselves, not for me?"

Silence.

Finally, "This zariphate's support will not be tied to our marriage." Cain.

A small fissure of relief cracks the tension inside me, but Cainis eyes his

son. “You don’t speak for this zariphate yet, boy.”

Cain leans forward, toward his father. “Test my will in this, old man. Meren will only become my heartmate of her own free will.”

Whoa. While until now, mostly I’ve seen the two interact from a distance, I would’ve *never* expected Cain to speak to his father that way. Not ever.

I glance across at Reven, but he’s not looking back at me. He’s watching Cain with speculation in his gaze.

The conversation goes downhill quickly after that, with most everyone else jumping in on either side of the argument. The room, within half an hour, is in a grim-faced standoff. I should have seen it coming. Which is on me.

The zariph doesn’t budge. Neither does Cain. Eventually, the only way to put a pin in it is for me to agree that, at most, I’ll think about it. At which point the zariph refuses to entertain any other options in terms of going against Eidolon until I decide. The decision being that I marry Cain is implied.

What I need to show the zariph is that no one is safe with the king still alive. Not a single damn soul. Including him and his zariphate.

But that’s clearly not happening tonight. What I do know is that I can’t leave the Vanished or my sister and Achlys with the zariphate and go off to fix the world. Without marriage to Cain, the zariph will abandon them. I’m certain of it. I don’t know how much Cain could actually do to stop that, but it would mean pitting father against son. That happens sometimes in these communities, and it usually rips the zariphate apart.

I refuse to play the game that way, like different people on the board are pawns to be sacrificed in my bid to topple the king. No soul is more or less worth saving than any other. Even the zariph, though he’s falling lower on my list of priorities with each passing moment.

Either way, we won’t get further tonight, and I—attempting to be graceful and failing miserably because my robes tangle in my legs—manage to stand. “We can talk more tomorrow night.”

The zariph nods. “You must be tired.”

That’s like saying the sun must be hot.

Beside me, Cain chuckles. I don’t glance his way, but I’m pretty sure he guessed the direction of my thoughts. I must’ve made a face.

“You’ll be staying in my quarters, of course,” Cainis says as I turn to leave.

Seriously? The man has control issues, and he’s just begging for Reven to

lop his head off with shadow at this rate.

I face him with yet another polite smile, forcing my lips to curve, but behind him, Magda's eyes catch mine. Cold eyes. She's not Cain's mother, who died long ago. Magda's the zariph's second heartmate—this particular zariph choosing to have only one at a time. She's also Pella's mother. What could she possibly have against me?

"I would be honored," I murmur, shifting my gaze back to Cainis, "but I prefer to stay as close to Tabra as possible."

"I can't allow that." An order—clearly one he expects to be obeyed. "She is too dangerous."

"She is my sister—"

"She isn't," Cain says. Taking his father's side? He must catch the accusation in my eyes, because he gives his head a slight shake. "She's not Tabra right now. Not all the time. Part of her is still whatever Eidolon made her."

Hells. Hells and damnation.

I was supposed to *protect* her. It should be *me* withering away and chained in that tent so far from everyone else. Worse, I can't do anything about it. I have no answers.

If it's Eidolon's amulet that's doing this to her after she wore it, why wasn't I affected the same way? And how do we reverse the effects? She's not wearing it anymore and hasn't in months.

I need to be near her. And the last place I want to be is in yet another ruler's private rooms—under his eye, under his thumb, and hiding what I'm doing all the time.

I glance at Reven, who gives me nothing back. Not even a blink. Beside him, Vos shrugs. Horus gives me a nod of encouragement. Tziah's small face is worried, but she also nods.

I guess I have no choice. "Very well."

So tempting to kick the zariph in the shin just to wipe the smug satisfaction from his face.

Cain offers me his hand. "I'll take you."

"We'll need to see the space first," Vos, who is on Cain's other side, cuts in.

Immediately, Cainis puffs up righteously. "I will keep the queen safe."

Vos, hands clasped behind his back, gives a courtly nod. "But if the camp is attacked, Reven is the best bet to get her out. He needs to know where she



is to do that.”

I almost cheer for Vos. The man has wiles.

After a pause, the zariph gives a nod, and I allow Cain and Reven to lead me away. Together.

This should be interesting.

Boys, Boys,  
Boys

We don't make it two steps into the room before Cain gets right into Reven's face. He uses a voice I don't think I've heard from him before—uncompromising and utterly commanding. “Stay away from Meren from now on.”

“Hey!” I put a hand to his arm, but he shakes me off.

Reven doesn't move or say anything. Not even a protest.

“She needs my father on her side,” Cain says.

Reven's chin goes up. “I know.”

“He's the most powerful zariph in the dominion with allies amongst almost every other zariphate. He could raise an army for her.”

“I *know*.” The resignation that slips over Reven's features carves a hole inside me.

I cross my arms, glaring at them both.

Cain's too bent on making his point to either notice or care that Reven isn't going to fight back. “I'm better for her than you will ever be.”

“I know that, too.”

The finality, the totally emotionless way he said that gouges a hole through me. He doesn't mean it. He can't.

Except he goes to leave.

Cain grabs his arm to stop him. He must have a bigger death wish than even his father. “Then what was with those displays of darkness?”

“Exactly what you think,” Reven mutters, shrugging off Cain's hand.

He lost control? Because of me, or because he was jealous? I want to wrap my arms around my middle. That answer is a gut punch.

My emotions are like that sand demon I loosed earlier. A twisted jumble of denial and arguments for us being together and seeing how he's struggling and burning disappointment that I'm apparently not worth fighting for. Not to Reven, at least.

Cain leans back, the anger fading to be replaced with something closer to understanding.

“I *know* Meren.” Cain has the stubborn look of a dog with a bone. “Better than anyone. I care about her. I’ll treat her the way she should be. I’ll protect her. I’ll—”

Hold on. Are they seriously debating who gets me without asking me? “Excuse me. I’m literally *right here*.”

Reven abruptly shoves a hand in Cain’s chest, pushing him out of his space. “What do you want from me?”

For the briefest moment, I catch the flash of fear in my friend’s eyes, gone almost immediately as he stares the Shadowraith down. I’m not the only one with no self-preservation instincts. “Let her go. That’s what I want.”

Reven says nothing.

Are they kidding me with this? “Listen—”

“She’s safe with me now,” Cain says, not softly but like he’s trying to lessen the blow. “I want you to let her go. Disappear from her life.”

That’s it. “Stop it!”

They both jerk their heads around to stare at me. Reven is emotionless. Cain, after a beat, quirks an eyebrow. I don’t think I’ve ever shouted at him that way.

That quirk ticks me off, but Reven’s blankness ticks me off more. “I highly recommend you both take all your unilateral decision-making and get out of my sight.” I glare at them. “The only person who is going to decide anything for me is *me*. If you two can’t see that, then damn you both!”

Cain’s instant scowl could melt iron. Without another word, he pivots and walks away.

I glower after him.

As soon as he’s gone, Vos stands in the doorway, appearing from the darkness in the area right outside my room. “Am I interrupting?”

“You heard.” Not a question.

“Those two weren’t exactly being secretive.” He casts a speculative glance over Reven. “And you better rein the darkness in tighter, my friend. You’re losing it.”

That is very true.

“What are you doing here?” Reven grumbles.

“The zariph didn’t seem to have a chance to tell you that Eidolon’s men found us twice while you were gone.”

Twice? I glance between them. Is that a lot?

Reven mutters a curse.

I guess it's a lot.

Vos dips his chin, gaze serious. "I shouldn't have to tell you those soldiers could only have found us because they knew where to search."

He shoots me a significant glance. Vos is a trained fighter and was once Eidolon's general. I trust his judgment. He doesn't have to say the word out loud.

*Traitor.*

Someone had to have led those soldiers to the zariphate. Which means we have a spy among us feeding our enemy information. It's the only explanation that makes sense.

Reven drops his chin to his chest. "Keep an eye out, ear to the ground. Report anything suspicious." He pauses. "Don't tell the others."

Vos's jaw goes so hard I think it might break. "You think it's one of *us*?" Given the blip of suspicion Reven had for Vos not all that long ago, I can see why this would be a sore point. "It could be a Wanderer who isn't happy about the Vanished being here."

I shake my head. "Wanderers don't go against their zariph or zaripha. Especially this one."

Reven holds up a hand. "A traitor only happens because they betray their own. Trust no one else with this for now."

We nod. Vos heads for the door only to pause, then duck back inside. "Is he wrong?"

We both frown at him. "Wrong?" I ask.

"Is Cain wrong about anything he just said?" Vos is looking at me now, not Reven. "Reven is a Shadowraith barely in control of the evil he carries."

The shadows punch out of the corners, and I jump. Even Vos eases back as a fist visibly presses Reven's clothes outward from under his skin.

Goddess above. That's worse than I thought.

Reven closes his eyes and swallows hard, his belly flattening back out after a second and the shadows receding. "I can't be here."

Then, in a wisp of smoky shadow, he's gone.

I put my hands on my hips. "You said he was a wreck without me. Why make it worse?"

"He was. But you are acting queen now, up against a powerful enemy. Your choices need to be about more than you and Reven."

I'm left with only Vos, who gives me a pitying look.

He shakes his head. "Getting Reven and Tabra back is Eidolon's highest

priority. You need allies, and the zariph is a powerful one. Cain is your friend and will treat you well. And keep you alive.”

“You think I should marry him?” I demand.

He doesn’t relent. “I think it makes him your best option.”

“No one decides my fate but me.”

I know I’m being stubborn. I know I’m facing impossible odds, but the thought of marrying a man I don’t love, even Cain... *Especially* Cain, because he deserves more.

I just can’t do it.

Vos picks at his cuticles. “A broken queen is as useless as a snowball in the seventh hell and just as damned.”

Maybe he’s right. Maybe I don’t have a choice here.

I bow my head, staring at the mats covering the floor. “You may go,” I say quietly.

If I’m queen, I get to give orders.

Without a word, Vos leaves me there alone.

## The Zaripha

“If I may...”

I glance up to find Magda standing in the doorway Vos vacated a few minutes ago.

“I wanted to be sure you have everything you need.”

Wanderer hospitality is beyond compare in all the six dominions. Even when they don’t particularly like you.

“I—” I glance around me. “I haven’t had a chance to get settled.”

The zaripha says very little beyond pointing out amenities for my comfort. In addition to a satchel of water that hangs from a post beside a collapsible animal skin bag to use as a wash bin, they’ve also laid out clothing—Wanderer clothing that appears to be the right size. Even better.

“Thank you—”

“Cainis only takes one wife at a time, if that’s what you’re trying for instead of Cain,” she says.

I have to swallow a sarcastic snort. As if I’d tie myself to *that*.

“He’s not like some other zariphs or zariphas, who take many heartmates,” she says.

Ah. Well, that explains the nasty looks. I’d like to laugh her off, because I wouldn’t take that man as a heartmate if my life depended on it. Which it might, actually. Instead, I can hear Omma’s voice in my head. “*Some allies are worth cultivating, and some are not. Be wise enough to know the difference.*”

I face Magda fully, looking her directly in the eyes. “I’ve seen the way he looks at you, zaripha. The way he listens to you. There’s a reason he hasn’t taken other wives.”

Her shoulders drop ever so slightly, but doubt lingers in deeply mysterious eyes the color of moonless midnight. Not quite black and not quite blue. Somewhere in between.

I sigh. “I’ve already given my heart away to...someone else.”

The words feel strange on my lips because I haven’t ever admitted that out loud, only in my head. Everything happened too fast. Except the truth that

blooms inside me as a warmth that spreads through my bones tells me my words are real.

My feelings are *real*.

Somewhere between being kidnapped and fighting side by side, I gave Reven my heart. And he wants to abandon me. Let me be given to Cain, even.

Magda blinks, probably at the way I would share such a thing.

“And if marrying the strongest zariph of the largest zariphate in the dominion helps you defeat Eidolon and win back your dominion?”

She has a good point, and I cock my head to acknowledge that, but I also smile, though it feels stiff on my face. “I’ve shared everything about my life with my sister.” Hell, I was even expected to share Tabra’s husband eventually, with him none the wiser. Mostly, I pretended that bit of repulsive reality wasn’t going to happen to either of us. But now... “I won’t ever share a heartmate with anyone.”

Magda must see the sincerity in my eyes, the way I hold myself, because after a moment she nods. “Thank you for that. In return, I’d like to say that I think you should visit your sister again.”

I blink, not expecting that. “Tabra? But what if she—”

“She’s...calmer...in daylight hours.”

How would she know this?

She must see the question in my eyes. “I’ve tried to help her, when I can.”

There’s more to this woman than I realized. “Thank you.”

She dips her head almost like a shrug. “We take care of the people in our zariphate, no matter if they are temporary guests or born to our people.”

I’m still grateful.

She goes to the doorway but pauses. “Your Shadowraith friend asked me to arrange a hot bath for you.”

I straighten, warmth surging into my cheeks. Reven did that? When?

That jolt of eager interest gets trampled by immediate annoyance. I cross my arms. Not five minutes ago, that man was giving me to Cain.

“Would you like that now or after you see her?” Magda asks.

“After.”

“The sun will be up soon. Don’t let anyone see you leave or return.” She winks. “It’s easier than having to explain yourself.”

I Used to Do This  
All the Time

I don't wait long before I swap clothes and sneak out of the tent.

Moving unseen and unnoticed around a zariphate camp is both easier and leagues harder than getting out of the hovel I lived in with Omma in Enora. There, I had a limited number of ways in and out, but the Hag, who Omma paid to keep tabs on me, was also my only block, and she was bribable.

Here, there are many ways to go. I can do things like slip under tent sidings. They are heavier than you'd think, but they're moveable. However, I don't know who or what might be on the other side. I am also dealing with a larger number of guards and patrols, all hypervigilant and well trained. *None* bribable.

Good thing I've had years to practice moving around this zariphate in particular.

I can't help a grin as I roll under the side of my room and pause in the dark alleyway created between the zariph's tent and those closest to it. My amulet warms against my skin. Just for a flash before it cools again.

*Let's assume that was encouragement.*

Using the darkness and the way my new clothes blend into the sand—I've draped the wraps over my hair and face—I move through the camp, scooting around corners, squishing against tents, using the shadows, and dropping to my knees or even my stomach when I need to.

I have to be wary not only of other people moving around but of those inside their tents. I don't want someone to hear me, and that's entirely likely to happen, because I can hear them fine. I catch an argument between heartmates in one tent and the opposite sound of lovers in another.

"No rune!" a child cries out, so close that we're only separated by the tent siding and the air we breathe.

And I have to smile as I recognize words that go with a board game the Wanderers play—Sur—about strategy and tossing runes to determine your next move.

It takes me longer to get by that one, because they're sitting so close to the



tent wall.

At least I know exactly where I'm going. Once I get through where the Vanished are housed, my plan is to go out into the desert and circle back to approach Tabra's tent from the backside, avoiding the guards at the front.

Outside one tent, I catch a familiar sound. Horus's voice. I'm getting close.

The scuff of footfalls over sand has me dropping to my stomach, trying to make like a divot in the dunes, but whoever it is keeps coming closer. Tucking my hands under my stomach so they can't see the light radiating from my palms, I use my power to pull sand up and over me, pulse racing as a sentry passes by not ten feet from where I lay.

Thankfully, they don't pause, moving out of sight. I let out a silent breath. That was closer than I'd like.

I give the sentry another minute to clear out of the area before getting up and shaking the sand off me, flapping a bit as some goes down the back of my shirt. Then I keep going, making it to the outskirts. Checking to be sure Tabra's guards can't see me from where they are, I step out into the open desert. When no one calls out, I keep going. I go until I can no longer see the camp, hidden by the rolling dunes. Then I make my way back around to the left to come up from behind where she is.

The sky is still dark, though. No glow to the sky. I pause, staring off in the direction where the sun would come up. Should I wait a little longer?

A skittering of tiny feet in the sand has me looking around only to catch the glint of not one but several pairs of curious eyes in the dark. Sand foxes. The sigil of Cain's zariphate. I've heard they are half the size of foxes found in other dominions. Ours also change color to blend with the desert sands, even the blue of the Lazuli Desert.

I expect them to whisk away the second I notice them. Sand foxes are notoriously wary of humans. They're also keenly intelligent and hang around zariphates for the food.

They don't go. Instead, a head pops up, nose twitching. My brows raise as the vixen comes over the top of the dune, her white fur blending into the sand, and moves straight for me. Followed by three pups.

She pauses only a few paces away and sits, staring up at me, head cocked in a curious fashion.

"You're a hard woman to get alone, Mereneith of Aryd."

The sand fox runs, and on a gasp, I wheel around so hard that I get hung up in the deep sands and topple over, landing on my backside. As I go down, I

catch the shape of a man out of the corner of my eye. He's close enough that as soon as I hit the ground, I'm scrambling back on all fours as fast as I can.

Not fast enough. He just sort of disappears and reappears right in front of me.

With a yelp, I pull my power forward in a sizzling rush and throw sand at him. Except it goes right through him, falling to the ground in a *shoosh* of grains.

Eidolon raises his hands in what appears to be a conciliatory gesture before he disappears again.

I stop, looking around frantically. *Goddess help me.*

Then he's back, even closer, right in front of me now, crouched down so that we're eye to eye. And he's smiling. Kindly.

I cut off the scream that started to rip out of me as it hits me that he's not... solid. I can see through him like the semi-sheer curtains that hang between columns in my room in the palace.

"That's right," he says, and his voice sounds muffled, like he's talking through a veil. "I'm not the current flesh-and-blood Eidolon."

A squeak leaves me before I can stop it. But seriously, what would be a better response?

I gather my wits and take a sharp breath. "What are you, then?"

He stands, looming over me. Assessing. Crooked mouth still tilted, like he's amused. "I'm one of the versions of him that was shed, lived as a man, and has already passed on to the afterlife. Not the first Eidolon who started all this, but...one of the first to be created."

## Ghost Stories

Shock punches out of me in a bark of a laugh. Uh-huh. Right. I'm talking to a ghost of Eidolon.

I push to my feet, dusting my hands off. I think it's more likely that my mind has finally snapped. That or someone is doing this to me. An *Enfernae* with power over the mind, maybe?

"Where am I really?" I ask him suspiciously. "Still in the palace? Is Eidolon messing with my head, trying to get information?" I look around like the world I can see will fade away and reveal that everything that's happened since the moment Reven appeared in my room and kissed me was all the king's doing. A shadowy mimic of this world to get me to bend to his will.

The ghostly Eidolon before me shakes his head. "This is real enough. The current Eidolon took some of us out of the Land of Eternal Death. I..." He smiles to himself. "I hitched a ride. I've been trying to find you."

Souls from the burning lands? He's been looking for me? That's a lot to take in, and I'm still not sure I believe any of this. "Why?"

"To tell you a story."

*A story?* I blink, because that's the last thing I was expecting.

Tabra had a nanny once...which meant I did, too, from time to time, when I was pretending to be her. A pleasantly plump woman with a personality that involved comforting hugs and kind smiles...and bedtime stories. Grandmother wasn't thrilled with any of those things, and the nanny was let go after only a few months. I haven't thought of her in years.

I'm pretty sure whatever this spirit has in mind, it isn't going to be that kind of story. I don't really want to listen to what any version of Eidolon, other than Reven, has to say. But maybe if I humor him, he'll leave. "Like a bedtime story?"

He huffs a laugh. "Not exactly."

"Okay..." I draw the word out. "And if I hear you out, you'll leave?"

"I'll leave."

I try to think of any other way out of this, but given the way he moved last time, running isn't going to work. I force myself to relax, hands on my hips

and head cocked. “All right. I’m listening.”

Remaining crouched before me, he hesitates, as though trying to decide what to say. Then... “The story of creation is written in the glyphs and runes found on ancient monuments, obelisks, tombs, temples, and scrolls, pieced together from each of the dominions of this age.”

I frown a little. He’s going to tell me about creation? Every person alive knows this story. They tell it in schools, in the temples, in homes of those who still pray to the silent goddesses. I’ve heard it.

Eidolon’s ghost continues. “These writings describe how the world was formed out of chaos by the mother goddess. In the beginning, Nova uttered her name, and the world came to be. An infinite expanse of deep, beautiful waters.”

My frown deepens. “You left out the monsters.”

I’ve been taught this history since my birth. The waters Nova made were teeming with the Devourers, according to our most sacred knowledge. Now there are only a handful left.

The king’s eyes fill not with agreement but with a stark bitterness that almost has me drawing away from him. “The monsters in my story come later.”

The monsters come later? What is *that* supposed to mean?

“From these waters, Nova brought forth the dominions as one land. But the mother goddess was lonely. One day, she surrounded herself in darkness and shed from herself five shadows.”

Shadows. Shed her shadows. Oh my goddess, is this specter telling me Eidolon’s power—and Reven’s power—is the same as the mother goddess herself?

I have to take a long breath to deal with that new bit of information.

I glance around the clear night sky, practically expecting a lightning bolt to appear out of nothing and fry him where he sits for his daring to make such a bold claim. But none comes. The goddesses have been silent in their Allusian heavens for a long time now. I shouldn’t be surprised.

Eidolon’s mouth twitches before he continues. “Each shadow of Nova’s grew in loveliness until she formed into a solid being, a goddess in her own right—Nova’s daughters: Aryd, Mariana, Wildernyss, Tropikis, and the twins who split the fifth shadow in two, Tyndra and Savanah. And each took a piece of their mother with her, a piece of her powers. When her daughters were fully formed, Nova split the lands and granted her daughters each a

portion to shape and create and rule as she wished.”

“The dominions,” I whisper. I can’t help myself.

This doesn’t sound familiar. Maybe this is why Grandmother always used to say that history isn’t always truth. That it can change with the perspective of the person telling it. Is this what the king believes?

Eidolon nods. “And all six of the goddesses brought forth life—plants and animals and landscapes matching her individual likes, dislikes, and imaginations. Each dominion as harshly and beautifully different as each goddess for which they are named: Savanah’s wide-open grasslands and plains. Tyndra’s frozen ice sheets. Mariana’s balmy beaches. Wildernyss’s forested mountains. Tropikis’s jungles and rainforests. And my home, the scorching deserts ruled by the Goddess Aryd.”

I already know this.

“But,” Eidolon continues, “Nova’s daughters, too, were lonely. So, the mother goddess formed of the elements a new kind of creature—humans. None with powers, though.”

Vexillum, or Vex as we call them.

“She bade her daughters to find their consorts, their heartmates, among the beings that sprang up, and rule their lands together in contentment and peace. Unfortunately, the human creatures Nova had gifted her daughters were too frail and powerless and mortal. So, in a final act of love, Nova gave to her daughters her heart, which she took from her own breast.”

Wait, what? I’m frowning so hard I’m giving myself a headache, because this is *not* the history I know, but it sounds so...true. Is this some ploy? What if Eidolon is projecting himself to lure me out? Or trying to confuse me with false information?

“Each goddess gave her consort a single piece of Nova’s heart to eat, and with that, those six frail humans gained supernatural powers. They weren’t quite gods, as the goddesses were more powerful, and they weren’t Imperium like some humans are now, either, because the goddesses’ consorts also gained immortality. They could now rule at their lovers’ sides forever.”

I swallow.

“Through the direct descendants of the goddesses and their consorts, the Imperium were born. Humans with powers but no immortality.”

Says the ghost of a man who has sat on his throne for ages. But I know how he does that, so I say nothing.

“As you know, these powers have been passed as inherited traits from

generation to generation. Over time, Imperium split into two factions. The Hylorae, like you, and the Enfernae, like me.” He lifts his chin a proud fraction. “Only soon the humans, growing in number and greed, rose up against their goddesses and their consorts.”

I’m rapt at this point. If this is true... But how can it be?

“In order to put down the uprisings, the consorts needed more power. In a desperate bid, they ate more of Nova’s heart. Only something in the magic went wrong, and, to the goddesses’ eternal despair, their mates became monsters.”

Monsters. Not dead? Not...

I gasp. “The Devourers?”

“Well done,” he says. Like I’m a good little girl for figuring that out. Holy hells. Why am I letting myself believe any of this? Eidolon—no matter the incarnation—is a *liar*.

It takes one to know one.

*What about Reven? He’s not a liar.* Not all the pieces of Eidolon were bad, he said. And if this is really one of the first versions of the king...

My mind is spinning like the toy top that goes with that Sur game.

Eidolon doesn’t wait for me to speak. “With a thirst for human blood, the Devourers went on a rampage through the lands, decimating Imperium and Vexillium alike. Despite the humans rising against them causing all of this, the goddesses still loved their people, especially the Imperium, who were their own descendants. The goddesses attempted to kill their bloodthirsty consorts, but, in the end, they couldn’t do that to their heartmates. So, instead, they cast the monsters into the seas and created protections for the dominions against them.”

This part is sounding more familiar. Not the casting out, but the protections at every dominion’s borders to keep out the Devourers. That’s well-known.

“Aryd raised her glass walls. Tyndra formed unmelting icebergs in the channels around her dominion. Tropikis sank the center of her lands, creating massive stone walls keeping the waters out, the fall from which would kill even a Devourer. Wildernyss lifted her mountains high in the sky and pulled her people into the heart of the lands, away from the edges. Savannah protected the seaward side of her dominion with massive rocks and showed her people how to build their watchtowers and walls. The dominion of Mariana has always had their large bay, but their goddess put the great whirlpool at the entrance to keep the Devourers out, though the Reverie now

lurks there.”

I think of my one encounter with a Devourer—the Hollow, a massive octopus-like creature that sucks out his victims’ insides. I thought he came for me because his voice had sounded in my head. I’d never known of anyone hearing a Devourer talk to them.

But if that monster is basically a demigod...

Eidolon isn’t done. “But now the people blamed the goddesses for the Devourers, growing angry as well as greedy, cursing their makers. Until finally two twin princesses of Aryd...”

He may as well have reached out a ghostly hand and slapped me hard. The mention of the twins—of the women who had to be *my* ancestors—this can’t be a mere bedtime story or a fairytale this spirit is spinning. Is this *his* truth?

I manage not to flinch or move or even blink, and he keeps going.

“These Imperium princesses laid a trap. On their coronation day to become queens and rule Aryd together, they invited the goddesses to come and bless their reign and to establish a new peace with their people. Only the princesses *lied*.”

Anger curls through Eidolon’s voice like a lick of flame.

I think I’m going to be sick.

“The morning of the coronation was auspicious. The princesses were to ascend on the day of the Celestial Alignment, when the sun and all three moons in full fill our skies together. It happens every one hundred years.”

That deep voice descends to a snarl. “The goddesses, all six of them, took that timing as a sign and arrived in good faith, but the sisters were waiting. From each of the different deserts of their dominion, the twin who was Hylorae with a power over sand formed unbreakable glass amulets.”

My entire world narrows to what this spirit is saying, my heart thudding.

*My power.*

Wait... *My amulet?*

It lies nestled under my clothing, where I keep it hidden. I haven’t even told Reven about it yet. Wrapped in a thin metal filigree, the jagged glass the size of a small scarab beetle is unexpectedly smooth to the touch. I know from holding it.

“Into each of these amulets, the twin who was Enfernae bound the goddesses’ souls, trapping them inside. The process killed the soul wielder, leaving only one queen of Aryd to reign.”

Can he hear my heart slamming against my rib cage, pounding so hard it

hurts? It will be a bloody pulp inside my chest at this rate.

“The goddesses weren’t inherently evil like the queens believed,” he assures me in a voice gone gruffer now, almost...shattered. An emotion I never once saw in the king I was trapped with all those months. Emotion that seems real as I study his hazy features with wide eyes.

“The goddesses were heartbroken and lonely, and, like the humans modeled after them, they were equal parts good and evil, selfishness and selflessness, right and wrong.” Eidolon takes a deep breath. “The man who shed me was a young king of Tyndra, newly crowned at the time. He was there that day and watched in horror as his goddess was imprisoned in one of those amulets.”

*Eidolon was there?*

“He grabbed the amulet with Tyndra inside and shadowed away before the remaining Arydian queen could kill him, too.”

He raises his gaze to mine, turquoise eyes paler than I’m used to thanks to his ghostly form, and I swear his eyes soften as he reaches out to cup my cheek. Not that I can feel his touch beyond an odd sense of cold. “So you see, young queen of Aryd, not everything is as it seems.”

I curl my hands into my clothes, trying not to let him see. If he’s telling the truth, the amulet I’ve been carrying around has a *goddess* trapped inside it. My goddess?

One put there by my own ancestresses.

I’m trying to control my breathing so he won’t know how I’m about to lose it, reaching for any way to calm myself down. “Is this why the goddesses have been silent? Why they haven’t heard our prayers?”

“Yes.”

“Why are you telling me this? Do you think we should help...errr...current you?”

Satisfaction sweeps over his features. Just a flash. “Knowing the truth will help you make the right decisions.”

I’m not fooled. That’s what he wants. Is that why Eidolon has been after the queens of my line all this time? To get our amulet? What would he even do with it if he had it? This doesn’t make any sense. “And what decision should I make?”

“That is for you to discern. But know that the next Celestial Alignment is almost upon us.”

Months—not more than two. It is not an event our stargazers can pinpoint



with accuracy. My viziers are already preparing a celebration. “Why is that important?”

The ghost’s crooked mouth tilts slightly. “That is for you to discover.”

I scoff. Is he kidding?

“You don’t believe me.”

I give him a pointed look. “What tipped you off?”

He nods, almost to himself. “Something is coming,” he says. “Something...bigger. Be ready when it does. And remember, not everything is as it seems. Don’t be quick to kill. Then you’ll know I spoke the truth this night.”

His form wavers, fading.

“Wait. Kill what?”

He doesn’t wait, though, turning more and more transparent before my eyes. His voice reaches through the night. “You’re not alone out here.”

“Meren.” The call comes from ahead of me.

The ghost of Eidolon vanishes, but in the distance stands a younger version of him. A solid version.

Reven.

I don't know what to think first, my mind zinging from thought to thought like a wind pixie in a storm.

Did Reven see Eidolon's ghost?

Reven just stands there, too far away to see his face, stance set wide, arms crossed, smoldering at me. I mean it. Even from here I can feel the smolder, and not the good kind. The angry kind.

Oh hells no. He does *not* get to be the angry one right now.

Hampered by the sand, which only ups my irritation, I stomp across the dunes to him. I don't stop when I get close enough to see that his jaw is clenched, lips flat, thick brows drawn low over turquoise eyes that look like the ocean in a thunderstorm when the waters churn.

Something, by the way, I shouldn't find sexy.

That thought is the only reason I stop a few feet away. I need distance to keep a clear head.

"I heard you," he says.

That takes some of the wind out of me. "Heard me?"

"You cried out for help. In the dark. I felt your panic."

When Eidolon's ghost showed up. It had to be. Did he see the specter or not? "I'm fine now."

"Now?"

He is not sidetracking me. As rattled as I am, as much as I need to talk this out with someone, if I tell him about Eidolon's spirit, he'll use it as a reason not to have the talk that we clearly need to have. I'll tell him after that. I plunk my hands on my hips. "It's time for you to tell me what in Nova is going on in your head."

He says nothing.

Neither do I. Anger builds at his silence.

This is the first time we've been alone—a true, not-waiting-for-someone-else-to-show-up-any-second kind of alone—since we shared our bodies and hearts months ago.

It's like I can feel him giving up on us.

My anger is still there, but the fear rises up, and so does hurt, swirling around inside me. A thousand unspoken words and moments and needs fill up the space between us until all I see and feel and sense is Reven.

And he's so far away from me.

He feels it, too. I know he does, because his throat works even while his face is expressionless, walls still raised high. Impenetrable.

"You shouldn't be out here."

And just like that, I'm back to pissed. "Excuse me?"

"It's not safe. Go back to your tent, Meren." An order. He's giving me an order.

"No."

He drops his arms to his sides and takes a menacing step forward, then stops, hands clenching as if he doesn't quite trust himself. I search for any sign that he's struggling with the Shadows.

"If anyone checks your room and you're gone," he says, "they'll tear the whole camp apart to find you."

"I'm not leaving here until you tell me what you're thinking."

He stares at me, refusing to say a word. Why? Because I'll try to talk him out of whatever it is?

That wall of nothing from him is so high, so thick. Goddess. I'm tired, and worried, and over it. And my heart aches something awful, threatening to spill into tears.

Resentment bleeds into the pain. I'm not the crying type, and I've already cried once tonight for Tabra.

"Right," I whisper. It's either that or choke. "I understand. It's over. No need to...whatever."

I don't open my eyes until my back is to him, and he doesn't stop me as I walk away toward the camp.

*I walk away from him.*

And I don't stop...until that voice that I crave to hear in the dark calls out. "You don't understand anything."

I stop, but I don't look at him, staring unseeing at the sand at my feet. We stay that way for what feels like forever and only a few moments at the same time, and I hardly dare to breathe, afraid of what comes next. Afraid of what he's trying to tell me.

"You have to let me go." His voice is a thousand layers of tortured.

It turns out there are words that physically hurt, that create an ache inside

you so bad, you don't know if you can stand it. I wrap my arms around my stomach to hold it in.

I was right. He's ending us.

"I don't want to..." He's closer now. I can tell. "Goddess help me, I don't want to let you go."

"Then don't." I spin around and he's right there. Within touching distance.

The walls are not down but lowered now. I can't feel him, but he's letting me see the struggle. It darkens his eyes, dulling the color. He shakes his head. "This is why I didn't want to talk about it with you, because you'll try to change my mind...and because I think it will hurt you more knowing that it's hurting me to walk away."

I chuckle, though the sound is humorless. "You got that right."

"Don't make this harder on me. I'm doing this *for* you."

"Horse shit."

He tenses, inching back from me, from my anger. I stab a finger in the air at him. "You are giving me no say. Not even asking me what I think or want."

"Damn it, Meren. Don't you see—"

"No." I cut a hand through the air, and he snaps his mouth closed. "Don't you see? From the second I was born, everyone around me has made decisions about *my* life. I've been given no choices. And I'm sick of it. Of everyone who knows me, I would have thought you would understand that."

"I do."

I scoff. "And yet you're choosing for me anyway. That makes it worse."

He stares at me. "You have to go out there and save the world."

I still at that. "What?"

"Not because it's your duty. I see you. I see the way you need to make sure everyone around you is safe—Tabra, Achlys, the Vanished, the Wanderers. You're going after Eidolon yourself. You haven't said so, but you don't need to. I can see it in you."

I stare at him.

"You think I didn't guess?"

"No one else has." Not even Cain or Achlys, who probably know me better than most.

"You have to do this. I hate that you have to do it, but it's who you are. Not because you were born to be a sacrifice but because that's your heart. I see you, Mereneith Evangeline."

He's the only person who leaves off the XII in my name. Like I'm the only one who's had that name that he cares about.

His throat works around a swallow. "You have to keep fighting until it's over. That's your fate. And I will burn down the world if I have to, just to keep you safe while you do it. That's mine."

I'm being torn in a thousand pieces. Because everything within me wants to melt at that, even while I am violently rejecting it. "Even if it means keeping me safe from you?"

"Yes." Unequivocal. Hard-edged.

I fold my arms across my chest. "What if my choice is to be together?"

He throws his hands in the air. "I'm *dangerous*. You seem to deliberately ignore that."

"If I've learned anything from my life, it's that making decisions based on fear doesn't work."

Reven says nothing.

"So many princesses of my line were hidden away, their lives forfeited to fear. So many of our queens taken and killed, and we did *nothing*. We just hunkered down and hoped it would stop." I want to reach for him, place my hand over his heart, try to make him feel what I am, to understand. But I suspect if I do, he'll shut me down. "You tried the same thing already. Made the Shadowwood, a place you thought he couldn't reach, and you hid there."

A starkness flickers over his features, too fast to catch. When he still says nothing, I keep going with a fraught sort of idea that if I keep talking maybe he won't walk away.

"Hiding doesn't work. Waiting doesn't work. Letting fear make us walk away from the small amount of good in our lives isn't the answer, either. I can't. I *won't*."

"Meren." He's shaking his head, listening but not hearing me. And there's nothing I can do about it.

I'm not giving up. "Let me be clear...I see you as the good. Maybe the only good right now."

"If I lose control," he snaps. "If the Shadows take over, or even if I disappear you without meaning to..." He runs frustrated hands through his hair. "You say you won't give up the good, won't give up me, but if I hurt you—and it's only a matter of time—I won't risk that."

"We beat Eidolon's Shadows together once," I point out. I almost killed him to do it, though. The edge of doubts doesn't leave him. "Even a

Shadowraith deserves some happiness, Reven.”

He ducks his head as a hundred emotions chase across his features.

Want. Need. Longing.

I reach out a hand only to drop it to my side as more emotions follow.

Despair. Refusal... Determination.

I swallow hard around the lump in my throat that might be my heart dying.

He lifts his head, and the walls are back, higher and thicker than before. He’s decided. “Do you really think it would make me happy to watch you get hurt because of me? Or see you lose everything because of me?” His expression hardens. Uncrackable. “It won’t. Don’t be selfish, Meren.”

He might as well have punched me in the stomach.

“I will stay. We can’t let Eidolon get to me, and I’ll do everything in my power to help you. But this...us...” Another step away. “Cain’s right. You have to let me go.”

Then he walks away, leaving me there, staring after him. At the edge of the camp, he pauses like he might turn back. He doesn’t. He keeps going until he’s out of sight.

# Part 3

## Critical Position

## Like Before

I wait awhile before I bother to move, mostly because I can't make myself. And when I do, Reven's footprints in the sand mock me almost the entire way back to the zariphate camp, more and more obvious as the dawn breaks. I only diverge from the path he took earlier when I get close enough to go to the back of Tabra's tent.

I don't enter immediately, taking time to try to get myself together.

The thing is, I have only a few people I have ever gone to when I'm upset. I didn't even share all my problems with Cain all these years. But my sister... she's the one I seek when I need comfort. When I crave the kind of touch that helps me know I'm not as alone as I feel.

Dropping to my belly, I roll under the siding and into the room. Immediately, Achlys sits up from where she was lying on a pallet beside Tabra, but she cuts off her squeak of alarm as soon as she recognizes me.

I don't move from where I am in case I upset Tabra and need to leave quickly. "How is she?"

"Meren?" Tabra's thready voice hurts to hear. If only I could make her sound stronger. I know I can't, and that's what hurts. I can't will her better.

"I'm here." I move closer. At a quick nod from Achlys, I dare to drop to my knees on Tabra's other side, and I smile. "Hi."

"It wasn't a dream?" She looks from my face to Achlys's.

Achlys links her pinkie finger with my sister's. "No, tesara. Not a dream."

Tears leak out of Tabra's eyes, running down her temples, and all I can think is that she can't afford to lose even that much water from her frail body. "I wasn't sure." She looks toward the doorway that is letting in a sliver of sunlight.

I wait. I give her time and hold back the hoard of questions that I want to ask.

Eventually, she looks at me. "What happened?"

I know what she's asking. I make a face.

"What? You don't think I can handle it?"

Pretty much. "It's not that. It's just...a lot."



Her cracked lips twitch. We've had these conversations before. Often. We would sometimes go months without seeing each other. In those days, when I said it was a lot, I was joking. Our lives were unremarkable in how nothing changed, especially when we were apart. She did princess things. I did the things I did, mostly listening to Omma's lessons. I used to babble when I'd get nervous, but in general I'm not much of a sharer.

Probably comes from having to keep secrets since infancy.

"Tell me one good thing and one bad thing." Which is how Tabra always used to get me talking.

"I can leave," Achlys offers.

"No." I shake my head. "Stay. Please."

I move to sit cross-legged as I sift through the options of good and bad things. It's a lot of bad. The thing is, Reven *was* the good thing. Now that's not true.

I clear my throat. "The good thing is we're back together and we have friends who will help us." I hope.

"What friends?"

It comes out more than. I tell her about Cain's zariphate and the Vanished. I tell her about Vos and Horus and Tziah and Vida. I can't bring myself to tell her about Reven beyond a mention of how he formed the Vanished. "And Achlys is with us, of course." I shoot her a smile.

"That was a lot of good," Tabra says when I stop talking.

I huff a laugh. That was a smidgeon of what she doesn't know.

"And the bad?" she asks, but falls into a fit of coughing.

Achlys gets up and goes to a bucket, drawing a ladle out and bringing it to Tabra. I help lift my sister so she can drink, but the angle is bad, and she chokes on the water, spluttering. Achlys pats her back until it's over. Then uses her own sleeve to wipe spittle away from my sister's chin.

The look they exchange, I might as well not be here. I drop my gaze to give them a moment. Then peek back up because even if I'm not getting a happily ever after, my sister is. There's some comfort in that.

Then Achlys seems to remember I'm there, getting up to put back the ladle before returning to sit with us. "So," she's the one to prompt. "The bad thing?"

"The bad thing is we are now fighting Eidolon, and we don't know how to defeat him." I pause and stare at the ground, the moment with the ghost suddenly striking a different chord.

“What?” Achlys asks.

I glance up at her, Tabra looking between us. “I may not know how to defeat him, but I might know something he wants.” If his ghost was telling the truth, at least. The question is, what do I do with that? I need to tell Reven

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No. I need to tell the others.

“I can see the cranks turning,” Tabra says. “You should go.”

She’s always been able to read me that way. I reach for her hand, careful to be gentle. “It can wait. I’ll talk to them once we’re on the move.”

No way is Cainis keeping the zariphate here after I just arrived. Not when someone—a certain king in particular—might follow. With the sun coming up, we’ll be packing up soon.

“You look exhausted.” Tabra makes a sound at the back of her throat. “Sorry. I don’t mean that harshly.”

That soft heart of hers is still there. Seeing even a small peek of it eases the worry of her going feral on me. She’s still her. Still my sweet sister.

“I’m sure I do. I’ll go to bed early when we get to the next place.” Maybe. After talking this out with the others. We need a plan, and my marriage definitely isn’t it.

“Good.” I think Tabra means to squeeze my hand, but it’s barely a brush of a touch.

*Boom.*

All three of us jump, and I twist in the direction the sound came from, even as it ricochets across the skies. “What was that?”

A beat of silence is followed by a battle scream from the Wanderers that thunders all the way to our edge of the camp. “Scourge!”

A Monster in  
Our Midst

Fear spikes my blood so hard it makes my skin crawl.

Another boom rattles the tent, followed by shouting.

Eidolon must have found us. Found the zariphate. Has he been following us the entire time? We probably led that bastard right to the camp.

To Tabra.

Goddess, my sister is senselessly vulnerable in this tent so far from the rest of the camp. She needs more protection. I whirl on Achlys. “Keep her safe. The guards will help you until I can send more.”

I’m up and out of the tent before she can say anything, ignoring the cries of surprise from the two guards. I run right at the sound of fighting only to collide with Reven one row of tents in.

“I knew you’d be headed straight for trouble.” But instead of stopping me, he marches directly toward the sound of chaos.

I don’t follow. “I need you to protect Tabra.”

He goes ominously cold. “I’m not leaving you.”

“Please.” I’m begging, pushing at his shoulder, shoving him in the direction of Tabra’s tent. “Please. You have to. They’ll take her or kill her. And I can’t—”

“Hellfires,” he mutters. Then gets in my face. “Okay. I’ll go.”

He’s not fighting me on this?

“Just do not—”

I know what he’s going to say.

“I have to protect my people. I’m an Imperium, and I’m the queen for now.”

He grips my shoulders so hard I cringe.

“Get your hands off her,” Cain snaps.

I turn my head to find him standing to the side, chest heaving like he’s been sprinting. He probably has. His expression is a combination of accusation and confusion that is becoming painfully familiar.

Reven ignores him. “I mean it, Meren. I’ll protect Tabra, but promise me

you'll keep yourself safe."

Courage burrows a hole through my fear. There it is again. This isn't him holding me back or trying to protect me. This is him supporting me. Believing in me.

"She bloody well isn't going anywhere near that—" Cain bites off his protest as both Reven and I swing glares his way.

"Actually, I have a better idea," Reven says without looking away from Cain. "*He* protects Tabra. I go with you."

Cain's lips draw back in a sneer. "What, so you can lose control again? Wipe out the entire zariphate this time? Not a chance."

He did *what*? I swing around sharply to stare at Reven. "Wait. You—"

The sand shifts under me a heartbeat before shooting into the air across the camp, followed by even more shouting.

After what Cain just said, maybe I should rethink sending Reven to my sister. But of the two situations, he's less likely to snap there, where he can't see what I'm doing. Right?

"Go." I give Reven a shove toward Tabra's tent. And, after a look that I feel to the deepest part of me, he goes.

"What is Eidolon using to attack us?" I ask as I push past Cain.

He grabs me by the arm, pulling me up short. "It's not Eidolon."

I try to shake him loose even as his words sink in. "Not Eidolon? Who the hells is it?"

No animals in the desert are rash enough, and most not big enough, either, even in herds, to attack a camp this size. Any soldiers would be Eidolon's, wouldn't they? Another zariphate maybe?

"Not who," Cain snarls. "*What*."

Then I remember. What the ghost of Eidolon said. Something bigger. "What?"

His expression darkens. "The Elimination."

Bile hits my throat so fast the sting of it is almost too much, but I swallow it and my shock back down as I stare at Cain.

The Elimination...the Devourer who swims the oceans surrounding Aryd. A Devourer is here? *Here*? In the center of the desert. How is that remotely possible? All of those monsters live in the *oceans*. And our walls...

Goddess above. Our glass walls that keep us safe. Did they fall?

A roar rattles the sand again, and the tents all around me shudder, one toppling over.

Seven hells, this is going to be a bloodbath.

We sprint through the camp in the direction of the sound. “Are the legends true?” I ask. “Is the Elimination made of sand?”

Cain says nothing. I shoot him a glance. His jaw is so hard he could be made of glass.

“Cain? Is it?”

“Reven is right,” he bites out. “You have to stay safe.”

That’s not an answer but tells me a lot all the same. He knows me—I’ll try to stop it if it’s made of sand. Fear churns so hard in my belly it creates waves. What good am I against a Devourer? Maybe I should listen to him. Let the warriors of the Wanderers and any Imperium from both them and the Vanished deal with this.

And I would...except my power is over sand. I can try to do *something* if the Elimination is made of the stuff.

The amulet against my skin warms. Assuming that story wasn’t lies and my goddess is inside, is she urging me to move? I’m still turned upside down after the conversation with the ghost. There’s still so much to unpack, but I don’t have *time*.

A thick plume of sand bursts into the night sky with that same thundering, strange boom, somewhere between a crack and a sizzle. In the same instant, over the tops of the tents, a massive figure rears back only to crash forward.

Holy terror straight out of the hells.

Cain sprints ahead of me and slows us both with a hand raised behind him. Together, not needing to be silent because the Elimination is making so much noise on its own, we use the cover of a few tents still standing near where it is and creep as close as we can. Sand hits us in a spray of pellets as the Devourer thrashes and roars.

Cain peeks around the edge, then waves me forward.

I peek around the tent, too. Or try to. Cain has a grip on the back of my top and is holding on tight, which makes it harder. Straining against him, I get my first good look at the creature. I’ve seen a Devourer before. I feel like I’m prepared.

*Holy. Heavens. On. Fire.*

I was wrong.

I’ve never seen anything like it. When I came across the Hollow, all I saw of it were tentacles. I didn’t get a look at the rest. The sheer size of it.

The Elimination, though, is different.

The thing is a butcher's nightmare concoction of all different beasts melded into one. Based on pictures Omma showed me of animals from all the dominions, I can pick out some. A man's face—a beautiful man's face—sits awkwardly within the head of a ram with its horns curling backward, but the jaw and mane are of a lion, and tusks like a wild boar protrude from between its lips. It has the arms and claws and torso of some kind of massive, fur-covered animal I can't identify, but its legs and tail look like those of a wolf.

All carved from sand.

I suck in a gasp on a desperate bid of hope.

The legends were right.

Every inch of him is made, very definitely, of sand. The different colored sands of my dominion, even, blended together in a way that reminds me of the time Tabra and I got into Grandmother's makeup as children and smeared it all over our faces.

The monster is surrounded by a hundred Wanderers at least. Warriors all, defending their homes and families with spears and bows and arrows. Those are weapons for distance. Closer-range weapons like their curved knives or their urumi belts wouldn't help for this. It could crush them with a stomp of a foot or a whack of a paw. Regardless, none of their attempts to stop that thing make a dent. If anything, they only manage to piss it off more.

Its terrible roar echoes that thought, and I clamp my hands over my ringing ears.

"Goddess help us." Cain is beside me now, watching over my shoulder. "There's not enough water or I'd—"

An unnatural blast of wind that has to be coming from a Hylorae in our camp howls over the dunes, knocking several Wanderers to the ground and sending unanchored tents and siding and poles rolling haphazardly away. The Elimination digs its talons into the sand and leans into the winds. Parts of him blow away. I can see the dust rise off him like fine, dry mist on the air.

How in the name of Nova did this thing survive in the oceans for so long? The thing should melt away in the water.

Even as I ask myself that, the Elimination reforms and rears back, bringing its front paws up. When it brings them down, the sandy body shifts and morphs into horse's hooves, which it uses to trample another swath of tents with deadly intent.

*It's a shapeshifter.*

That answers the ocean question. It must morph into something that can

swim and breathe underwater.

“I’m going to try something!” I shout over my shoulder.

“Don’t—”

Focused on what I’m about to do, I ignore him and ignite my power, bringing it sizzling forward.

I haven’t done anything this big since fighting Eidolon. I hope with all the powers of the underworld and the Allusian heavens combined that I can.

Just one small piece. I’ll try to affect one small thing on the Elimination, and if it doesn’t work, then Cain’s right and goddess help us all.

*Please, goddess, hear me. If one of you is in my amulet, I need your strength.*

The amulet is already warm against my skin, but it does nothing. Maybe she didn’t hear me. Or maybe she’s not there at all. I don’t have time to work that out.

Instead, I center all my attention on a small part of the Elimination, something it hopefully won’t notice. I send my will through my power to all the tiny grains that make up this beast and picture the tip of its wolf tail still as stone.

Suddenly, the Elimination’s tail appears to be caught in the air, as though something snatched it. The tip doesn’t move, but the rest of the tail keeps trying and is swinging and yanking more and more wildly. I release it with a gasp just as the Elimination bends its body around to look at itself.

I stifle a giddy screech. It worked.

The question is, can I do that to the entire thing? Something so huge? It might wipe me out, but that’s worth the risk.

“Meren, what are you doing!”

Reven suddenly skids to a stop beside me. Menacing fury is visible in every ferocious inch of him, and I can feel his anger inside my own shadows, clenching, pounding.

Reven is threatening enough that Cain shoves himself bodily between us.

I’m pretty sure Reven could knock him away with a whim. I know he could disappear him entirely, and it sounds like Cain has seen it happen, too. Reven ignores him, his glare fully directed at me. “You *promised*.”

“Technically, I didn’t, but that’s why I’m hiding and not out there fighting.” I wave a hand at the chaos, then at him. “Why are *you* here? What about Tabra?”

“Horus and Tziah are with her.”

Okay, good. I glance at the Elimination, then back at him. If he's going to end us so that I can do what I have to do, then he needs to let me do it. "It's made of sand. I'm the only one who can stop it."

"*That's* what you're doing?" Cain says from behind me. "No. No way."

"I froze a piece of his tail."

The Elimination rears up behind us, then sinks down as its back half shifts into a snake's body, which coils upon itself, lifting up its torso like a cobra. Those boar's tusks change to fangs.

"Fuck," Reven mutters. Then the anger in his features changes...to acceptance. "Do it."



## Face-Off

Cain grabs me by the arm to stop me, but the way Reven's gaze cuts to his hand, he's lucky he still has it. To my surprise, he lets go, though with a glower. "You can't let her—"

"She's doing this." Reven is unmovable, and I guess Cain can see that, based on the way his lip curls.

Is it wrong that his standing up for me thaws some of the icy anger in my chest at his leaving me?

"I'll shadow her out if I have to," Reven tells Cain. "Get to your father and warn him what she's about to do."

My friend shakes his head. Once. Twice. Then, "Hells." He sprints away using the few tents still miraculously standing as cover.

Reven looks at me, no doubt in his eyes, which bolsters my own courage. "Ready?"

I take a deep breath, drawing my power forward until the glow coming from my hands is almost blinding. Thank goddess for the daylight or I'd be easy for the Elimination to spot and kill.

Planting my feet—as if that's going to help—I hold up my hands, directing the light toward the creature still squaring off against the Wanderers, who look tiny beside its bulk.

*Here we go.*

This time, I go big. I'm going to have to work fast, but maybe if I neutralize the parts that do the most moving, I can buy myself time to freeze the rest. Which now means stopping that endless serpentine tail. Four hooves might've been easier.

I concentrate hard, picturing every part the way I can see it curled, and imagine all the sand inside. When I think I'm ready, the power that leaves me is like a physical wave. I imagine a soul being forced from the body feels much the same.

The Elimination's thundering roar cuts off, and its head whips down to look at itself. Its torso jerks as though it's trying to make itself move, but I have it. I damn well have it.

I have all the sand in its coiled snake body immobilized.

Holding that much, I try for the torso, except it transforms again. Not the tail, but the upper part becomes fully snake, except the face and the horns. It falls forward onto the sand like a tower being toppled, then writhes and flips over the dunes and trampled tents as it tries to free itself.

But I still have it.

My focus narrows to only me and the Devourer I'm trying to stop. I'm furiously trying to freeze more, but it's moving, so the progress is slow going as I make my way up its body a bit at a time.

My insides start to quake with the effort.

A scream of frustration punches from the Elimination's throat, and it changes form yet again, giant wings sprouting from its back. With a great beat of its wings, sending gusts of air over us, it lifts, paralyzed back end and all, out of the dunes so fast, I have to snap my head back to track it into the sky.

So that's how it got this far into the desert. Why hasn't it attacked on land before?

I lose my focus, and my control over the animal slips enough that it shifts midair, returning to the form of the original beast, wings gone, as it drops back to the sand with a booming blast of sound and sand. I duck and cover, but nothing touches me.

Lowering my arms, I find Reven standing over me, blocking me with his body.

"*Where are you?*" a voice, low and scratchy the way I imagine a sandy lion would sound if it could speak, demands in my head.

I hear it the same way I heard the Hollow when I thought it spoke to me. I'd convinced myself I'd imagined that, but two Devourers speaking to me can't be a coincidence.

I push Reven up and out of my way and force my light forward again. This time, I try for the entire body in one shot. I know I'm not entirely successful when its head starts moving, eerie eyes made of sand searching all around it. Searching for me.

My amulet still rests silent and unhelpful against my skin. Why? The ghost of Eidolon's story rings in my mind. Is she silent because this is *her* mate? Her consort became a monster?

"I promise I won't kill him." I'm speaking to the goddess in the amulet. In theory. I'm honestly not sure what I expect.

“What?” Reven’s head jerks down to stare at me. “Why wouldn’t you—”

The piece of lightning glass—the heirloom Omma slipped into my pocket the day my grandmother died and Tabra became queen—sparks so wildly, the intense heat singes my skin, and I yelp.

Reven spins me around to face him, concern etched in every angle of his face. “Meren—”

“Move.”

I tug away, and this time the power that surges from me makes the sand underneath me ripple outward. The Devourer before me freezes completely. After a shocked beat, the closest Wanderers move in for the kill. They know an opportunity when they see one. Not that I’m sure they could kill it. How do you kill something made of sand?

“Stop!” I yell and surge out of my hiding place, surprising Reven, whose shout follows me.

I stumble as I keep my glowing hands up and try not to lose my hold on the Elimination because I can feel the thing fighting me, straining against my control. At the same time, the amulet is searing my skin, but I can’t pull it away. I can’t drop my hands yet. I catch sight of Vos as he raises his own hands. A glow similar to mine ignites, I assume so he can blast the thing with ice.

“No, stop!” I yell and sprint out into the battlefield.

An otherworldly sound I’ve never heard in my entire life—somewhere between a roar and a scream—blasts through the camp from behind me, and everything around me goes from chaos to silent and still, terror etched on the Wanderers’ battle-hardened faces all around me.

I skid to a stop, clinging to my power’s hold on the Devourer. The beast has already stopped fighting, though. I know because the strain lessens.

Slowly, I peer over my shoulder.

Reven.

He’s on his hands and knees in the sand. Darkness ripples out of him, but this is unlike any darkness I’ve seen from him before. It’s like the shadows are tar, stringy and thick, pouring over him and through him and out of him, writhing and wriggling. Darkness slithers from the hidden places among the camp and the dunes, drawn to whatever is happening to him.

In tiny, jerking motions, like he’s being held down, Reven manages to lift his head, and those seafoam eyes focus on me. He crawls closer.

No. *He* doesn’t. The shadow monster does, still Reven in shape but leaving

Reven's body behind.

His face twists in agony. "*Meren.*"

Suddenly Cain is on top of him, foot in his back and an arrow nocked and pressing into the back of Reven's skull. Not the shadow monster's—Reven's.

Some of the shadows turn on him, crawling up Cain's leg, but he doesn't move by so much as a twitch. "Give the word."

Reven's gaze meets mine.

"I'm okay," I say just to him. "I have it. The Devourer can't hurt me."

And I do. Maybe because it's not fighting me as we all deal with a different monster in our midst. But still...

Cain presses harder, and a dribble of blood drips down the side of Reven's neck. I take a step forward.

"No!" The word bursts from Reven.

He grits his teeth, eyes focused on me, unwavering, and a guttural yell punches from him. The shadow monster rears back, its mouth opening in a silent cry as it's drawn back to Reven. The way it moves—oozing and twitching at the same time, its black eyes never leaving me—makes my stomach twist in revulsion. *This* is what everyone was warning me about?

Reven's face contorts, his entire body spasming with pain or effort or maybe both as he reabsorbs that...thing.

Then he collapses, chest heaving, the shadow monster gone.

"I'm...good," he says finally.

Cain doesn't move, arrow still trained and ready to release. "You sure?"

"Get the fuck off me."

Cain does. Reven doesn't get up, but they both look at me.

Right.

I am still bodily between the Elimination and the fighters, my hands up, trained on the Devourer, standing my ground and holding it immobile. Everyone stares at me slack-jawed, with varying reactions of shock, anger, and disbelief. All they can see is that I'm stopping them from killing something that, as far as they know, devours humans.

The thing is, I know why I am able to hold the Elimination in my power. Because it's not entirely me. I promised a goddess who might be trapped in my amulet that I wouldn't kill him, and I think her power is bolstering mine. She's done it before, too. I'm more sure of that now.

Hells. That ghost story was true.

## Elimination

As if she knows I don't need her anymore, the amulet goes cold again. The sensation is so abrupt, I almost drop my hands to check the glass. What does that mean? Is she abandoning me? Or is she like Reven, and using power drains her?

"No." The Elimination's voice suddenly echoes in my mind. "*She is gone from me. Where is she? I have come for her.*"

Come for her?

Does he know I can hear him? His voice is like sand over skin, rough and raw.

But I'm not focused on that. I'm focused on a memory of the Hollow. When that Devourer talked to me, he used similar words...sort of. Was he also there for the goddess around my neck? On that rickety ladder dangling between Wildernyss and Tyndra, when I thought it came for me, the words in my head were those of someone familiar with the person they were addressing.

"*I felt her,*" the Elimination says, starting to sound frantic. "*I felt her and followed her to this place. She was here only moments afore. Only you are not her. You are a mere sand Hylorae.*"

"You attacked to find her?" I force the words to be gentle. It probably helps that my voice is shaking, both with fear and effort.

Even though it's held immobile, the Elimination seems to startle, strange sand eyes narrowing as it stares at me. "*You can hear me?*"

I shouldn't be surprised that he's surprised. As far as I know, humans—even Imperium—don't normally hear them, let alone respond.

"I can." Though at this point, goddess alone knows why.

I don't have to look around to know the others are all glancing between me and the monster. They can't hear it, I don't think, but I don't have time to explain.

The Elimination seems to search my face as if delving for answers, or the truth, or my sincerity. "*I will form a pact with you, young Imperium.*"

A pact?

*“Release me from your hold. Answer three questions. Then I will depart this place and leave you in peace.”*

Release it first? Does it think because I’m young, I’m easily duped? “How can I trust you not to attack before I can stop you again?”

*“You cannot. But you have my solemn vow I will not attack.”*

“What if you don’t like my answers?”

*“Swear to me you shall only speak the truth. I will leave no matter what.”*

“What if I don’t know the answers?” Is this going to be some kind of riddle? I’ve never been good at riddles. That’s Tabra’s strength.

*“If you truly do not, that is an answer in and of itself.”*

So not a riddle.

Except his answer was a bit of a riddle, so...I’m confused. Is it too naive to hope this Devourer won’t ask any problematic questions?

I make my decision.

“Do not attack unless it attacks first!” I shout over my shoulder.

“Meren?” The warning veiled as a question comes from Cain.

“It’s okay. I’m negotiating,” I try to assure him without looking.

“The hells you are.” His fear for me punches through every word.

Time to pull the queen card. “Stand down. That’s an order.”

“No.”

I blow out a frustrated breath. “Cain. Can you *please* just trust me?”

At the very least, I’m not going to do anything to make Reven worse. The last thing we need is him losing it again and expending energy that I’m not so sure he has after what just happened. He needs to save any he has left in case I’m wrong.

I don’t say that out loud.

Finally, after a stomach-clenching silence, he takes a breath and pushes to his feet. He sways once he’s up, but his posture is that of a fighter, hands raised and ready to strike. Then he nods.

*Whatever goddess is in my amulet, please help me protect my people if this thing has played me false.*

I drop my hands to my sides, letting go of my power.

“What is she doing?” a faint voice calls out from the gathered fighters somewhere to my left. One of the Wanderers, probably.

The Elimination, for a long moment, doesn’t move at all. Then, very slowly and carefully, it drops to its belly, front paws out straight in front of it, wolf tail tucked around in close to its body, head held regally high. It reminds

me of a guard dog hoping for some kitchen scraps, which is so absurd that I almost laugh. Despite an alarming growl from Reven, it lowers its head sideways to me, so it can look at me with a single massive eye.

I stare right back. The details in the sand are incredible—intricate and even delicate down to the whorls of what would be the iris of its eye. Heart in my throat, I wait. Am I about to be swallowed by this thing?

*“Question one. Who are you, little Hylorae?”*

Wow. I guess it really is going to ask me three questions. *“That’s what you want to know?”*

It draws back its lips, showing me not just the tusks but razor-sharp jagged teeth inside, rows and rows of them. All around us, I sense those watching shift, collectively readying themselves to fight again.

Right. Answer the question. “I am Mereneith Evangeline XII. Princess of Aryd. Sister to Queen Tabra, and currently standing in for her as ruler while she is...unwell.”

*“Question two. Your power felt strange to me. Is it entirely yours?”*

That’s a tougher question, especially with people listening. This is something I’m not ready to have others overhear. Grandmother and Omma both pounded into me the reality that Eidolon could have spies everywhere. To trust no one. We already believe there’s a traitor among us.

“I’m not sure,” I finally say, choosing my words carefully. “But if I had to guess, I would say no. Not entirely.”

A shiver passes through its body, sandy fur rippling, almost as if in anticipation.

*“Question three. Do you know where the Goddess Aryd is kept?”*

Kept.

I’m standing in front of a massive, shapeshifting, human-eating monster, answering a question about where a goddess might be imprisoned. Reven’s right. I attract trouble.

Also, heavens help me, I think I actually know the answer to what he’s asking. Despite the evidence in front of me, I’m still not sure if I can believe ghostly Eidolon’s story, but if it’s true, then I have a different question. What if the goddess inside the glass isn’t Aryd? The Elimination said Aryd specifically.

I take a deep, wobbly breath. *Please let this be the right thing to say.* “I’m not positive, but I think so.”

The Elimination gives a sound like a broken bark, a sound so wrenchingly

sad, my heart pinches with instant empathy. For a Devourer. Unfortunately, the sound is also violent, and a shout goes up among my people.

“Stay back!” I yell, throwing an arm out, as if I could block any attack that way.

*“I will keep my promise and depart,”* the Elimination says. *“But may I see her first? I have been searching and waiting, attempting to defy her glass walls to find her ever since she disappeared centuries ago. I felt her near the southern borders of Wildernyss months ago, and again in Tyndra. Another flash in Aryd, and nothing since. Not for months.”*

I’m taking a chance, but I ask the question anyway. Because of that story... “Are you her consort?”

“Yes.”

There’s a wealth of pain and longing and truth in that one word.

I close my eyes. He’s a goddess-damned monster. Except I thought Reven was a monster once upon a time, too. Seeing what came out of him today, I know the entire zariphate now believes he is, if they didn’t already.

The problem is, I can’t let everyone know that I might have a goddess strapped around my neck. Not when the current Eidolon has one, too. Not when there could be spies among us.

Not when a lot of things...

I open my eyes. “I want a new promise from you.”

The Elimination gives another of those full-body shivers. *“To see her at last? Anything.”*

“No more killing.”

*“I harmed no one.”*

I rear back at that, then look at Cain. His father has joined him, not exactly slack-jawed but as close as I’ve seen him get to it even as he holds himself in stance ready to attack. “Is anyone harmed?” I ask them.

“That thing...” The Mighty Cainis stabs an accusing spear toward the Devourer. “Trampled our tents, our belongings. It did untold damage.”

“Is anyone hurt or dead?” I repeat my question, enunciating extra clearly.

His jaw works as he glances to Ledenon, who shakes his head. “No.”

I scrutinize the Devourer. “I want your promise to...” What? Protect me? Protect my people? Help me figure out this amulet thing? I shake my head. Forget promises. “You may stay,” I say instead. “No promises needed.”

“Not in *my* zariphate,” the zariph snarls behind me.

Is he going to stamp his foot, too?



I ignore him. A trick I've learned from Reven, actually. "We should speak more in private, and I'll show you."

I check on Reven again. "It's okay."

"None of this is okay."

The Elimination's massive eye positioned in front of me blinks long and slow, and I'm mesmerized by the way the sand that makes up his body shifts and eddies and works together. One organism, and yet made up of individual tiny particles.

"Are you certain?"

"No attacking anyone," I say drily. Then tack on, "Unless I say so."

Let Mighty Cainis and the Wanderers chew on that.

*A little fear never hurt anyone, Grandmother used to say. But it's quite useful to maintain authority from time to time.*

If anyone had told me before all this that I would agree with, let alone put into use, anything that woman ever said to me, I would have laughed and then probably spit in their face. Or maybe something less gross, but still something.

I wrinkle my nose as I study the Elimination's form. He's massive, almost as tall as the Tomb of the Sovereigns where the kings and queens of antiquity, from before my first twin ancestors, lie in state. The tomb can be seen for leagues before you get to it. We're trying to hide from Eidolon out here. What am I supposed to do with a giant creature?

"Are you able to hide yourself at all?" I ask him. He's a shapeshifter. Maybe he can shapeshift into a sand dune? Moving around with something so large and easily spotted from far away would put the zariphate at even more risk than it already is.

Those terrifying teeth glint at me in a thousand sparkles of sunlight striking sand as he draws his lips back in what I guess is supposed to be a grin. "*I possess a better way.*"

Nothing happens at first, and my eyebrows creep up as I wait. Until a slight hiss sounds nearby. Peering closer, I eventually see it—sand falling away from his body like he's leaking. Then more and more, like when wind moves the dunes around. Quickly, he shrinks. Smaller and smaller and smaller.

Once it becomes obvious to others what's happening, murmurs of astonishment rise up from all those around us. The shocked buzz reminds me of a swarm of locusts, but I remain focused on the Elimination. Its body

keeps the same dimensions, the same features, just smaller. Behind him, sand piles up in dunes of discarded...um...flesh? Finally, he stands in the circle of trodden belongings, the size of a massive wolf or a small pony.

Slowly, he prowls to where I stand and, with a regal flourish of one paw, bows to me. *“Display to me my goddess, and I will become yours to command, Princess Mereneith of Aryd.”*

“Give me strength,” Cain mutters. “That thing bowed to you.”

Goddess bless. I have a Devourer as a pet? A friend? An ally? Also, this makes the Hollow—the Devourer that usually lurks in the waters around Savannah—and what it did to me and Reven on that ladder between Wildernyss and Tyndra...what? A big dog just trying to play?

Whatever. I have a Devourer.

And now, maybe, more answers.

There’s nothing for it but for me to stride confidently away—with more stares following my every step than I think even my arrival in the camp garnered. I head back to the zariph’s tent, which is thankfully still standing. Reven stalks along behind me like an angry, prowling jungle cat of Tropikis. It’s not lost on me that Cain, Vos, and Horus all trail him closely, taking up positions around him.

This is going to be a disaster.

## Revelations

I thought maybe getting to the tent with a smaller number of people to deal with would be a relief. Wrong. Instead, I'm staring at a sea of faces—most of them angry or confused or frightened—while I try to keep myself together. What I just did took a lot out of me, and it's starting to hit, my limbs turning heavy. Not exactly what I'd call fun.

I realize I'm twisting my signet ring and drop my hands to my sides. "Now —"

"What happened out there?" the zariph shouts.

Yup. Disaster.

At least acting as queen comes with perks, like not explaining myself.

"What should I call you?" I ask my new Devourer friend, blocking out the zariph's scowl.

He gives another small bow of his head. "*You may call me Bene.*"

Bene.

I mean...I should have guessed. Every person in Nova knows the names of the goddesses' consorts, though the shortened form is new to me.

"Is that thing talking?" The zariph waves a hand at the Devourer. "Or are you making this up as you go?"

Bene lifts a sandy lip in a silent snarl.

The zariph snaps his mouth closed with an audible clack of teeth. That had to hurt.

I clear my throat. "May I present Benedornan, or"—apparently—"Bene. The consort of the Goddess Aryd. He has been searching for her a long time."

"Impossible," Cainis snaps.

Bene flaps his wings. "*I do not care for this man. Do you wish me to smite him for you?*"

It's hard to hold in a huff of a laugh. Except what we need to talk about now is no laughing matter. I look at Reven. "Does everyone in here know what you came from? What Eidolon is? The shadow shedding?"

Vos and Cain slide closer to Reven, and a frown flickers over Reven's features. "Yes."

Good. Less to explain, then. “A specter of Eidolon—not the current one, but a ghost from one of his past selves—came to me.”

Cain and Reven both startle at the same time. Cain crosses his arms, tipping his head at me. “When was this?”

*When* is a sand trap we don’t have time for. “He told me a story.”

I quickly tell them about the alternate creation history, the goddesses and the Devourers and the amulets, trying to remember the specific words the ghost king used. Bene remains silent through it all. So does Reven, though his silence is more ominous. Cain, meanwhile, is leaning back on his elbows, just listening.

“First of all, you heard this from a ghost of Eidolon, and you believed it?” the zariph says with a dismissive sniff.

“Not until a Devourer showed up. He can confirm much of what I was told.”

Cainis tents his fingers under his chin, eyeing me the way Omma used to when I asked silly questions. “And you’d believe him?”

“Bene, is any of this true?” I ask him.

He blows out a soft breath that sounds like a breeze stirring the top layer of sand in the dunes. “*I can confirm everything up until the Devourers came to be.*”

“Uh...what’s happening right now? Is he talking to you?” Cain leans forward, head cocked like he might be able to make it out.

I keep forgetting. Quickly, I pass on his words.

The zariph throws up a hand. “Why are we listening to a *monster*?”

“*Smiting is becoming more and more appealing,*” Bene rumbles to me. I don’t translate that one, though it’s tempting.

“Because he’s the *proof.*” I say this not to Cainis but to Reven. To Reven, who has been collecting proof against Eidolon ever since the day he was shed.

He draws one knee up, resting his elbow on it. I don’t believe the casual posture—it’s for the others. “We should listen.”

Cainis glares.

“What made you like this?” I ask Bene. As he talks, I translate for the others.

“*Aryd and I fell in love, and she chose me to be hers. When I agreed, she gifted me something called Aura, and I ate it. It transformed me.*”

“And when did this—” I wave at him. “Happen?”

*“That came later. A few of Aryd’s sisters’ consorts desired more power.”*

Wait. Eidolon put it a different way. That the consorts needed more power to put down uprisings of Imperium. But Bene’s wording sounds more like a power grab to me.

*“More and more Imperium were birthed among humans each passing year, and three of my fellow consorts felt...threatened. In order that no one consort would have more power than the others, we all ate a second piece of Aura together. That is what changed me into what I am.”*

The last words contain a rage that reminds me of Reven sometimes, and I have to consciously not lean away.

*“The other consorts, too, although I seem to be the only one who held on to my reason. The others are bloodthirsty. Mindless. I have spent much of my exile staying out of their paths.”*

As soon as I share that last bit, a sound pierces the quiet of the tent only to shut off just as quickly. Every eye goes to Tziah, sitting in a back corner by Vos. Her frosted black eyes are wide in a face gone...goddess, she is terrified.

“What did the Aura look like?” Vos asks in a voice so tight I’m afraid it might snap.

Bene considers him for a long moment. *“A small blue crystal. It looks like a rock but will dissolve on the tongue when consumed.”*

A memory flickers through my mind, of blue crystals in a circle around Reven as he refilled his powers in the night. Only I thought it was jedite, a rare and extremely valuable mineral. Is it the same?

I translate quickly.

“Jedite,” Vos supplies for all of us.

I glance at Reven.

His nostrils flare, and I know he’s thinking the same thing I am. That he’s been using pieces of an ancient, long gone deity’s heart to strengthen his power and tether Eidolon’s evil inside himself. I never did ask him where he got the jedite or how he uses it.

He gives a small shake of his head, and the shadows that bind us ripple, the warning alive within me.

Cain shifts where he’s sitting, looking around the room. “I thought there was none left. The Ynferno Mountains have long been abandoned.”

Tziah grimaces.

“Something you’re not telling us?” Cain asks.

Vos and Tziah exchange a look that says a thousand words even as they speak none. Then she nods.

“Tziah’s family were miners by trade,” Vos starts slowly. “From Mariana originally, but when King Eidolon reopened the mines in Tyndra, he needed skilled workers, so they came. They didn’t know what they were mining for until they found a source inside the mountain. Even then, like the rest of us, they thought possession of jedite could only be used to amplify an Imperium’s power. I was sent to the mine along with Eidolon’s newest general at that time, Quinten.”

Vos shakes his head, jaw working, and Tziah sneaks her hand into his. “Quinten wanted to test a theory.” He glances at Bene. “He made the workers in the mine each consume a piece of jedite, and they developed Imperium powers when they’d had none before. Each and every one, though they couldn’t control them well. Then...he forced them all to eat a second piece.” His jaw works again, like he’s having to force the words out. “They turned into *monstrosities*.”

Tziah whimpers—an eerie sound, given her voice. A heartbreaking sound. Vos pulls Tziah into his side, his arm around her shoulders, the sorrow plain as a bright desert day written over her features. “All except her. Though she changed, too, she was still lucid. Like your Devourer, there. When the others started ripping into one another and anyone else down there, Quinten ordered them all killed, but I got her out. Barely.”

My stomach sinks. *That’s* why Vos left Eidolon’s service? He threw away his position with the king and became a wanted man to save her, eventually hiding with Reven in the Shadowwood?

And Tziah...mother goddess almighty...her family all slaughtered after watching them become terrible things.

“Why do they become monsters?” Pella asks.

“Maybe it’s the same reason Tabra and I are twins.” I work through the thought slowly. “Maybe the body can’t handle more than one power.”

“You’re telling me Eidolon is sitting on a new supply of jedite—which is actually pieces of the mother goddess’s *heart*—that can make him more Imperium or, if they attempt to get a second power by eating more, it can make him more beasts?” Cainis demands in a voice gone cruelly cold. Then his gaze cuts to me. “You’ve brought death to my zariphate, Mereneith.”

A year ago, I would have taken those words like a fist to the stomach. I would have hung my head and probably even exiled myself. He’s right, but I

have too many people depending on me to cower now. I stare right back at him.

“Seven hells,” Vos mutters under his breath. “Every greedy, grasping, power-mad person will come out of the woodworks to get their hands on the stuff if this information gets out. It’ll be chaos. Anarchy.”

Even more monsters to deal with. No one speaks it out loud, but we’re all thinking it.

Cain is the one to ask the obvious. “Why would the mother goddess’s heart be buried inside Mt. Ynferno?”

“*That is her resting place, I was informed,*” Bene answers. I translate.

The zariph sneers. “By the same goddesses who fed you Aura and let you become what you are?”

Bene looses a growl. Ledenon whacks a telescoping spear into full length, taking a stance to fight so fast, I didn’t see him actually move. And Cainis, a man I’ve never seen back down from anything, leans away. It’s infinitesimal, but we all see it. Turns out a Devourer, even a relatively well-mannered one the size of a pony, can still strike fear into the bravest of hearts.

But there’s still so much we don’t know. Where the other amulets are, to start with. But more besides. Like everyone else in Nova, I’ve always assumed the goddesses—even silent in the Allusian heavens, as we believed they were all this time—were benevolent. But if that was true, then why were they put in the amulets in the first place?

“If everything else the ghost told me, or hinted at, was true,” I say, “then Eidolon is running out of time faster than we thought. He will try everything—no matter how depraved—to get what he wants.”

I just wish we knew exactly what that was. Reven returned to him. My sister. Now these amulets. Or do they all go together in a way we can’t see yet?

“You’re saying we need to get ahead of him.” Reven sits forward.

“I’m saying we need more answers.” I very deliberately look straight at Reven. “And I can think of only one place we might find them.”

*You know where we have to go.*

Reven leans forward abruptly, almost like he heard me. “It was burned to the ground.”

“Not everything.” That I do know. I walked through the remains myself. “We need to return to the Shadowwood.”

## My Last Secret

“Go back to the Shadowwood? In Tyndra, where Eidolon is king? Not if I have anything to say about it.” Cain’s barking the words now. “What we need to do is gather all the zariphates we have allegiances with and force that bastard out of the palace and out of the dominion.”

His option sounds like the right move, but he hasn’t gone against the king. I have. Reven has. It almost killed him. I *know* we can’t face Eidolon yet. We need to know more, and not from a ghost and a monster.

I glance around at the faces in the room, wondering how much I can trust them. I’m well aware we have a possible traitor in our midst, but I know I’m right about the Shadowwood, and I can only think of one more thing that might convince them.

It’s time to show them.

Heart pounding, I pull my necklace out and show them what’s at the end of it.

I clear my throat. “This is an heirloom, passed from my grandmother’s twin to me. Omma, who is Mereneith Evangeline XI, gave it to me on the day of my grandmother’s passing.”

Bene flutters. Not his body or his wings, but the sand he’s made up of undulates.

“Holy damnation,” Pella murmurs. “Is that what I think it is?”

Cain, who is closest, reaches toward it. “You’re telling us you think there’s a—”

I lean over it in a protective reflex, reluctant to let him touch. At the same time, Bene gives a soft snarl, and Cain stops himself, shooting the Devourer a wary glance. “I think there’s a goddess inside it. The Goddess Aryd. Bene heard her. That’s why he’s here.”

Horus immediately drops to his knees, lifting his hands in a gesture used in the temples and in prayer, his expression one of utter awe. The rest of the Wanderers in the room—except the zariph—join him while everyone else stares in varying states of shock.

“Meren,” Vos grumbles. “Someday you’re really going to need to tell us



everything up front.”

“I’m never sure when it’s safe to share what I know or even whether what I know is important or not.” It’s the only excuse I can offer.

“Uh-huh.”

I drop to one knee in front of Bene. “Do you feel her?”

Bene walks awkwardly forward with a prowl that reminds me of Reven, but his head bobs like a chicken. He sniffs at the amulet, visibly cautious. Is he afraid she is in there? Or afraid she isn’t? “*Is this why you went silent on me, my love? Why you stopped coming to find me?*”

The pain in his voice reaches around my heart and digs in. All this time and he still loves her like that? I take the amulet from around my neck and hold it out, resting on my palm. Bene noses the glass.

Nothing happens.

He does it again, and I wait, holding my breath. Still nothing happens. Then he looks up at me. “*I cannot feel her.*”

That’s a letdown. She was *just* awake outside. I tell the others what he said. “I...I think she’s asleep again.” Saying that out loud only makes me sound like I’m trying to convince all of us.

The zariph scoffs. “Asleep? She’s not in it. No more discussion of going to —”

“She talks to me sometimes.”

Having moved around Bene to see, Reven’s gaze flashes to mine at that. “Talks to you?”

“Not with words.” At least I don’t think so. Maybe some of my thoughts haven’t been my own? “She pulses or warms. And I think even bolsters my power.”

“When?” Vos asks.

“When I made the portal in the Shadowwood. And just now, when I froze Bene.”

The Devourer gives another little growl.

“Only after I promised not to kill you,” I assure him.

The zariph leans forward, lip curling. “You lie.”

I stare him down for a beat before cocking my head. “Can’t you see if I am or not?”

A quietness settles behind his eyes in a way that tells me he doesn’t like that challenge. No glow alerts us to his use of his power, but after a second the bluster blows out of him, his shoulders rounding. “You speak the truth.”

Reven suddenly breathes out through his nose in a sound of pure patience-gathering, and a flutter of a darker emotion hits me in the side, but his voice is controlled when he speaks. “So let me get this straight. If Aryd is in there—and we’re not sure she is—but if she is, you’ve been wearing a goddess around your neck this entire time. One who shares her power with you.”

Before I can answer, he runs a hand over his face, the scratch of his stubble against his skin loud in our bubble. “What am I saying? This is *you*. Of course you do.”

“I should have told you—”

“You should have told all of us,” the zariph cuts me off. “And this still proves nothing.”

Damn, the man is stubborn.

I fling a hand at Bene. “Use your power on him, too. You have a Devourer telling you that story is true and an amulet in front of your face that I’m telling you does things.” Realizing I’m almost yelling, I take a breath and quiet my voice. “Eidolon has an amulet, too. He gave it to my sister as a betrothal gift. Other than the color, it’s identical to this one.”

Now is not the time to mention that I wore it as well for months.

That last bit falls into a deep well of utter silence, the zariph’s jaw working like he’s chewing on words he wants to hurl at me.

I chance a quick glance at Reven. Shadow knew. We discussed it when we were trying to rescue my sister from the king. At the time, I thought I was speaking with Reven, but Shadow was in charge. I guess Reven heard.

I hold up my amulet. “We need to find out if Aryd is in here.”

The zariph leans back, arms crossed, expression mulish. “And if she is?”

“Then we find out why. I think that ghost of the king told me that story because it’s connected to Eidolon and why he’s been doing what he has. We need more information.” I give the zariph a hard look and deliberately quote a Wanderer proverb. “You have to know your enemy before you can defeat your enemy.”

“Meren’s right,” Reven says.

I blink. I am? I’ve been waiting for him to side with the others. To tell me this is a terrible idea. Instead, he’s backing me.

Cain rounds on him, voice rife with accusation. “Do you always agree with her just to get on her good side?”

Reven says nothing.

I, on the other hand, throw a glare in my best friend’s direction. “Do you

realize that in always trying to protect me, you're only holding me back?"

Hurt flashes across his features, and I want to take it back, but I lose the chance as everyone else pipes in.

After that, the discussion—and discussion is a loose term—takes a while, but in the end, I get my way. A small group of us will travel to the Shadowwood to see if the library is intact and has any answers.

As the group breaks up, most of them going to help clean up the aftermath of Bene's rampage, I watch Reven as he leaves. The way he doesn't even look at me, like I'm no longer important enough even to nod a goodbye to... that hurts, an ache blooming inside me.

Pride helpfully steps in, straightening my spine.

Cain stops at the tent flaps and looks back. He must see something in my face, because he tilts his head at me in question. He used to do that when we were kids, too.

"I'm fine," I tell him. "You?"

I know he's still angry about earlier. "Right as rain, Mer. I'll always have your back." He flashes me a cocky grin. "Even when you're wrong."

I roll my eyes, and he chuckles as he leaves the tent.

Bene follows me back to the space that is my room. I'm so tired at this point that I could sleep for a week. At least we're not moving the camp today—thanks to my Devourer friend's destruction, we can't—so I won't have to sleep on horseback.

Goddess, I'm tired.

As I lay on the pallet they provided for sleep and the Devourer settles beside me, I think over the plan. Tomorrow we'll start preparations for a group to go to the Shadowwood. My eyes are drifting shut when I suddenly remember a question that's been bothering me. "Bene, how did you get past the walls at our borders? You said you'd been trying."

The Devourer tips his head. "*Through a crack in the glass.*"

The Things  
We Don't See

The walls are cracking.

As if I wasn't dealing with enough already.

The walls are no longer impenetrable, and Devourers could get to my people. That terrifying knowledge hasn't strayed far from my mind since Bene told me how he got in. Fear on a continual loop for days while the zariphate has traveled farther west rather than south.

I'm supposed to protect my people, and I'm the one who should do something about it. But I don't have time. That's probably why I can't let it go. I want to head south and heal it, but everyone else agreed that one crack is less of a threat than Eidolon.

I can't be in two places at once.

Touching my amulet through my clothing, I silently pray to the goddess I think is in there. "Please let the walls around Aryd *not* come crashing down until I can fix them."

Not that she can do much about it, either, if she's trapped inside the glass.

I push the thought to the back of the list of urgent matters. I need to focus on what I actually can do instead.

"Knock, knock," I call out before drawing back the flap of the tent I was directed to and stepping inside.

Only to whirl around on a gasp at the sight that greets me. Pella, half-naked, is standing in the middle of the space.

"I didn't say come in," she says from behind me. "Rude."

I press my palms into my eyeballs. "My eyes. I'm never going to be able to unsee that."

"Too close to the goddesses' perfection for you?" Satisfaction curls around every word. Probably because she knows it's closer to the truth than I'd like. "I understand if you need to leave."

Before I can answer, Vida comes in behind me. "Oh good! You're here."

She's carrying a stack of materials that are different from what makes up Wanderer clothing.

Zariph Cainis moved the zariphate closer to Yolyn Zag, the southernmost city of Aryd that lies at the base of the Patience Mountains near the salt flats. No doubt Vida's materials came from there so she can make those of us heading to Tyndra warmer clothes for the journey. Yolyn Zag has the closest working portal to us. That's the way we'll get to the Shadowood.

Me. Reven. Vos. Horus. Tziah. Bene. Cain. And...

I take a closer look at what Pella is dressing in. Warm layers of fur-lined leather. Someone shoot an arrow through me. "Um...you're coming to Tyndra?"

Pella doesn't bother to look up from lacing up her leather gauntlets. "Someone has to look after my father's interests."

"Cain—"

"Will put you first."

I'm not sure she's wrong about that, and awkwardness steals into my limbs. I don't know where to put my hands or where to look.

Vida glances between us. Several times. Then moves over to a pallet where she sets down her materials. "Well, let's make sure that you are dressed appropriately for the terrain."

I'm hustled into a corner, where I strip and dress in clothing more appropriate for an icy dominion. The Shadowood itself is more temperate, so Vida is sending us only with basics.

When I turn around, she stops helping Pella with the more complicated straps and buckles of Tyndran wear meant to keep out the cold and faces me, head tipped to one side. After a second, she wrinkles her nose.

"What?" I look down. "I thought I hooked it all up correctly."

"You did. It's just..." She sighs. "It's so functional."

"Why is that bad?" Pella's lip curls into a sneer. "Because she's a queen?"

*I'm not a queen*, I want to mumble. I don't.

"No, silly." Vida bats Pella with a hand, and Pella doesn't cut it off with the nasty curved blade I know is always strapped to her back. Surprising.

She catches my stare and returns it with a flat-lipped one of her own.

Vida doesn't seem to notice. "I'd want to dress you *all* better. Not just Meren." She gives the pile of materials an offended glare. "But this is all they brought me."

Pella relaxes the smallest bit. Then tenses back up when Vida strolls over to me to tweak at the materials. "I should add more fur to the cuffs," she murmurs to herself. "Frostbite is not a joke."

“I have no doubts everything will be amazing,” I assure her, reaching out to squeeze her arm. Which is a lot for me.

Vida laughs. “Liar,” she says through chuckles. “You don’t care about clothes. I’ve known that from the start. But thanks for the confidence.”

Over her shoulder, I can see Pella’s sour face, how she always looks around me. I’m tempted to stick my tongue out at her, but I’m nineteen now. I should probably try to outgrow those urges. So again, I don’t.

Vida gives my shoulder a squeeze. “Now where were we?” She’s been riding beside me most of the way here and has been a bundle of questions. Mostly about my life as a hidden princess. “I think you were going to tell me about the palace in Oaesys. I’ve never seen a palace before, and I want to know it all.”

“You were going to tell me about living with the zariphate.”

Pella scoffs. “Why do you want to know? You’ve done it yourself.”

“Only for a day or two, and never far from Enora.” Why am I bothering to explain anything to her?

Vida grabs her pincushion. “We didn’t exactly have it easy while you were gone, you know.”

I guess she’d rather not hear about my time with Eidolon, either.

“I mean, there is a *lot* of sand here.” She *tsks*. “It’s rough on the complexion, and I wasn’t allowed to bring more than the most basic items for clothing repair with me.”

“It’s too bulky to carry with us,” Pella explains, but in a non-Pella voice that actually sounds patient.

“I know.” Vida flaps a hand, pins now between her teeth as she takes in Pella’s coat.

“Is everyone decent?” Horus’s voice sounds from outside.

“Come in,” Vida calls out, then gives him a wide smile when he sticks his head inside but not the rest of him.

He takes in the three of us with a sweeping, sharp-eyed glance. He gives Pella a respectful nod of his head, then another, deeper one to me. “Meren.”

Meren. Horus called me *domina* once, but that was in the Shadowood, before he learned I’d lied about being Tabra.

His choice of greeting to me makes Pella’s expression flatten.

“Don’t linger in the door.” Vida moves closer to hook an arm through Horus’s, ignoring the way he stiffens a bit at the contact, and tugs him inside. She crosses her eyes at him to get a twitch of a smile in return.

Horus clears his throat. “Cain wants to know if you’ll have everything ready by tonight, Vida. Tomorrow is the best day for us to try for the portal.”

“Of course.” She gives a cheerful bob of her head and gets back to work on Pella’s clothes. “These are the last two.”

With another nod, Horus leaves us. Vida finishes up with Pella and has her undress while she turns her attention to me.

“Speaking of Cain...” she mumbles around the pins. “He’s quite the catch.” She gives me a twinkling look. “Aren’t you a little tempted?”

I may have told Vida about the marriage proposal.

I try not to wince, and I definitely don’t look at Pella, who I’d rather not hear from about that. What do I say?

“Um—”

“I have things to do.” Pella stomps out of the tent.

From where she’s now kneeling on the ground in front of me, Vida blinks after Pella’s retreating back. Then slowly turns wide eyes my direction. “Is it something I said?”

“Pella would probably rather I not end up with her brother.”

“Why?”

“She’s never liked me much.”

“Why not?” Visibly offended, Vida’s hands fly to her hips.

Which makes me want to hug her. “History.”

“Hmmm.”

She returns to her work, and I watch her nimble fingers fly over the material, gathering the spots that are too big and pinning them. “So what’s the plan, exactly, to get to the Shadowwood?”

We chat about that and other things while she finishes what she needs to, then while I undress and put my Wanderer clothing back on. I don’t want to leave. So I sit cross-legged on the pallet, chin propped in my hand, and watch her sew. “What about you?”

She doesn’t look up from what she’s doing. “What about me?”

“Do you have a...” I search for the right word. “A romantic interest?”

Vida snorts delicately. “Who has time? I’m barely keeping my family going.”

I smile as I pick a scrap of fur trim up off the floor. “The Vanished keeping you busy, mother hen?”

“I mean my...” Her fingers pause, and she looks up at me. “My blood family.”

“Oh.” Wait a minute... “Are they here? Why haven’t I met them?”

“They’re not part of the Vanished. Reven offered to bring them, too, when he found me, but with the people of our community thinking I’d died, they were safe enough. It was easier that way.”

“Easier?” I glance around for answers. It doesn’t help. “What does that mean?”

“I killed a man,” she admits. “A man in power. I was set for execution.”

“Why?”

She goes back to her sewing with a shrug. “He tried to force himself on me. I had to defend myself.”

“Oh, Vida.”

She gives a sudden hiss, pulling her hand away from the garment she’s working on and sucking at her thumb. Then goes back to her work. “My family knows I’m alive. I try to help them.” Another shrug. “When I can. In...whatever way I can.” The last, she mutters more to herself.

I lean forward and give her wrist a squeeze. “I’m glad that you didn’t get executed. Your family would have missed you terribly, and I would, too.”

Her lips twist like maybe she’s touched, or maybe she wants to say something, but then she huffs a laugh and her usual chipper smile returns. “You wouldn’t have known what you missed out on.”

“Yes, I do. I would have missed out on a good friend. You told me yourself that’s what we’d be. The first day we met.”

She ducks her head on a chuckle. “Yes. I did.”

We fall into a companionable silence for a bit.

“You’re sure you’re okay staying here?” I ask. “When we go to Tyndra?”

She flicks me a glance. “I don’t think I’d be much help. Besides, with all of the Vanished’s leaders going with you, I’m needed here.”

True.

“Can you do me a favor, though?” She glances up. “Can you check my shop? I’m missing my favorite set of shears. They were specially fashioned by a metal Hylorae and cost me a pretty coin, and these...” She picks up a dull, rusted set of scissors and glares at them fiercely. “Are a nightmare to work with.”

I chuckle. “I’ll look for them myself.”

Which earns me a bright grin before she’s back to the serious business of sewing.

“Can I ask a favor in return?”



“Of course.”

“Two, actually. First, watch after Tabra and Achlys? Help Achlys with whatever she needs.”

Vida stops what she’s doing and slips the needle into the material to hold her place, then takes both my hands in hers. “I’ll watch after them as if they were my own sisters.”

“Thank you.”

She nods. “And the second?”

I nibble at my lip, debating how to say this. “We have a traitor among us.”

Vida’s eyes go wide. “A traitor?” She squeaks the question loudly, and I put my finger to my lips. In a quieter voice, she says, “Are you certain?”

“Nothing these days is certain.”

She frowns. “Are you asking me to...find them?”

I wouldn’t put her in harm’s way for all the world. “Not exactly. But you are friendly with so many, which puts you in a helpful spot. Just keep your ear to the ground. Note anyone behaving oddly—Wanderer or Vanished. Can you do that for me?”

She gives a jerking nod. “I’ll keep my ears open.”

Good. “And don’t trust the zariph.”

She blinks slowly.

I lift one shoulder. “He’s not a bad man. He’s just not on our side. He’s on his own.”

After a second, Vida’s lips quirk. “That one would sell his own mother if he thought he could leverage it to his advantage.”

Her words should be funny, but there’s no humor in our situation. “We have both his son and daughter with us, which should ensure he doesn’t abandon the Vanished or my sister, but he’s not happy that I haven’t agreed to marriage. And between Reven, Tabra, me, and now the amulets—”

“Don’t forget Bene,” she tacks on.

As if I could. “The zariph’s not thrilled with how this is going.” I don’t blame him, either. “So be careful. Okay?”

Vida stares at me for a long time. Long enough that I start to open my mouth to ask “what,” because it’s like she wants to say something but can’t. Or maybe decides not to, because in the next second she smiles. “I’ll keep an eye out.”

Asking her to watch over them is the best I can do while I’m gone.

Disguises and  
Portals

“You need to work on looking less...you.” I mumble the words under my breath as Reven and I wind our way through Yolyn Zag.

It’s market day. Which means it’s crowded. Stuffed with people. Which is why we came today. It’s easier to blend in and go unnoticed in a crowd.

Reven puts a hand to my lower back—something an Arydian would rarely do in public, even with a loved one—to usher me between two people. It’s not a sweet gesture. It’s him literally keeping a hand on me so he doesn’t lose me. Is it pathetic that I want to lean into the touch even though it means nothing to him? He hasn’t touched me in what feels like forever, even though it’s only been days.

He grunts at my comment. “You mean looking less like the king?”

Actually, no. Though that’s a problem, too, which is why half his face is covered, and so is mine. “I mean you tend to draw the eye.”

“Huh?”

Is he really so oblivious to the fact that it’s not just his face that makes him noticeable? He’s dressed as a Wanderer rather than in his usual black, and I’d still pick him out of a crowd from behind. A head taller than most, he walks like a predator among us. His sharp, intelligent, assessing gaze misses nothing. He might as well carry a painted sign that reads, “Be Wary.” But he’s so beautiful, anyone looking would want to pretend those things aren’t true just to get a little closer.

I’m case in point when it comes to that.

This man is a walking illustration of why we tell children the story of the Honey Witches, carnivorous creatures who disguise themselves as kindly women in our cities. They lure naive children away with sweets and then eat them. The children, not the sweets.

Another woman walks by and almost trips over her feet as she tries to get a closer look at him. Reven doesn’t hide his irritation fast enough. He saw. He gets it now. I give him a pointed look, and, just for a flicker of a second, I think he might huff a laugh.

He doesn't. "I can't exactly change my face, Meren."

True. "Try this. Stoop over... No, not that much. Now lower your gaze. More. You have a hood for a reason."

"But I can't see."

"So follow my feet."

"This is ridiculous." I catch his mumbled words at my back, and a check over my shoulder has me choking back a laugh. Whatever he's doing is definitely worse. It looks like he's putting on a farce.

"Goddess grant me patience. Forget the stooping."

On a frustrated growl, he straightens, keeping his head down.

I guess that's as good as we're going to get. I hope the others, who are following in staggered pairs spaced out to avoid drawing attention, will have an easier time.

I glance around me as we continue on. Yolyn Zag is, for all intents and purposes, a mining town, thanks to the mountains it sits at the foot of, which makes it both richer and more working-class than the other cities of Aryd. It's not as downtrodden as my home of Enora, or even the capitol.

Someone bumps into me only to shuffle away quickly at the look Reven bends on them.

"Quit that," I mutter under my breath.

If I could have made a portal to get us to Tyndra, I would have—it would've been faster and safer—but I tried. Tried...and failed. All my efforts shattered, and my amulet remained unresponsive the entire time.

Cain insists I only have a confidence problem, but I'm now pretty sure my previous successes were because of her. Either the Goddess Aryd is not in the mood, or she can't always help.

Why? Is she trapped? Sleeping? Being capricious, which was an Omma word for bitchy? The not knowing is the worst. Eidolon's ghost very well could have lied to send me on a wild hare chase for reasons yet to be seen. Or maybe Aryd's not really in there at all.

Either way, we're using the portal in the temple in Yolyn Zag.

We enter the cool shade of the outer vestibule of the temple. At least we don't need a priestess or acolyte to help us open the portal. Any Imperium only needs to turn on their power and picture their destination to work one. Only Vexillum, without powers, have to pay the temple keepers to use the portals.

No one stops us, and no one is using the portal when we reach it. The room

is safely empty. The portal here is more basic than the one in Oaesys, smaller and simpler. One edge of the glass—blue glass here, different from the black in Oaesys and red in Enora—is rough and oddly shaped, as if it was chipped from a larger block. Propped up against the far wall, it's held in place by two onyx slabs on either side.

The portals are the reason glass is forbidden in Nova, so no one can make their own. The only exceptions are small pieces of colored glass in the painted windows in some temples, and the glass walls of Aryd, because no way is anyone taking those down.

Reven pushes his hood back and takes up a position in the doorway, looking outward for anyone coming.

“Go,” he says.

The sunny glow from my hands spreads across the room. Picturing the portal chamber in Tyndra's temple, one I've been in before, I wait. At first, the glass goes opaque, the colors behind it shifting to reflect the new destination rather than the sand-colored walls in this room. Then it goes crystal clear, showing us a different room on the other side.

We step between dominions like we're stepping from one room into the next. Then the glass goes solid behind us as I turn off my power, and a small part of the tightness in my chest eases, though I'll only be fully comfortable once everyone else is through safely, too.

As we both pull out our warmer clothes and put them on, I take a moment to glance around. I've been in this room before. I can't say it's any less striking this time.

The Tyndran portal is located in one of the twin temples. A high bridge connects the tower I'm standing in to a sister tower across the channel that divides the dominion into two pieces—the mainland and Little Tyndra, where we are now.

Every inch of the room itself is covered in glittering jewels. The walls, the floors, everything crusted in blue and white and black gems set in patterns that depict Tyndra. Mt. Ynferno, the Cliffs of Sacrifice, and even the ruins of the ancient watchtowers from when all six dominions, according to legend, still dared death in the maw of a Devourer to cross the oceans to get to one another. Before the portals.

The room is dazzling.

Don't get me wrong—Aryd is the only dominion with multiple portals, and our portal rooms are ornate and beautiful, too. The one in the capital city of

Oaesys is all obsidian and gold. But this is something else. I thought so the first time I saw it, too.

I happen to catch Reven's gaze on me as I pivot, and I still because of the way he was watching me. The need lighting his eyes with a blue-green fire.

Fire he immediately banks, his face back to expressionless.

*He was right.*

The realization is like having cold water thrown in my face. Knowing that he still wants me and that he's deliberately making the choice to keep us apart might be worse than thinking he simply didn't care as much as I did.

He clears his throat. "Why do you think they were only looking at me?"

I glance away, touching the frosted, jeweled wall with a fingertip. "I've spent almost nineteen years learning how to be invisible."

"So have I."

"With shadows and darkness, yeah."

His gaze narrows. "Which means what?"

"It means you've relied heavily on your power. Maybe a little too heavily." I'm pretty sure a pat on the arm would make him even more disgruntled. "Am I wrong?"

He opens his mouth to argue, pauses, then closes it.

"At least Cain wasn't with us to see all those stares." I honestly meant it to be a good thing, but the way his face goes dead blank, I have to bite my lips together to keep from laughing. I really wasn't trying to poke at him.

If this was before, I'd tease him more. But the way we've been lately... I study the room instead.

There's no fireplace in here. No warmth. Everything—and I mean everything—is covered in a fine sheen of ice, giving it an extra sparkle and making me shiver. A desert girl is not meant for this cold, harsh place.

"Vida should have made you a thicker coat," he grumbles.

I'm not sure what he expects me to say to that. "I'll be fine."

"You say that, but getting sick wouldn't help us now."

"We'll be in the Shadowwood soon enough."

He grunts.

We both stare at the portal, the silence growing longer. I shuffle my feet. "Speaking of Vida, I asked her to keep her ear to the ground."

"For what?"

"The traitor."

Reven frowns. Is he going to say I shouldn't have told Vida and put this on

her shoulders the same way I shouldn't have told Achlys about Eidolon's book?

"Good idea. Vos has cleared the Vanished, but Vida interacts with the Wanderers more than most."

I fist my hands on my hips and stare at him. "Hold on. When did Vos clear the Vanished?"

"He has a network in the Vanished and reached out to them for information these last few days while we prepared for this journey."

No surprise Vos has a network. "Uh-huh. And you were going to tell me when?"

"I'm telling you now." He cocks an eyebrow at me. "The same way you're telling me about Vida now."

"Yeah, well. I'm glad it's not the Vanished." But that means it's one of the Wanderers, and I can't be glad about that.

Reven crosses his arms. "You're thinking of your desert friends."

"Who have risked their lives to protect us? Yes, I'm thinking of them."

"A traitor doesn't taint the entire lot."

My chest squeezes. "I know."

An odd *tink* of sound in the hall outside the chamber has me looking in that direction.

"What?" Immediately, my Shadowraith is between me and the archway leading out of the room.

"Didn't you hear that?" I ask quietly.

Not answering, he goes to the open doorway and sticks his head out into the hall, looking both directions. "There's nothing."

Oh. Am I turning paranoid? It wouldn't surprise me. "You're sure?"

"Wait here. I'll check around."

I've Got a Bad  
Feeling About This

I'm not particularly fond of the idea of Reven leaving me here alone to go off by himself—both for me and for him—and it sets my stomach clenching. Tziah and Bene are next to come through, but it will be a bit.

The longer I wait, though, the more I'm sure that sound was my imagination. I can tell by the stillness that cloaks the building that this temple is exactly as Vos and Reven reported from their earlier scouting—empty. Abandoned, even. As though no one has been here for months. Not since the attack on the Shadowood.

But that can't be right. This is Tyndra's only portal and their temple. At the very least an acolyte or a guard of some sort should be in the building.

What happened?

Suddenly, the glass changes from solid to opaque, then to clear, and on the other side is Tziah—covered head to toe and with a hood drawn low over her face to hide the blue of her skin.

Bene sits on her shoulder. Before we entered Yolyn Zag, he shifted shapes again. Smaller. Less noticeable. Now he looks like a raven, even using the part of him made from black sand to color his entire body. Someone would have to get very close to spot the difference.

Tziah's hand is glowing a deep purple as she operates the glass. I wasn't sure if she was Hylorae or Enfernae, given how she uses sound, but now I have my answer. Enfernae. Once she's through, the portal closed behind her, she flips her hood back and smiles. Immediately, Bene flies to my shoulder and pecks at the chain under my jacket. He was not pleased having to let me go ahead with the amulet that may or may not house his lover.

I wave him off. "She's fine."

Meanwhile, Tziah tips her head, looking around, then raises her eyebrows in question, no doubt asking about Reven.

"He'll be right back." I'm sure he will. I'm just being squeamish.

Bene flies to my shoulder. "*Aryd created these portals.*"

"Really?" I ask, snagging Tziah's attention, who didn't hear him. Quickly,

I translate.

*“The walls I knew were hers. I watched them rise from my place in the waters...”* He ruffles his sandy feathers. *“You have never heard such a calamitous sound, but she had no choice. Locking me out with the rest of the consorts.”* His voice goes sharper, harder in my head. *“Devourers. What an apt term.”*

That much we know.

*“But these...”* He points his beak at the glass. *“I feel her magic in this glass.”* If a miniature Devourer in the shape of a raven can smile, I guess that’s what he does. *“I should have guessed. It was always my goddess’s way to be a blessing to her people, and the dominions need one another.”*

He’s right about that. Aryd wouldn’t survive without the trade we do with the other five.

The glass changes again while we’re all three looking at it, and Vos and Horus file through next. They’re both breathing hard.

“What happened?” I ask.

“Soldiers checking the market stalls,” Horus says, grim-faced. “White armor.”

Seven hells. Eidolon’s men. Is it coincidence, or did they know? “Did they see you?”

Vos waves a hand between him and Horus. “Us? Come on.”

Good point. They’re better at blending in daylight than Reven. Cain and Pella, who are last, should also be okay. They’re from Aryd, so they don’t stand out as much.

Vos takes in the room in a single sweeping glance. “Where is he?”

Not back yet. The weight of worry turns heavier.

“Checking that the place is empty.” I’d rather not mention the sound I thought I heard. No need to highlight that the tension is clearly starting to get to me.

Vos and Horus both eye me narrowly, and then Vos goes to stand in the doorway looking out into the hall.

I don’t know if it’s the way Vos is waiting or my own nerves stretching thin, but he’s making me anxious. What if something happened? It’s not like I can feel Reven. He’s still keeping me out, cutting off our connection.

“There you are,” Vos says.

Reven appears a second later. “No sign of anything or anyone.”

“Was it in question?” Vos glances between us. After all, he was the one



who scouted it.

Reven cocks his head at Vos. “Were you worried about me, old friend?”

He can joke with Vos but not even smile for me?

The portal goes opaque again. Cain looks right at me and Reven as he comes through, and it’s impossible to miss how his shoulders drop slightly to find us standing apart, the way his face eases. Then he claps Horus on the shoulder and grins. “Good to see we all made it. I wondered when we saw the soldiers.”

A howl moves through the tower, the echo of it seeming to float from room to room like a specter, and the blood in my veins turns sluggish in a response I can’t control. The sound reminds me so much of the noises Tabra makes sometimes now. I can hear her at night. We all can. After the first time I caught that sound, I had a little more sympathy for why the zariphate put her tent far away.

A warm hand settles on the small of my back and I startle. I hadn’t even felt Cain close the gap between us. Touching me like this... Reven isn’t used to what it means to someone like us. Cain is.

“It’s just the wind,” he says.

My logical side says he’s right, but after the earlier sound, I still don’t like it. “Sure.”

I don’t know if he sees the doubt in my face, but he gives me a small push toward the door. “To be safe, though, let’s get out of here.”

We all make our way down a massive winding staircase that reminds me of the well in the palace courtyard in Oaesys. Windowless except a skylight above us in the ceiling, each level houses more rooms. The staircase itself sinks down through the center of the tall temple.

A sudden gust of wind blows upward on another howl like Tabra’s moans. “Well, at least that explains the sound,” Horus mutters.

It does. So why am I unable to relax?

We continue down the stairs. Reven puts himself between me and the drop, the same way he did when we scaled the steps leading underneath Wildernyss. I shoot him a grateful look and stick as close to the wall side as possible. Teleportation really would have been a much handier power to inherit. Then I’d never have to deal with heights.

We’re about halfway to the ground when another eerie howl whips through the building. That isn’t what bogs me down like quicksand, though—it’s something else, something below me on the stairs. The hairs on my arms, the

back of my neck—everywhere, really—stand up like I latched on to a lightning bolt. Dread sinks through me, and I stare hard at the apparition and try to make it make sense. Make it take a form I can recognize or disappear, like when I'd wake at night in the palace and be sure Eidolon was standing in my room, watching me, only to stare at that spot until my sight adjusted to the darkness and nothing was there.

I sneak a quick glance around, but all eyes are on me. I look back at whatever it is. My eyes are adjusted fine, and it's still there.

A figure. I'm sure of it. Standing in my way.

"Meren?"

Reven's voice steals around me, but I don't look away. "Are you doing something with the shadows right now?" I have to force the question past stiff lips.

Please let his power explain what I'm looking at.

"I'm not doing anything."

He squints in the same direction, and when he does, the shadowy figure vanishes. I squeeze my eyes shut, then open them and look again. Just an empty staircase.

"I—" I finally look at Reven, who is staring at me with worry wrinkling the space between his brows. "I swear I saw something."

*Please say you saw it, too.*

Otherwise, I'm seeing and hearing things that aren't there.

"There wasn't anything there, Meren," Cain says from where he's stopped on the stairs to my right. "Must've been a trick of..." He trails off.

Shadow. He was going to say a trick of shadow. By the way Reven tenses, I know he caught it, too. We all did.

"It *wasn't* me," Reven insists.

Cain holds up a hand. "I believe you."

"Maybe we should move a little faster," Horus says.

I guess I've freaked out the others enough, because they don't dawdle. The hurried sound of our feet on the stone of the staircase is a *rat-tat-tat*.

Then something brushes against my hand.

I only have time to gasp before Tziah hisses, and then Pella stops and whips around, her hand going behind her head to the handle of her curved knife.

She stares at nothing, breathing hard, then... "It's not Meren's imagination. We're not alone."

## The Shadowwood

A breeze—one that shouldn't exist in here because there are no windows—stirs the hair at my neck, and the way the rest of my friends shiver, I know they felt it, too, this time.

A floating, hollow chuckle of a laugh whispers both close to me and far away at the same time.

Pella's right. We're not alone. And we're being toyed with.

"Move," Vos says.

Forget hurrying—we run the rest of the way to the ground floor, then through the wide, ornately carved doors outside into the cold, and I swear another floating, hollow laugh chases us out.

As soon as Horus and Pella push the doors closed, we all let a collective breath go. I roll my shoulders to rid myself of the feeling of being watched or followed.

Beside me, Reven is staring at the doors, visibly lost in thought.

"The tower didn't feel like that when we were here before," I say, but in a low voice for him alone. "Right?"

His lips flatten. "No. Not when Vos and I checked it out, either."

What happened, then? Has this place always been...I don't want to think the word *haunted*, except I recently encountered a spirit of the dead, so who am I to say hauntings aren't real? But why now? Did our presence wake something up?

Cain puts his hands on his hips and stares at the building behind us. "I'll cross that off my list of possible summer homes."

The rest of us burst into tension-breaking huffs and chuckles. Wind scatters snow across the stone terrace where we stand on a short set of stairs leading down to the icy ground, and another shiver racks through me.

I draw my fur-lined jacket closer as I'm whipped by freezing cold winds across fields of ice. The weather is teeth-gritting but manageable for the amount of time we have to be out in it.

Hopefully.

Any signs of Eidolon's army, which had been previously camped here

when Reven, Vos, and I had to fight our way out, are mostly gone, though I can still make out a few stakes sticking haphazardly out of the ground and remnants of tents under the snow. Not to mention the boats I sank using glass spikes I made. Parts stick out of the water in the channel between Little Tyndra and the mainland. I'm not surprised that a lot is buried. The snow here is like the sand in my home. Give it a week, and it will wipe the evidence of life from its face.

Tziah gestures away from the temple.

"She's right," Vos says. "The faster we move, the sooner we can be in the warmer woods. Unless anyone wants to wait inside the warmer temple?"

"No thanks," Cain mumbles.

I'm already dreading the fact that we have to come back through it to leave here. A problem for another day.

Reven has been conserving his power for the next part of our travel—shadowing us to the woods so we don't have to spend days trekking over the snow and ice to get there, although we brought gear for that just in case.

Because of the distance, we decided he'd shadow us to within a league of the southern border of the woods. We could have had him take us all the way to the abandoned village inside the Shadowwood, which would be faster, but we have no idea what to expect there. It could be a trap—more of Eidolon's soldiers waiting for anyone to show their faces.

The last thing we need is for Reven to be drained if we face a fight.

The part of me that still hopes he'll change the way he's keeping us apart expects Reven to turn to me first, but he doesn't. He holds out a hand to Vos.

I wince, then immediately frown at myself. *Where's your pride, Meren?*

Vos carefully checks Reven's face, probably for any sign of Eidolon's Shadows. I see Reven notice that small hesitation. He takes it like a blow but says nothing. A new ache blooms inside me. For him. Can't he see he's only hurting himself by trying to deal with his problems alone?

Except, what could we possibly do to help him? My own frustrated helplessness is reflected on more than one face around me.

Vos clasps him heartily, hand to forearm. "Let's go, brother."

The shadows rise and fall too fast for me to say anything, do anything. In a blink, he and Vos disappear. Another blink, and Reven's back.

I'm next. He touches me for only as long as it takes to get me to where he left Vos, and then he's gone again. I stare at my gloved hand for a second, the one he'd held, before he reappears with Horus, and I hastily drop it to my

side. I watch Reven's face every time he shows up with more of our group. He brings Cain and Pella last, but fortunately, even by then there's no flicker, no show that he's exhausted himself or struggling.

That's a good sign. I hope.

We make the rest of our way on foot. The trees loom larger and larger on the horizon as we cross the frozen tundra toward the forest of towering red-barked, flat-leaved trees. The edges of the forest are filled with smaller piney trees. As soon as we reach them, my muscles ease, my breath of relief a misty puff on the air. We still have a way to go, but at least here we're more protected from the weather.

Even so, we all get quieter as we make our way closer and closer to the village.

*"Why such solemnity?"* Bene asks in my head.

"You'll see," I whisper.

We trek on for what feels like an eternity. I picture the Shadowwood the way I first saw it—the massive, towering trees filled with treehouse homes high up in those ancient branches, winding stairs around the thick trunks, other buildings on the ground where the villagers did their work and trade. A fully functioning community.

Except that's not how we left it.

Dread clings to my feet, trying to slow me down. What we're about to see isn't going to be easy.

Reven—or more accurately one of the Shadows, though I didn't know at the time—and I were the last ones out. I know what we left behind. I witnessed the bodies of our dead from that battle. They littered the ground like used handkerchiefs, their cloudy eyes open and accusing. We didn't have time to bury them.

Should I prepare the others? I'm not sure if knowing what to expect will make it worse or better. Other than Pella and Bene, they were all there during the attack. They saw. They know, to some extent.

I stay silent.

At the first decent view of the village, Tziah stumbles to a halt, her twilight skin turning chalky. Shock opens her mouth, and a sound like hissing and screaming at the same time emerges as a chirp before she snaps her teeth closed, cutting it off.

The village is a shambles.

A tangle of different emotions roils through me along with the foreboding

—regret, guilt, hatred for the soldiers who came for us and the man who sent them, sadness for the people we lost, but also for the safe haven that was destroyed.

The twirling staircases that went up into the trees are all smashed. Shards of wood and belongings litter the ground like dismembered limbs. The Vanished did that themselves, using large logs on swinging ropes to destroy the way up and prevent our attackers from getting to where we'd taken refuge. Except the Tyndrans shot flaming arrows into the canopy, forcing us down to the ground to be decimated by the soldiers and barbarians waiting below. Some of the trees are burned to charred husks while some are only partially blackened.

But the damage isn't what turns me immobile or why, I'm pretty sure, Tziah made that sound. It's what's *missing*.

There's not a single corpse to be seen.

The sound of my own breathing is harsh in my ears. None of our people returned to bury our dead. The Tyndran soldiers and barbarians were wiped out by Reven's shadows. Not slain. More like disappeared. Disappeared. No one was left behind to do anything about the bodies.

Maybe animals came through? Ate the bodies? I don't see any bones, though.

"Mother goddess," Horus, who stops beside me, whispers more to himself than me.

Reven is up ahead.

I can't leave him to face this alone. I walk up behind him and lay a hand in the center of his back. He doesn't flinch at my touch like I was bracing for. I scoot around to his side, though I don't touch him again.

Still. He's so still.

What he must be feeling now... He was the one to hear every single person in the darkness, to find them, to bring them here to safety. He knows *exactly* who we've lost. He knows each and every face, each soul, each story, each name, in a way I never will.

What do we tell their families and friends when we return to Aryd?

Neither of us voices the question out loud.

"I don't like this." Cain's voice breaks the silence around us. "We should have done what I suggested in the first place."

He means gathering the other zariphates and storming the palace. But he wasn't there when Reven and I fought Eidolon in Oaesys to see how

impossible it is to kill him.

Reven moves away from me. “Vos, unthaw what you can around here. We’ll need supplies. Start with the creek in the clearing for water.”

He’s right. Without Reven’s protective veil of shadows in place, even as close as we are to the warm springs, it’s colder here than before. Without a word, Vos sets off.

Tziah watches after him, and I almost think she’ll follow, but instead, she points up into the trees. Into a specific tree—the one where the books were stored. Relief rushes from me on a sharp exhale because the library looks like it’s still intact. The flames seem to have scorched the roof, but that appears to be all.

*Let’s hope that’s all.*

The staircase leading up that tree is crushed in the middle like all the others, so there’s no way to get up there easily. I already have an idea to deal with that, though.

“Here.” I move Bene to Tziah’s shoulder.

Pulling my power forward, the heat of it in my blood, under my skin, is almost enough to dispel that ominous sense that still hovers over everything here. My yellow light adds a sunnier, warmer glow to the surrounding trees.

There is still sand on the ground. Not naturally, but because of me. I drew it out of the dirt what feels like ages ago, first while trying to figure out how to make a portal, and later to fight. Now I gather a pile at the base of the library tree and start forming it into stairs, filling in those that were crushed by the falling logs the Vanished devised as a defense.

At least I don’t need my amulet to help. I can do this much.

“I’ll leave some for you,” I tell Bene.

He hops to the ground and starts growing in size, back to small-horse proportions.

I’ve made it halfway up the tree, focused on what I’m doing, when the oddest crackling noise reaches me.

“No! Stop!” Vos’s shout from within the woods is a distant clap of sound.

The shock of it has me dropping my hands and spinning into a defensive crouch, ready to fight. Behind me, my sand stairs scatter back into formless piles in a hissing *whoosh*. Tziah, Horus, and Reven sprint toward the sound of Vos’s shout.

I take off after them, Bene running at my side.

## Returned

Losing sight of the others, I dash into the clearing farther into the woods only to stumble to a halt. Bene skids to a stop beside me, his head now at the same level as mine, vicious teeth bared in a fearsome snarl.

A white-blue glow lights up the clearing. Horus deliberately steps in front of me, arms out, but I lean around him to see. A man stands at the center of a...a... I frown. The only way to describe it is a storm of lightning. Like a thousand different bolts came together and then time was stopped in the same instant.

Reven, Vos, and Tziah stand with their hands up. “Hakan,” Vos says slowly, carefully—very un-Vos-like. Nervous. “It’s us. It’s us.”

Hakan? I stumble over the name until it hits me—the leader of the Vanished from Savannah. He’d been away from the Shadowwood when I was brought here on some kind of mission. I wasn’t given details.

He must have returned to the Shadowwood, unaware of what had happened in his absence. Has he been here all this time? Months alone.

That odd crackling noise sounds again, and I can *feel* the sound as it buzzes across my skin.

The man himself would be attention-getting already, even if he wasn’t standing in an oval of raw power. His head is shaved on either side, leaving a single braided strip of tight blond curls down the center of his scalp. Tattoos of glowing white-blue lines, like he’s lit up from the inside, fill the bare, rose-gold skin where it’s shaved—swirling and yet precise. The design on one side is a bird of prey, talons extended, almost cruel in the depiction.

“Hakan,” Vos says. “We’ve come back. It’s us.”

The man raises his hands as though he’s about to send those bolts of instant death right at us, and Horus pushes me back behind him even as Reven walks forward, though the shadows around us remain unmoving.

He’s not using them. Yet.

I don’t see what happens next, but the glowing light douses suddenly.

My friends all seem to take a collective breath, and I know it’s going to be okay when they all straighten and lower their hands. I risk another peek.



Hakan is no longer lit up. Now he stands in a field where the ice under his feet melted all the way down to the grasses, which are charred, smoke rising around him in curling tendrils. His tattoos have faded to a normal bluish-black ink.

Tziah, I can see now, is standing not a foot from the edge of the smoking grass, smiling.

Hakan leans over, putting his hands on his knees and breathing in and out. “I thought I was seeing things again—”

On a grunt that sounds a lot like relief, Vos crosses the scorched grass toward their friend, though the two men don’t touch. “Have you been waiting for us?”

Hakan straightens. “I returned to find the Shadowwood destroyed. I stayed, hoping one of you might try to come back.” He speaks in a slow, deliberate cadence, very guttural and Savanahan.

“I should have returned for you,” Reven says in a low punch of a voice.

His guilt sneaks past whatever he does to cut me off and stirs the shadows inside me like a witch stirring a cauldron. I put my hand over that scar in my side, trying to will him to forgive himself. He couldn’t do everything, especially while he was still healing. Otherwise, he would have come for me sooner, too.

“I never doubted that you would have if you could,” Hakan says before I can.

After a beat, Reven nods.

“We’ll tell you everything,” Vos assures Hakan.

The Savanahan says nothing, like he’s not surprised or angry that he got left behind. Which makes him a better person than I am. I’d have been angry and betrayed and probably left ages ago.

Then Hakan raises his gaze to where I stand farther back, half hidden by Reven. “Who do we have here?”

Only he’s not looking at me. He’s looking behind me, beyond Horus to the edge of the clearing.

I look over my shoulder to find Pella there, glowering back at him.

The look on her face was worth the risk of coming here alone.

On our way back to the village, Vos gives him an extremely fast, overly simplified overview of who I am and what he’s missed, with a promise to elaborate later. Hakan says nothing. A man of few words, I guess.

Reven stops us when we reach the edge of the village. “No one should go

anywhere alone.”

Hakan frowns. “Why?”

“It’s likely we have a traitor in the zariphate—”

“—or the Vanished,” Cain interjects.

There is no bloody way one of the people saved and protected for *years* would be a traitor. Besides, Vos already cleared them.

Cain crosses his arms. “We’re checking our people.”

Reven pauses a beat, and I’m pretty sure he’s trying not to roll his eyes. “As are we,” he finally says. “Either way, Eidolon’s men found us before for a reason. They were in the city of Yolyn Zag, too, and we shouldn’t assume that’s coincidence. We have to assume they’re getting information from the inside and will find us here, too.”

“Great,” Pella mutters. She’s glaring at Cain, though. “A traitor. That information would have been useful earlier.”

“Father knows.”

The way Pella stiffens slightly, I’m guessing she doesn’t appreciate being left out of the loop.

Reven cuts a hand through the air. “For that reason, no one goes anywhere alone. Agreed?”

We all nod. Horus glances between me, Cain, and Pella. “Don’t touch Hakan’s skin unless he gives you permission.”

I look at Hakan, who has somehow ended up standing beside Pella. The epic pout she has going on says she’s anything but thrilled.

“Why not?” I ask Hakan.

“My power.”

No bow, no acknowledgment of my station, despite having been introduced to me as the standing queen of Aryd. I like him already.

“How long have you been here?” Reven asks him.

“Long enough.”

Which means he saw the carnage. My heart drops, but Reven nods once. “Thank you for burying our dead.”

The mood is somber as we all head back to the tree that houses the library. It’s going to take all of us going through these books to find what I hope we find. Taking a deep breath, I pull my power forward again and rebuild that sandcastle of stairs winding up the red-barked tree trunk to where the books await us.

When I’m done, Bene flies down from wherever he’s been perched—he

may be the size of a wolf, but he still has wings, and the trees here are big enough to support his bulk. He nudges my hand with the top of his head, sand scratchy against my palms. “*You truly are a descendent of my love.*”

I decide to take that as a compliment. “Thank you.”

I eye the stairs. There is no way I’m letting anyone else risk getting sucked into quicksand if I haven’t made them firm enough or falling to their death if it crumbles under their weight. Before anyone can stop me, I climb up quickly, one hand on the rough bark as if I’ll be able to grab on if this thing collapses. This fear of heights is a weakness. That’s what Omma would say if she were here. That queens can’t afford to be weak.

But even queens are human.

Not everything my great-aunt said to me was crap, but there was a lot—a *lot*—that was. Irritation at my own thoughts is what gets me the last little bit to the top, and I push my way inside the library with a small sigh of relief that I can’t see how high I am anymore.

That doesn’t last long.

I stumble to a halt just inside the door to the room housing the books, and Cain ploughs into me from behind. I barely notice because I’m too busy trying not to dissolve into a puddle of frustration and hopelessness.

“*No.*” The single word comes out as a harsh whisper.

## Written History

Ruined. It's all ruined.

My lungs tighten down like a saddle cinch is being drawn around them and pulled tighter with each attempted breath. I try to suck air in, but it doesn't make it to my chest. We needed answers, and we came all the way here, risked the time and chance of discovery because I said we needed to. Insisted, even. All for nothing. Nothing.

I try to suck in again, but it's not helping. I can't breathe.

I was counting on this—

A brush of shadow is my only warning before I'm suddenly on the other side of the room, Reven's hands at my waist, intent gaze trained on my face. He lets go instantly, and by his expression, I think he's already regretting touching me at all. Almost like he couldn't help himself. "Breathe, princess. It's going to be okay."

Princess. He called me princess. I'd missed the way he used to do that. But the fact that he does now just adds to the not okay.

Nothing is okay.

The musty scent of books and parchment that I remember from when Reven brought me here—when he showed me how he was trying to find evidence to use against Eidolon, when he told me who he was, when he kissed me the very first time—that scent is barely here anymore, faint under a combination of smoke and mold.

Smoke because of the fires set by the Tyndran soldiers. Mold because the wave of water Cain sent into the trees that night to put out those fires apparently hit the library directly.

I hadn't thought about the water. Goddess. What if all the knowledge we needed has been washed away? It's not like we'll find it somewhere else. Books are rare and precious. So are the scrolls stacked in their own corner.

"Vos can remove the ice, and we can salvage most of them," Reven says.

I shake my head again, but with less conviction. He's right, sort of. The ones that got the wettest are likely lost no matter what we do, but not all of the books have been destroyed. I swallow. "We'll just have to pray that what

we need is still intact.”

*Standing here moaning doesn't help. Get a move on, Meren.*

I pick up the book nearest me that has a promising title, a tome as thick as my thigh, and drop down to sit on the floor cross-legged with it in my lap. Very carefully—because paper this old is delicate and could disintegrate in a puff of wind—I open it to the first page.

“Some of us,” Pella says in her irritated-as-usual voice, “can't read.”

For once, I see past the irritation in her face to the very real, legitimate emotion underneath. Pella is embarrassed. Not that she needs to be.

“I'm sorry,” I offer sincerely. Maybe the first time I've ever spoken those words to her, because I should have known better. I lived half my life on the streets of Enora. No one I knew there could read. Even many authorities can't. It's not like there is a lot of reading material to go around. “I should have asked.”

She opens her mouth, pauses, then says, “Yes. You should have.”

I ignore the verbal jab, instead glancing around to the others. “For anyone who can't read, I figure we have two options. Someone who reads can show you the specific words you're looking for and we trust you'll see them, or you can start going through the damaged books and trying to salvage what you can.”

“I can read Savanahan runes,” Hakan says. He studies the texts littering the space, then gingerly picks up a ruined book closest to the door. He pushes past Vos to head outside, where I can see him spreading it open on the balcony floor and brushing off the pages carefully one at a time.

Immediately, Cain and Tziah join him, and I blink, because I didn't expect that Cain couldn't read, either. And I should have. Wanderers take with them only what is worth packing and hauling through the desert. Books, which are heavy, and scrolls, which crush easily, are not on that list. All their knowledge and history and information is passed along orally. Some of the most beautiful poetry I've ever heard comes from Wanderers.

I know this, and yet I assumed, since he was the zariph's son... When did I get so out of touch? So unlike them? Or maybe I never really was.

Pella plops down beside me, and I lean away on instinct. The last time she was this close, she dropped a howling spider down the back of my shirt. Spiders land on the same list as heights as far as I'm concerned, and she figured that out. She's good at figuring out a person's buttons and pushing them.

“Show me the words,” she demands with a wave at the book I’m holding.

*Oh.* I ease up a bit. Rather than make a thing of it, I ask Reven for something to write with. All he can find is a piece of coal, but that’s okay. On the wooden floor of the library, I draw the symbols and explain to her what the difference is between those and others and what combination she’s looking for.

Which is when I hear it. A whisper. A murmuring of several indistinguishable voices that seems to move by me like I’m passing a group of gossiping courtiers in a palace hallway.

I stiffen, glancing from face to face. Did anyone else hear that? No one seems to have noticed anything.

*Stop it, Meren.* That weird occurrence at the tower must’ve gotten under my skin, but we’re not there now. Tension is getting to me. That’s all.

“*I will seek out a high perch and keep watch for intruders,*” Bene tells me, his large head sticking through the doorway, which is too narrow for his broad shoulders to get through in his current size. Backing up, he stretches out his wings and flies away.

*See,* I tell myself. *You have a Devourer keeping watch. Stop working yourself up.*

I pause as that thought sinks in, then, on a huff of a laugh, rub a hand over my face, giving a mental shake of my head. Thinking of a Devourer as protection would have been inconceivable even a few weeks ago. The world truly has unbalanced and keeps right on spinning.

Shaking it off, I get started. A buzz of anticipation overrides everything else, including my nerves. We came for one reason and one only. We will find something that tells us what we need to know about Eidolon. We *have* to.

A New  
Understanding

The watery sun crawls across the sky and sets again on what is our third day in the Shadowwood. Or maybe fourth? I'm starting to lose track. With each darkening second, the forest looms in on me, and over me, a weight of... something...hangs in the air. Except, I seem to be the only one bothered.

Not a single blink or furtive glance among the lot, and believe me, I've been watching for anyone else to show a sign that they feel odd. I'd even be relieved if Pella said something.

Instead, they've all been going about their business as if nothing is strange. We've done nothing but search the tomes. We've barely broken for meals—Tziah, Cain, and Hakan hunt and cook for us—and our break to eat or sleep is the only time we leave the library.

Nothing bad has happened beyond my being creeped out, so for now I'm keeping it to myself. We don't have time for more worries.

Words swim on the page before me. My eyes are aching, my sight turning bleary. Especially since we can't have too many candles burning in here. Books are highly flammable. Dominions have lost entire libraries to a single spark.

Meanwhile, paranoia has started sinking in. Did I miss something? Should I have someone else check the books I've gone through to make sure? Do we even have time for that? Even with four of us skimming to go faster, we've barely made a dent in the pile.

Across the room, Reven sits with a book in his lap, but he's not reading. He's staring at nothing, head cocked, almost like he's listening. My heart picks up pace. Is he hearing something, too? Or is he lost in thought?

Then he rolls his shoulders and goes back to reading like nothing happened.

*Goddess grant me...* I'm not even sure what to ask for.

I should just tell him I'm hearing things. Or, rather, *heard* things. It was only the one time the first night. He's been doing a bang-up job making sure we're never alone together, though, and I don't want to worry anyone else.

Reven flicks a sudden glance my way. I pretend I was looking up to stretch, tipping my head back and rolling it side to side. It really is stiff. I miss the tables in the library in the palace. Much more comfortable than the floor.

He drops his gaze back to keep reading.

I lower my own to the book in my lap, fighting the twang of disappointment that strikes. It's always there, this sense that it shouldn't be this way with us. Worse here, because this is where we truly found each other, where we gave each other everything. The little bit of heaven we found here hurts too much to give up on. The wish that he'd suddenly wrap me up in his arms and tell me he can't go on this way, that he needs me, too, just won't go away.

Tziah sticks her head in the door and waves.

"Is dinner ready?" Vos asks, not bothering to hide his relief as he snaps the book he was reading closed and stands up in a hurry.

Not that I blame him. The pace we're pushing ourselves at is brutal, even if it is only sitting and reading. She waves again, this time indicating we should all come with her, but I lower my head, determined to finish. I'm close to the end.

When no one moves, I sigh. "Go ahead. Seriously. I'll be right behind you."

The others seem to take this at face value and file out behind Tziah.

I feel more than see Reven climb to his feet. "You've hardly eaten, Meren."

"I'm fine. I'm not the only one who hasn't been eating well," I point out, and I can't help the stubborn jut of my chin.

Reven sighs. "You're right. We should all be keeping up our strength in case something happens."

Something like Eidolon tracking us down, no doubt. And he's right, too.

"Just a few more pages."

Reven crouches in front of me. Not touching, but he dips his head to catch my eye. "They'll still be there after dinner."

"I know. But if I lose my place now, it'll slow me down when I start again later. Okay?"

"You realize we might not find anything," he says. "It's even likely."

I wrinkle my nose at him. "The goblet is always half empty with you."

He huffs to cover what sounded like a chuckle. "Like you're not exactly



the same.”

True. I’ve already been thinking the same thing since the first word I read. “I have no idea what you’re speaking of. I am a blessing of positive thoughts and…” I can’t think of anything funny to add. My brain is too fuzzy with all the reading.

“Wishful thinking,” he supplies in a dry voice.

“Exactly.”

He shakes his head. “Right, well…don’t take too long.”

I stare after him as he leaves. Small moments like that one, when it’s like we both forget the distance for a second and are just us… I’m starting to live for those little moments. With a shake of my head, mostly at myself but a lot at Reven, too, I drop my focus back to the book I’m scanning. I’ll hurry up and finish this and get down there.

“Always the martyr.”

I glance back up to find Pella standing in the doorway, scowl tucked in place. “Reven sent me back for you.”

My eyebrows fly up. Has the man not figured out that Pella and I aren’t exactly soul sisters? What’s he trying for—cruel and unusual punishment? I get why he wouldn’t send Cain, but Horus or Tziah or Vos—hells, even Hakan would be a better choice than the girl leaning in the doorway, glaring at me right now.

Knowing I’ll be opening a can of rotten worms with my words, I sigh. “Why do you hate me so much?”

“I don’t—” She cuts herself off, head going back as though reconsidering. “Cain,” she says finally.

I frown my confusion. “What about him? I’m not good enough for him or something?”

“No.” She picks up a smaller book, leafing through it, then sets it back down before moving deeper into the room. “My brother is the only person who ever cared about me.”

I’m pretty sure her personality plays a role in that. “What does that have to do with me?”

She pins me with a look of stark resentment that has me leaning back. “He cares about you more.” She chucks the words at me, bald and angry, and…

Aw hells, I get it now.

I can’t believe I’m about to say what I am. I clear my throat because the words are sticking. “His caring for me doesn’t take anything away from how

much he loves you. Even I know he adores you, Pella. You're his baby sister."

Or he wouldn't put up with her bullshit. For once, I stop myself from tacking on that last bit.

"Yeah, well..." She shrugs. "Tell that to five-year-old me. Cain was my hero."

Then I showed up one day and took that from her. Is that how she sees it? Knowing how important Cain was to me at almost the same age, when he found me knocking on death's door in the desert the first time I ran away from Omma, I have an idea of what that did to her. Maybe more than anyone else would. "Well...damn."

Her brows wing upward.

I huff a bit. "I'd rather not have to think of you as anything more than the girl who tormented me a hundred different ways when all I wanted was to fit in somewhere."

Her hands go to her hips. "You're a princess. You have a place."

Wrong, and everyone in this small circle—including Hakan, who has been filled in—knows my secrets and lies.

"I'm a hidden, pretend princess who is good for two things and two things only." I hold up a hand, ticking them off on my fingers. "As a decoy to die for my sister, or as her double to take her place if I screw up and she's the one killed."

Quite a fate to hang over a child's head. I was told my purpose from the second I was old enough to speak.

"My family's preference was obviously the first scenario. Everyone in the palace knew me as Tabra. A handful of people in Enora knew me as Meren, but they didn't know much more than that I was poor and lived with Omma. I wasn't really allowed to interact with anyone. Schooling with other kids was a no. Friends were definitely a no. Until Cain."

She stands there, listening. Just listening. No sneer. No scoff.

"You're not the only one who was...an afterthought."

I stare.

She lifts one shoulder in a barely there shrug that isn't casual. For such a small gesture, it carries weight. "I've spent my entire life trying to be the best. At everything. Because maybe then..." Pella shrugs.

I can fill in the rest. Maybe then her father would value her, too. He really is focused on Cain, the firstborn who will take over the zariphate someday.

Maybe then she'd be more than just Cain's little sister. Maybe then she could relax and not have to always be what others wanted. "Maybe then," I agree.

We both nod.

"I'm pretty sure I would have still hated you, though." Only her tone is ironic now rather than Pella's usual brand of poison.

"Likewise."

Apparently done with the conversation, she leaves. I'm about to get up and follow when the book I'm holding jerks in my grip and an invisible force slaps at my hands. I jump up, scrambling back, narrowly missing knocking over a candle, only to watch as the book flips its own pages...or...no. The *shadows* are flipping the pages, darkness touching it in waves like visible wind.

Every muscle in my body goes taut. Uh...this is new. Is this Reven? Or Eidolon's ghost? Or something else?

I'm half a second from sprinting out the door when the pages stop turning and a word on the page it lands on catches my eye. One of the words I've been searching for.

*Eidolon.*

## One Piece

I inch toward the book, trying—and failing—to keep my breathing even and calm. I need to see what the shadows showed me. The last thing I need is to scare them off.

My amulet flashes hot, and I just about trip over my own feet.

“Sandsnakes!” I gasp. “Don’t *do* that.”

I’m not sure if I’m more annoyed at the goddess trapped around my neck—*now* she decides to wake up?—the shadows that only now decide to be helpful, or myself for being so goddess-damned jumpy. But after everything that’s happened and now days of bleary-eyed reading, it’s probably all of the above.

A scratching flap of wings is my only warning before Bene lands on the balcony outside the doorway, then sticks his big head through the door. I’m staring at a lion’s head with a man’s face, his boar’s teeth sharp as daggers. “*I feel her.*”

Yeah, me too. But all I can think is how happy I am not to be alone. His presence settles me. I’d hug him if he wasn’t a giant, sandy Devourer.

He reaches out a paw, close enough to get to me, and, with a single unsheathed claw—which isn’t creepy at all—plucks at the chain around my neck. Before he can work it out from under my clothing, the amulet goes cold again, and he stops. “*She has gone from me again.*”

“I—” I don’t even know where to start. “She woke up when... But now she isn’t... I think...”

“*Calm yourself, young Imperium.*”

I take a breath. “I think the shadows showed me a page.”

“*The shadows? Are you sure?*”

No. But darkness was definitely involved.

“*Did they attempt to hurt you?*”

How is he so calm? He just thought he felt his heartmate after ages without her.

“*Did they?*” His voice goes harder.

“No.”

*“Then I would pay attention to whatever they showed you. You are safe enough with me.”*

Right. Devourer. That makes me feel better.

With Bene there watching, I start to read as fast as I can. Partly to find out what they want me to see, but also to get out of here and back to the others as fast as I can. In my rush, I have to keep going back in case I missed something important.

With every new symbol on the page, my eyes grow wider. I need to show this to Reven. Using a spare bit of parchment to mark my spot, I close the book and tuck it against my chest.

Bene following, I run out of the room and down the stairs. We find the others all gathered in what’s left of the rectangular ground-level meeting room where I first met most of Reven’s leaders. My friends now. The thatched roof is ash, and an entire wall was knocked down, but the fireplace works, and the large wooden table, big enough to seat all of us, is still usable. They’ve already started eating.

Bene leaps over the downed wall and skids into the room ahead of me, and I’m thinking that a large Devourer suddenly bursting into the room, especially when we’re all on edge, isn’t a good idea, but it’s too late to stop him. I reach the door in time to see everyone except Pella and Hakan are up, ready to fight.

“Blast it, Bene,” Cain mutters as they all relax and put their weapons away. “Don’t do that.” At Pella’s chortle, Cain shoots her a glare. “It’s not funny. Why weren’t you on your feet, too? That”—he points at Bene—“is a threat.”

She shrugs. “I could see him coming.”

And didn’t warn her brother. Priceless. If I wasn’t so eager to share what I have, and if it wasn’t Pella, I’d laugh. Behind her, from where he stands to eat rather than being seated, Hakan’s lips twitch. Everyone resumes their seats with a grumble, returning to their food, and Bene moves out of my way.

“Get some food,” Horus urges, picking up a wooden bowl to hold out to me.

Tziah is the only one who pauses, bite halfway to her mouth, to stare at me. She taps her hand over her heart, and I know she’s asking if I’m all right.

I put the book down on the table between Reven and Horus and flip it open. “I found something.”

I try not to hop from foot to foot as Reven reads it. After what feels like forever, he raises his gaze to me, and I see the same riot of reaction I’m

tamping down.

“It’s true,” he says, those two words heavy.

“True?” Cain asks. “What’s true?”

“It doesn’t say *why* your ancestresses trapped them, though,” Reven murmurs for me alone.

How did he know that’s what has me strung as taut as a bowstring? I can’t help but wonder why the previous queens of Aryd did it. What humans, even two Imperium, would dare go up against not just one goddess but all six? What could have been so terrible that they’d take that risk in the first place?

I don’t stop myself for once, leaning over to put my forehead to his. I immediately realize what I’ve done, and I would pull away, except, for a stomach-dropping second, he leans into me and softens. Then, just as fast, he stiffens and pulls back. I should have known better, but my ridiculous heart can’t help itself.

The others pass the book around, tension thick in their voices as they murmur and point things out.

“Listen to this,” Vos says to the room in general. “*The six pieces of glass holding each of the six goddesses were given to the rulers of the dominions, each rightful goddess to her rightful sovereign.*”

I jump as Reven suddenly shoves to his feet.

“Seven hells!” He looks straight at me. “We were right. *This* is why Eidolon has been stealing the soul *Enfernae* from your line.”

Leads to More  
Problems

I wait for him to elaborate, but he just watches me expectantly.

*Okay.* Well, before our fight with Eidolon what seems like eons ago, we'd already guessed that the king is waiting for a certain soul-related ability to manifest, which is why he allows the twin to take the throne after he kills the sister rather than kill them both and end the rule of my line. Powers are inherited, passed generation to generation by blood, each a little different than the last but still the same general type. If Eidolon needs a specific power

---

Realization dawns with a horrific sort of calm, and I meet his eyes, seeing it reflected there. This has to be what the ghostly Eidolon didn't tell me.

This is Tabra's power.

"If your soul *Enfernae* ancestor was powerful enough to trap the goddesses' souls, Eidolon must believe that one of her bloodline, one who manifests that same specific type of soul ability, will be able to release the goddesses."

He's right. Goddess above, he's right. None of the queens he killed must've had the right version of soul manipulation. Is that why Eidolon killed them? I squeeze my eyes shut. The answer is as clear as a cloudless, windless day in the salt flats.

I open my eyes on a breath. "So we *were* right. That's why he never killed the remaining twin. Letting us breed is his best hope for the right version of a soul *Enfernae* to show up eventually."

"Fuck," Reven mutters, running a hand through his hair, leaving it standing in ragged spikes.

Everyone else remains silent as tension fills the room. I should also tell them how I found the page in the book—or, more specifically, *what* showed me. I know I should, but they're already dealing with so much. Does it really make a difference? How I found it doesn't change the words on the page. I glance at Reven. Maybe I'll tell just him. Later.

Vos continues to turn the pages slowly, then holds up a hand. "Found

something.”

I lean over his shoulder to see what he’s looking at, my confusion growing with every symbol on the page.

“What does it say?” Pella asks me.

“I...I don’t really understand it. Something about punishment.” I glance at him. “Does it make any sense to you?”

He’s still focused on the words, so it takes a second for him to answer. “It’s about the Devourers, I think.”

Bene makes a hissing sound as the sand of his body ruffles like wind rippling across the water of a pond.

“And the protections the goddesses put in place before they were trapped,” I note, pointing at the words on the page.

“Yes, but it’s specifically to do with Wildernyss and Tyndra. Something about...” Vos shakes his head. “The goddesses’ magic being out of control and Wildernyss creating a hole under the ocean’s waters.”

Reven peers closer, then spears Vos with a troubled look. “Do you think this is why Tyndra is sinking?”

Vos goes still, his lavender eyes flashing. “It’s dropping into the void left by Wildernyss?”

“The book doesn’t say for sure,” Reven says, but now I’m starting to wonder.

Is this why Aryd is getting hotter and hotter—because of the walls? Why Wildernyss keeps raising into the skies? Why Tyndra’s winter is taking over other dominions? Because our trapped goddesses aren’t there to control the magic?

Guesses. Speculation. But it’s yet another reason for Eidolon to want to release them. Maybe for us, too.

Vindication flares inside me. I knew, I damn well *knew*, I was right to bring us here.

Pella drops into a chair. “Great. Something else for us to worry about. And we don’t even know what it means.”

Ignorance would be worse, though. “We should focus on what we know for sure.”

Which sets us all to thinking about the amulets.

Tziah gestures, and I don’t need Vos to translate her question. *We’re sure it’s Aryd?*

“She woke up for a second in the library,” I tell them. “Bene felt her.”



Horus rises slowly and leans his fists on the table as he stares at my necklace. “Here’s the problem. If this is Aryd, Meren’s ancestresses trapped the goddesses in those amulets for a reason.”

Vos claps a hand on Horus’s shoulder, expression solemn. “You have a point. Releasing any of the goddesses, Aryd included, is a bad idea until we know why they were imprisoned in the first place. Even if we think they could fix Tyndra sinking.”

“That’s assuming my sister has the right power to release them at all. And we still don’t know how the Celestial Alignment plays into this.” Best guess is it bolstered my ancestress’s magic. I pick my necklace up, studying the white glass.

Reven shifts beside me. “I think we have a more immediate problem.”

Cain grips the chair he’s standing in front of until his knuckles turn white. “We can’t let Eidolon find the other amulets before we do.”

“If I may...” I glance up to find Horus regarding me with a quiet thoughtfulness. “Why do we think *we* are going to find the other amulets? If the king is searching for them but hasn’t found them all, how can we?”

I wish the book had told us exactly where they were. Sadly, my fate has proven to be not the easy road but the rocky one.

“We have to at least try. Based on this”—I point to the line on the page—“I think it’s easiest to start with the kings and queens of the other dominions. This says each of the ancient sovereigns took their own goddess’s amulet with them. Maybe, like mine, they’ve passed them down through the generations, either without knowing what they had or keeping them secret from their people.”

“Great,” Cain mutters, pushing away from the chair hard enough that it clatters against the table.

“What’s the plan?” Pella shoots at me. “Knock on the front door and ask politely if they have an amulet that looks like yours and happens to contain their dominion’s lost goddess?”

Something like that, actually. “I’m open to other ideas. Do *you* have any?”

She snaps her mouth shut.

I look around at the others. No one speaks.

“We do have one thing on our side,” I point out. “They will welcome a woman they think is the Queen of Aryd coming to visit.” Looking like the queen has to be good for something.

More grim silence. This is going so well.

“Which means it has to be me.” I know I’m stating the obvious, but just in case... “None of you would be deemed worthy. Guards would stop you and turn you right around. Sneaking in and out will take too long because we don’t know where or how the amulets might be hidden.” I look from one face to the next. I need to be sure they understand. “We don’t want to be making enemies of other dominions right now. We need to go directly to who might know, and not behind their backs.”

Cain’s hands go to his hips, his mouth a grim slash. “It’s too dangerous. Eidolon might catch on and catch you again. Or the other rulers might have their own agendas, or already be his allies.”

It’s the only path I see. I touch the ring on my finger. “Tabra’s sick. It has to be me.”

“Hells,” Vos mutters. He gives a small cough, and Tziah frowns at the sound. Which he pretends not to see. “I can hear the funeral bells ringing now.”

## Into the Night

I blink slowly awake in the dead of night, with no idea what woke me beyond the fact that I'm currently a human lump of ice under the animal pelts someone scrounged up for us to sleep with. We're all crowded into one of the rooms up in the trees not burned down. As usual, I'm in a ball on my side, facing the door. In the past, my back would be to a wall or to Cain. Here, Tziah is close by.

"There's a draft," I murmur drowsily.

No answer. I roll over, not that I can see in the dark. "Reven?" I whisper, trying not to wake the others.

No answer.

Scooting across the wood floor, I feel around. He should be there. He isn't.

I could assume he's relieving himself or checking the village and will be right back. I should. He's done that on other nights since we've been here. Bene goes with him. I know I should go back to sleep. I even roll over and close my eyes, trying to do just that.

Except he has grown quieter and quieter these last few days. Quiet for him is nothing new, but this is something else. Even Vos has been watching him carefully. Surreptitiously but carefully.

I flip back over and feel again. The pallet he made up isn't even the slightest bit warm. He's been gone a while, then. But if something was wrong, I'd feel it, wouldn't I? The shadows inside me would warn me, would feel different. Except he's been cutting me off.

Unless that's what woke me.

I frown. Nothing feels off right now. Even so, the dawning sensation of anxiety, right in the center of my chest, won't let up. The knots twist tighter with each passing second that he doesn't return.

I manage to make it ten minutes—at least, that's what it feels like—before I get up. I'm already dressed in my warmest clothes. Trying not to wake Vos, who is grumpy as a coiled cobra when his sleep is interrupted, I give Tziah a shake and quietly tell her what I'm doing. Then I put on my leather boots and a cloak and leave the room, tiptoeing carefully down the winding staircase,

half of which is sand that scuffs and crunches as I walk.

“*Where are you going?*” Bene’s voice in my head has me searching the trees. I find him perched on a high, thick branch that bends under his weight. Watching over us. He’s always watching over us. Devourers don’t sleep or feel cold. Which makes sense if I think about it. Sand probably doesn’t have sensations like that.

“Where’s Reven?” He should be with him. No one is supposed to be out alone.

“*Are you avoiding my question?*”

“No. That’s what I’m doing out here. I’m looking for Reven.”

“*He went to the clearing with the stream. I shall escort you there.*”

I’m not going to argue with him, but I don’t wait, either. He lands beside me as I get to the ground, then prowls along at my side, head swinging left and right, scanning the woods as I make my way through the deserted village. I scan the area, too.

*No voices. No voices. No creepy voices.*

It hits me that I’m silently pleading with the goddesses, only they can’t hear because they aren’t in the Allusian heavens where they should be.

Still... *Please, no voices.* I aim that thought at Aryd’s amulet. Let me just make sure Reven is okay and then go back to bed without anything happening. Is that too much to ask?

There are several paths leading to nearby clearings and glens here. An odd sort of déjà vu hits me as I move through the forest, and I huff an unamused laugh because this feels like the first night Reven brought me to the Shadowwood. I couldn’t sleep that time, either, and went wandering.

Tonight is different.

The Shadowwood is frosted over now. No glowing lanterns hang from posts around the village. Only a few souls slumber in their beds rather than three hundred. After seeing this place so alive and warm, the coldness to it now is hard to stomach. All three moons have hidden their faces, so I don’t even have their silvery light to guide my way.

But I know where I’m going.

I barely make it out of the village before a rustle disturbs the nearby underbrush. Bene prowls forward, head lowered, staring at the spot. Despite the large predator standing there, a hare the color of snow emerges. She sniffs the air, nose twitching, then tries to hop around him.

As soon as she sees me, she stops, then in what might be the most adorable

thing I've ever seen, gives me a bunny bow.

Bene snorts a sound that might be telling her to get lost or might be surprise. I'm not sure which.

*"Do animals approach you like that often?"*

I think of the sand foxes. But also, before I got trapped in the palace, there were the kirin and the death worm, and even the old she-wolf that lives in these woods. "Only in the last few months."

He grunts another nonanswer and we move along.

Thankfully, I reach the clearing without a problem, and the knots in my stomach untie a bit. This open space with a babbling brook that cuts through the center is a break in the trees, letting starlight in. At the far end stands the Sacred Tree of Tyndra, weeping sweet nectar. While not as tall as the massive red-wooded trees that make up the Shadowwood, it's still glorious, with elegant limbs that reach out from its center and broad, flat leaves that are a brilliant shade of red in the sunlight.

Also like last time, Reven is seated in what appears to be a swirling, contorting throne made of shadow, back regally straight, only without the circle of blue glowing jedite stones around him. After hearing what those gems really are, is he not using them anymore?

He must be here to absorb more shadow, reinforce his power. Does he do this every night? Maybe this is why our time here is the longest we've gone without him losing control since he got me out of the palace.

If I didn't know better, I'd relax.

A few steps closer, and I realize he's holding something in one hand. I stumble to a halt as it glints at me in the starlight. Confusion hits me first, fluttering and swirling, followed by the sting of resentment. Because I know what it is.

My glass flower.

Why is he holding the gift I gave him? He cut me off. Broke us up before we could become...us. A painful sort of hope that he's regretting that more than he's letting me see threatens to knock me over. Asking him would feel like begging for him to want me, to hurt as much as I am. My pride won't let me do that. Which also makes standing here in this place way harder than I expected it to be. Too many memories.

"You shouldn't have come." That familiar, silky voice slides through the darkness of night.

His eyes are open now, gaze trained on me.

“You can go back,” I tell Bene, who is standing at my side. “I’ll be okay.”

The Devourer gives Reven a narrow-eyed stare, then, with a snort, lumbers back toward the village. I catch Reven’s flat-lipped annoyance. He’s annoyed? Too bad.

Coming around the bend, I stop at the edge of the clearing and cross my arms in a useless gesture to either contain my feelings or protect myself from more of the same. “You’re breaking the rules, being here alone.”

“Bene knew where I was.”

“That doesn’t help if something happens.”

“I’m fine.”

I roll my eyes. “Toddlers use that kind of logic.” I pitch my tone higher like a small child is speaking. “Nothing’s happened before, so it won’t this time.”

His nostrils flare. “Are you calling me childish?”

“If the mental age fits the action—” I cut myself off. I’m picking a fight, and I know it. My frustration is not about him being out here alone. Or not directly. My problem is that I’d rather be with him. *That’s* what’s bugging me. Not that he broke the rules but that he’s completely alone. I hate that he’s alone. That he’s fighting whatever it is he’s fighting, and I can’t help him. He won’t let me.

“You have so many expressions,” he grumbles.

“I do?”

He nods. “I don’t know how you hid who you were from an entire dominion for so long.”

I huff a laugh, then brush my fingertips over the scar in my side. “I think maybe you’re cheating a little bit.”

Even through layers of clothes I feel the shadows ripple against my touch, like they’re pressing into my fingertips. Reven’s features go taut, the turquoise of his eyes turning brighter.

I want to chase that look, but... “Don’t.” I shake my head. “Don’t look at me like that unless you can mean it.” I’m helpless when he looks at me like that.

For a second, I think he’s finally going to give in, because he’s up and out of his throne, which disappears, and is across to where I’m standing in a few long strides. Except he stops in front of me, body stiff, face a mask of control.

He uses distance like a second wall, putting more of it between us, and the gut punch of my disappointment is impossible to ignore.

“I’m trying to figure out why these woods feel different,” he says.

The admission comes so out of nowhere, it takes me a second to catch up. I’m not sure if the bubble of emotion that expands in my chest is relief or growing worry. This place feels different for him, too? Wait... “Different how?”

“I don’t know. Darker. Like something is growing.”

My eyes grow wide. Is this the same as what I’ve been feeling?

“I hear voices,” he says.

I suck in a sharp breath. There’s no way that’s coincidence. “The king’s Shadows?”

“No. They don’t sound like me.”

“Like when you heard me or the Vanished calling you at night?” I ask slowly.

“Maybe. Except they’re not crying out for help. I don’t think. They sound...angry.”

“What are they angry about?”

“I don’t know. I can hear them like a buzz—like cicadas—but I can’t make out the words.”

I swallow. Hard. “I’ve heard them, too.”

He grabs me by the arm. “What?”

“I heard voices,” I admit. “Like a crowd around me talking, but I can’t make out what they’re saying. It’s only happened once.” I wince. “Oh, and the shadows turned the pages to show me that spot in the book.”

His eyes go wide, and for a second, I think he might shake me. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

I pull out of his grasp. “Why didn’t *you*?”

That has the muscle in his jaw ticking. Only when he opens his mouth, he’s back to cold and logical. “I wasn’t sure at first. It was only here and there.”

“Me, too.”

“But tonight it’s nonstop and louder.”

“It’s getting worse?” That’s different, then. I stopped hearing them days ago.

He nods. “I came out here to try to talk to them.”

Of course he did. I fling up my hands. “Damn it, Reven. What if something happened while you were out here?”

This is the moment when he’d call me on my swearing. Before. I miss it

now, when instead his jaw works as he stares at me. “I’d rather it happens away from you. If anyone is going to take the hit, it’s me.”

I fold in on myself, wrapping my arms around my waist. He’s protecting me again. Making decisions without me. Again.

I should be annoyed. I want to be furious that he’s risking himself and ignoring all my wants at the same time. Except part of me hopes that it means he cares too much. But mostly I’m...exhausted. Empty.

And scared.

I drop my head so I don’t have to look at him when I say this. It comes out quiet because I don’t have it in me for more. “I know what you’re doing—all of it—is to keep me safe. And I know you’re hurting yourself doing it. I can see that much.” I let out a soft breath. “But I really hate the ways you try to protect me, Reven.”

Without giving him a chance to respond, I spin on my heel and call for Bene as I walk away. Reven doesn’t stop me.



## Falling Apart

That buzzing of voices is what wakes me up the next morning. I jackknife on my pallet, looking around for whatever is making the noise, but nothing is there except Vos and Tziah.

I drop my head into my hands.

Seven hells. Did I dream it because Reven and I talked about it last night, or was that real?

“That was abrupt.” Vos is standing near the door to the room. “Bad dream?”

“Something like that,” I mutter. “Where are the others?”

Vos and Tziah exchange a look, and she signs something about how they already packed and went down to eat breakfast. I get busy packing my own things.

Reven is downstairs with the others at the table eating when we get there. He doesn't look at me. At least, I don't think so, because I don't look at him.

My parting shot is still hanging over me like my own personal thundercloud. Should I take it back? Apologize?

No. I meant it.

In short order, we're all fed. Yesterday, we took some time to check all the homes and shops still standing for any gear that might be handy or anything we want to take back to the other Vanished, rather than leave it all here. I even found Vida's shears. All of that stuff is already packed into heavy bags each of us gets to heft.

We load up with that as well as our own packs we came here with and our weapons—never leave home without those. I groan as Tziah helps me strap in. This is going to be a long walk out of the forest. After a quick last check around, we make our way out of our village.

Reven pauses just where the trees will block the last view and looks over his shoulder. I don't need to feel him through our scars to know that he's saying goodbye to the sanctuary he had tried to create here.

I ache, watching him.

The day we fought Eidolon, Reven plunged a knife into the king's heart. It

did nothing. Reven said to me in that moment that Eidolon had no heart to wound...because *Reven* had it.

I think he might have been right. As the last good piece of the king's soul, he's the last piece of heart that was holding on. Maybe that's why he feels everything so deeply, even when he hides the way he does.

I want to hug him. Tell him that he will return one day. This was the home he built, the safety, the community.

Damn Eidolon. Even if he has reasons—like Tyndra sinking—damn him straight to the seventh hell.

A breeze stirs against my cheek, which should be normal, except the pine needles on the trees and leaves on the bushes don't stir. One glance at Reven, though, his back still to me, and I know he felt it, too.

Bene prowls up next to me, close enough that I could lean on him. "*Something has changed in these woods.*"

My blood goes cold. If a Devourer feels it, then we really have a problem.

"We should get going." I start walking quickly, hoping everyone will pick up the pace.

We go the same way we came to get here, through the massive trees to the southeast. At the border where the woods end, we all stop and stare. Winds we barely heard in the trees are whipping across the land, blowing snow everywhere. Visibility is down to nothing.

Even so, relief is like that first sip of water when you get to a well or spring. Thank the goddesses that we made it out without incident. Not just the voices, but no soldiers, spies, or Eidolon. Plus, we have more to go on now, which is something. Maybe the fates are swinging things our way finally.

At least we don't have to be out in the weather long. Reven will shadow us to the temple. That place comes with its own issues, but Reven and I won't be the only ones to hear it or feel it.

Though...maybe he should shadow us up to the portal, just to be safe.

"Meren?" That's the first time Reven's talked to me since last night.

Why does his voice sound strange? Reedy. Maybe because of the rush of the winds?

I turn back, and every drop of blood rushes out of my head, leaving me woozy. He stands at the edge of the woods, just inside the trees, very still, gaze pinned to mine, a warning in his eyes.

And a shadow is curled around him.

Like before, when Bene attacked, the rope of darkness is thick and oily.

But it isn't coming from Reven. I think...mother goddess...it's coming from the woods. There's menace in the way it's snarling around his limbs, reminding me of the Hollow's tentacles.

I take a tentative step forward. "Reven?"

"Don't—" The word cuts off as another tendril of darkness curls around his throat and squeezes.

This isn't him. He's not doing this. I can see that much in the anger tightening his features, feel it in the spiky panic that bleeds through the break he's made in our connection.

"Tell me what to do," I beg.

He visibly swallows. "Run."

The shadows haul him into the woods so hard his arms and legs fly out in front of him as he shoots backward through the air, crashing through limbs of trees with a thunder of noise that dies away in seconds.

Just like that, he's gone.

## Risen Against

“Reven!” The scream punches from me, and I take off after him.

I only get a few yards before Cain wraps an arm around my waist and yanks me off my feet. “Damned if I’m going to let you do that.”

I turn on him like a wild thing, kicking and clawing and scratching my way out of his grasp. “We have to help him!”

I know I’m screaming the words, but I don’t care. Cain also doesn’t let go, but he does spin us so he can shove me at Vos. “Take her.”

Before I can say another word, Cain sprints into the forest in the direction Reven was taken.

“Cain!” Pella surges after him, but Horus snags her by the arm even as Hakan gets in front of her, arms held wide, a wall of imposing man between her and her brother and whatever took Reven.

I go limp in Vos’s hold. Breathing hard, I twist in his arms to stare at the woods that consumed the man who was the brightest part of my past and the man who is my everything. Even if he doesn’t want to be.

Goddess save him.

Reven is my *everything*, and I never told him that.

Instead, I told him I hated the way he protected me.

“Please,” I whisper, more to myself. Or maybe to the goddess around my neck.

The goddess...

I gasp. “Bene!”

He can do some damage, even in his current size. Plus, he can fly and get to them faster. The Devourer takes off after Reven only to have another oily tentacle of shadow whip out at him from within the trees. He circles back to land beside me. “*In this size, I cannot fight whatever that is.*”

We all stand at the edge of the woods, winds whipping at our backs and snatching at our clothes as we watch, straining for any sign. I’m too numb for the weather to even penetrate. What is going on in there?

I close my eyes and focus on the shadows inside me. Once, when Reven lost control to Eidolon’s Shadows and was buried deep inside himself, I

pulled him out through our connection. It anchors us to each other.

For the first time since I left the palace, I try to actively use that to feel him. To find him.

I press my hand to the scar in my side and slow my breathing, focusing the way I have to when I use my power over sand. The shadows inside me press against my hand like a snake twisting on itself. It gets worse when my own fear spikes, so I force myself to shove that aside.

He's fighting, I think.

Which is when I hear it. Voices. Not close by but coming from the trees. Like before, but...more. Way more. Hundreds of voices. Furious voices. Almost familiar, but I'm too terrified to wrap my head around why.

A spike of Reven's terror penetrates the nothing he's put between us, flaying me, and burning fury erupts throughout my body.

"Let him go." The words come out through clenched teeth. Guttural, commanding, and pissed. I don't know who or what I'm talking to. Reven. Eidolon's Shadows. The woods. The darkness itself.

I open my eyes, glaring at the trees. "Let. Him. *Go!*"

My scar flexes against my hand oddly, still twisting but different. Then, it suddenly eases.

In the same instant, Pella straightens. "Something changed."

I squint at the forest, searching. What changed? She's an empath, so that means emotions, but how? I open my mouth to ask—

"I'm...here." Reven's voice has us all whipping around to find him standing behind us. A swirl of shadow circling him quickly disappears, though it's difficult to tell if the winds and snow blew it away. He's bent over, hands on his knees, and shaking so hard the ice under his boots is crunching with it.

Cain is at his feet, already covered in icy flakes. Three bloodstained gouges rend through his clothes to the flesh of his chest. The hells? Did a wild animal get to him?

"Merciful goddess!" I try to run for them both.

Only Vos still has me wrapped up and doesn't let me take so much as a step.

I push against his hold. "They need help."

"Not until we know—"

Reven raises his head at that, shoulders still heaving. "It's me."

Vos doesn't let go. Flat-lipped, Reven makes the signal with his hand, one

he told the others about.

Vos doesn't say a word, but his grip on me falls away, and I'm across the icy space between us and on my knees beside Cain even faster than Pella moves. Lifting his head onto my lap, I curl over him, trying to shield him from the weather. She pulls back his rent clothing to check the wounds, a hiss escaping her lips.

I raise my head and meet Reven's gaze, my head full of a thousand questions, but I can see for myself that, beyond a few shallow-looking scratches on his arms, he is unharmed beyond being visibly exhausted.

"He hit his head on a tree, and it knocked him out," Reven says with a nod at Cain. "The wounds aren't deep. If we keep out infection, he'll live."

I drop my gaze again, smoothing Cain's hair from his forehead. "What did you go and do?"

Pella starts ripping up a cloth that Tziah pulled out of one of our packs to bind Cain's wounds.

"What happened?" Horus demands from somewhere above me.

I lift my head again to catch the pained grimace that flits across Reven's features.

"The soldiers I disappeared the night we fought in the Shadowwood—their souls are trapped in there. In the shadows. I think my presence has been waking them up."

"Wait." I want to get up, but Cain's head is still in my lap, so all I can do is straighten. "The voices you couldn't quite make out, the ones that were getting louder. Those were the soldiers? They attacked you as shadow?"

"You've been hearing goddess-damned *voices*?" Vos barks. "Not Vanished and not Eidolon but *other* voices?" He gets louder with every word.

He's right to be furious, but not just at Reven.

"I heard them, too, Vos," I say quietly.

He rounds on me with a growl of frustration. "You two are meant for each other," he snaps. "With all your secrets."

I'd feel bad, except I'm still trying to process what Reven said. The souls of the soldiers and the barbarians who attacked us are trapped. Reven disappeared them all that night. In a blink, they were gone, but we didn't know where. We assumed just...dead. But they're here? Attached to this place?

Horus positions himself closer to me, still between me and Reven. "What do you mean, you woke them up?"

Reven looks off toward the trees, which are silent and still, other than the wind blowing against them. “Best guess, my power put them there, so it woke them up, too. The woods were quiet at first but got louder the longer we stayed. It felt a lot like the—”

“Temple,” Pella murmurs beside me.

Pella, who is empathic.

“Did you feel it, too?”

She slides me a resentful glance, pausing in binding Cain’s wounds. “It felt...heavier the longer we were there. I didn’t connect it to the temple until now.”

“But if Meren can hear them, what does that mean?” Vos demands.

Reven’s gaze skitters across me, like he wants to look at me but won’t let himself. “I’m not sure.”

But I have a guess. I carry his shadows inside me.

“Whatever the reason, when Cain showed up, the darkness attacked him, too.”

Vos faces the woods in a stance that looks like he’s waiting for shadows to crawl out and come for us. “What made them stop?”

“I don’t know.”

“Meren?” Cain croaks.

On a gasp, I look down to find Cain’s eyes fluttering like he can’t make them open.

“My hero,” I whisper with a smile. I used to call him that when we were little.

“Meren?” he calls out again, more urgent this time, eyes still not open.

I frown. “I’m here.”

His head thrashes to one side. “Meren, don’t.”

I look at Pella. “What’s happening?”

She shakes her head. “I think he’s caught in a nightmare.”

“He’ll kill you!” he shouts. “The darkness is coming for us all—”

I put my hands on both sides of his face. “Cain. I’m here. Listen to my voice. It’s—”

“Watch it.” Vos snarls the words and assumes a fighting stance. So do Horus and Hakan.

I look up to see Reven gone so rigid I think he might snap at the first gust of wind.

My blood goes as cold as the Tyndran wind billowing around us. “Reven?”

“Stay away from him!” Cain shouts, an arm flinging out in his unconscious fear and accidentally smacking me across the face, hard enough that my head whips to one side and I have to catch myself with a hand on the ground.

I gasp and look back up at Reven in time to see three faces cross his features in rapid succession—all furious and snarling. His gaze narrows on me, and he takes a halting step closer. Except it’s like he’s being held back, forcing himself forward against an unseeable thing. Is Reven fighting the Shadows?

That’s what it looks like. Shackles.

He manages another agonizing step forward, and Horus jumps in his way. “I can’t let you near her—”

In a wisp of misty shadow, Reven disappears only to reappear behind Horus in a crouch, one foot out as he sweeps Horus’s legs out from under him with a spinning maneuver.

Horus hasn’t even hit the ground when Reven disappears in another wisp of lingering shadow just before a blast of lightning torches the spot where he’d been.

On a gasp, we all look around, Horus rushing back to his feet. Our heads might as well be on swivels as we search for Reven, but he’s gone. Bene gives a low warning growl, the sand at the back of his neck raising like hackles on a wolf.

“Where is he?” I whisper.

Vos steps closer, a hand on my shoulder. “I won’t let him—”

Reven appears in front of us and lands a punch to Vos’s face hard enough that I hear the crack of bone. Then he’s gone, only fading shadow where he stood.

“Stop him!” Vos shouts.

A cloud of shadow suddenly seems to bubble up from the very ground. Moving impossibly fast, it surrounds us in a circle of undulating blackness so thick the winds that have been snatching at us all this time stop completely.

Bene takes off only for a whip of shadow to lash out, catching him by a hind leg. He dangles in the air like a fish on a hook.

What comes next happens so fast, I can hardly track the action. Hakan blasts another bolt at the shadow, but the bolt sizzles around the circle of it, lighting it up in flashes from the inside like lightning in a rolling thunderstorm. As the last flash of light dies, another whip of shadow shoots out and drags both Hakan and Horus into the cloud of darkness before



spitting them back out in an unconscious heap. Vos blasts ice into the heart of the shadow only for the ice to go straight up before it touches the darkness, like it's hit a wall. Then a fist of shadow punches through the ice to take him by the throat and throw him into the sky.

“Bene!” I yell.

Maybe Hakan's lightning cut him loose. He shoots off in chase of Vos.

In another blink of wispy shadow, Reven appears again, this time crouched directly in front of me—too fast for anyone to stop him.

Pella throws herself over Cain's body. “Don't!” she yells and grabs for Reven. To what? Try to use her powers to force him to calm?

Between the faces still cycling across his features, I catch glimpses of Reven. He's still in there, thank the goddesses. Maybe I can get to him. Pull him out. I've done it before.

When he reaches for me, I don't scramble away.

Gaze locked with mine, he touches a single finger to my cheek where Cain struck me. I feel more than see the instant he regains control. The Shadows stop—no more faces, no more struggle. The cloud of darkness surrounding us sucks back inside him, leaving just us. Me and Reven.

A squeak comes out of me that I think is relief, or disbelief, or maybe shock.

A terrible fear flashes in his eyes a second before he lowers his gaze. Then Reven takes a shuddering breath as he forces himself shakily to his feet, then inches slowly back.

All the  
Problems

“What the hells was *that*, Reven?” Pella demands, still hovering protectively over Cain, who is back to silently out cold.

Horus groans, lifting to his elbow right as Hakan gets to his feet and Bene arrives with Vos dangling from one talon. They aren’t trying to stop Reven anymore. They see it, too, that he’s fully in control.

For now.

Reven’s own disbelief disappears behind that wall of unemotional nothing he’s perfected so well. He looks away from me. “I don’t know.”

Vos strides across the ice to get right in his face, not touching but pissed. “No, you don’t get to say you don’t know. What the blazes was that?”

“The Shadows”—Reven manages to look even grimmer—“didn’t like what Cain was shouting.”

I frown. That’s it? They didn’t like someone telling me to stay away from Reven?

Before we fought the king, he once told me that Eidolon’s Shadows wanted me. Craved me, he thought.

Reven’s expression goes dark. His expression, not the Shadows’. “And they—no, we—*hated* that he struck her.”

Oh. Well...okay.

I clear my throat and fiddle with one of the cloths laying discarded beside Cain. Did he touch me to ensure—for himself and the Shadows—that I was okay? Is that what calmed them?

Horus moves closer to where I sit, practically hovering over me. “Maybe you shouldn’t be anywhere near Meren while you don’t know what’s happening to you. Go back to the zariphate while we go to Wildernyss.”

I shoot him a glare. No way am I sending Reven off alone. “We’re bonded by shadow. It’s too late to separate us.”

Every person around us goes dead still.

Which is when it hits me what I’ve said, what I’ve admitted. Horus, Vos, and Tziah all knew that Reven had healed me with a shadow rite after the

escape from the soldiers in the temple, but they weren't in the room to witness it. They don't know how it worked or that a piece of Reven is what is holding my insides together. I clear my throat. "It's probably why I could hear them, too. The shadows in my scar."

"You are a deep well of secrets, aren't you?" Vos murmurs.

Screw apologizing again. "I'm doing my best here."

Reven says nothing.

Maybe while he's still on edge I shouldn't be near Cain. Carefully, I lay his head on someone's pack that was dropped next to me in the middle of everything, before standing and moving well away from him. "Can we just focus on getting out of here?"

"Only if he's not going to lose his shit again."

Reven doesn't even look at me...he looks at Pella. "Keep Cain silent and away from me...and Meren."

Typically, I'd be pissed off he's making decisions for me, but I'm not sure pulling Reven back would be as easy a second time, and he's clearly still on edge.

After a moment, she gives a sharp nod, then goes back to binding his wounds.

"What's the plan?" Horus asks.

Right. Reven can't shadow us now. It's too dangerous to even attempt it. So how are we going to get to the portal? "Bene, if you were your true size, could you fly us?"

*"Yes. However, I require sand."*

"I could probably pull enough from the ground in the Shadowwood, since we don't need the stuff for the stairs anymore." It will take a while to get more, but with both me and Bene working at it, maybe not as long?

"That means going back into the woods," Horus points out. "Is that really a good idea now that the darkness is attacking people?"

"Maybe it won't attack everyone, just Reven? Or"—I risk a glance at Cain—"someone trying to help Reven?"

Tziah jumps to her feet and runs at the forest before anyone can stop her. As soon as she's within about twenty feet of the trees, that tar-like shadow whips out at her. In an impressive move, she ducks, then rolls backward into a crouch.

"Guess that answers that," Pella mutters.

The shadow slowly withdraws. Tziah backs away carefully until it's safe to

turn around and make her way back to us. Vos moves to intercept her. I can't see his face, but based on Tziah's contrite expression, I'm guessing he's not happy with her little maneuver.

Right. So no getting sand from the Shadowwood. I pull my power forward and reach for the sand in the ground beneath us. But I can't, because even the ground is too hard.

I feel an epic screaming fit coming on. Not that I'll give in to it, but just once, can something we try not be one step forward and a hundred steps back? I'd even been congratulating myself that we'd completed this trip to the Shadowwood safely.

I patted my own back too soon. Clearly.

I look at Bene. "I can't reach it. Can you?"

The Devourer gives a full-body shake. "*It is solid, unmovable.*"

"What about the channel?" Vos asks.

The narrow waters that separate Little Tyndra from the mainland? "Maybe. I was able to work our cages out of the ground when Eidolon's soldiers had us at the temples."

Vos nods. "And you made glass spikes easily enough there when we were escaping. The waters must keep it from getting as cold there."

Pella's brows shoot up. I guess no one shared that story with her. She'd probably love knowing that I managed to impale myself in the process.

I'm focused on Bene, though. "It's loose under the water. How long would it take you to get there and back?"

He doesn't have to get all the way to the twin temples, just to the channel that separates Little Tyndra from the mainland.

*"The return trip shall require roughly a quarter of a day. I am faster in my larger size. However, traveling to the waters in the size I am currently will involve a full day, perhaps more. Especially if these winds keep up. Then another quarter day to the temple."*

I tell the others.

"Do we even want to get to the temple?" Pella asks.

We all look at her, and she holds up both hands. "If it's gotten as bad as the woods now that whatever is...errr...awake..."

Son of a viper. "I can try a portal again."

Not a lot of hope there, given my previous failures, but I did make the sand stairs easily enough. Maybe my powers are strengthening slowly?

"Okay, here's the plan." Vos clasps his gloved hands behind his back.

“Forget the temples. We go by foot north toward Wildernyss. When Bene finds us, Meren can use some of his sand to try the portal thing. If that doesn’t work, Bene flies us to Wildernyss.”

*“I cannot fly that high,”* Bene says. *“I do not know if it is the goddesses’ magic or my own, but too high and my sand falls apart.”*

I groan out loud.

“What?” Vos demands. I tell them.

Vos looks up to the skies, and his shoulders rise and fall in what is an obvious attempt not to yell. Guess I’m not the only one with that urge. “Fine,” he says, lowering his head. “Bene gets us to the one working bridge between Wildernyss and Tyndra, and we go up that way.”

He means the flimsy ladder that is an excuse for a bridge. The sister to the one the Hollow destroyed while Reven and I were still on it.

Hells no. I’d rather trade my soul than try that again. If that isn’t incentive to make my portal work...

“All agreed?” Vos asks.

We nod.

“This is really going to suck,” Pella mutters beside me.

I look off over the rolling fields obliterated by ice and snow and wind that’s already beating at us, and the cold finally penetrates enough to send a full-body shiver racking through me. We’re still leagues away. At the very least, we have a day or more of travel—on foot, in this weather, with Cain injured, and with Reven dealing with whatever he’s dealing with.

Hells.

Bene looks to me, almost as if asking permission. Or maybe trying to feel his goddess, who hangs around my neck.

“Go,” I tell him.

He spreads his wings and takes off into the sky, tossing about like a falling leaf until he disappears in the swirl of snow-filled air.

This is going to be rough.

## Across the Ice

We've been going for three days, and there's been no sight of Bene. No one has voiced their worry, but it's longer than he told us it should take. I'm not the only one checking the skies frequently.

I am putting one foot in front of the other, hunched over, numb not only in my body but my soul. At least the wind has stopped blowing for a second, leaving a pristine but blinding landscape of rolling snow- and ice-covered hills that reflect the sunlight. Reven and Vos assure us that Little Tyndra is easy terrain to navigate, that the mainland with mountains and crevasses and sheer drops would be much harder, so at least we're not there.

I'm not sure I'm in a position to appreciate the difference. Why couldn't we have gotten ourselves stuck walking through, I don't know, *any* other dominion but this one?

My cheeks are chapped, my lips cracked, and every part of me is so cold, I'm a royal block of ice. I don't think I've stopped full-body shivering once, despite the brutal pace we've been keeping.

Vos calls a halt. "Let's stop here."

I grunt with relief, because I'm not sure I can force my stump feet—which is what they feel like even encased in furred boots—to take another step. Immediately, we all drop our packs. While lugging them around has been awful, thank the goddesses that we brought all our gear with us. It has come in handier than expected, way sooner than expected.

Exhaustion drags at us all as we start the now familiar process of setting up our small camp. Pella and Tziah tend to Cain, who has woken only once or twice for short periods and is still strapped to the pallet we trussed up for him. With every plodding step, each of us has been swapping out who is doing the dragging.

The rest of us get started on making camp. Reven continues doing what he's been doing for weeks now—pretending like I don't exist. Except now there's something else. I've caught a confused glance or two directed my way. I get the sense that he's studying me...or maybe waiting. For what, I'm not sure.

Ignoring him right back—I am so not in the headspace to deal with my dying romance—I get busy with helping make camp. Vos is the busiest, using his power to create a small structure made of ice. The orange of his Hylorae light is darker than my soft yellowy-amber and makes me feel like it should be warm to stand beside, like a fire. It's not. He forms our shelter brick by slow brick. We all pack into it at night, rotating who is sleeping on the outskirts of the group so we can each have time in the middle with body heat to thaw enough and get halfway decent sleep.

I grab the small trowel and leather satchel we use to carry water and move away from where we've been walking to scrape clean snow into the satchel. Only the darn thing isn't penetrating and keeps bouncing and slipping off the solid ice.

I glare at it. "Just once," I mutter at the ground. "Just once can you work with me?"

I hate this blasted trowel and the blasted ice.

"Here."

Vos shows up beside me, holds his thickly gloved hand over the ground, and the ice I'm chipping at turns to softer snow. He can't get much deeper than that. We tried the first time we stopped, hoping he could thaw enough frozen ground underneath the ice so I could pull up sand. It didn't work.

I blow out a breath. "Thanks."

With a nod, he moves off to finish our shelter.

As soon as I have enough, I put it to melt by the fire Hakan is already building—lightning, it turns out, is very handy to light fires.

I grab a second satchel, return to the same spot, drop to my knees, and start scraping more. It's already freezing up again.

I barely notice when Horus drops to his knees beside me to do the same. "Everything okay?" He glances over one shoulder as he asks.

He's been checking in with me every day. With Cain and Pella, too, I've noticed. The Arydians of our group are struggling the hardest here, but Horus, as one of the Vanished, spent more time in Tyndra than we did. "I really hate ice," I grumble.

Hopefully, Bene shows up soon and this will all be a bad memory.

"Yeah," he agrees.

"Horus..." Maybe I shouldn't say this out loud.

He glances over his shoulder again. So do I. None of the others are near us. He lifts his thinning brows at me in question.

“Are we doing the right thing, going after the amulets?”

I trust the others to tell me the truth. Hells, if I want it unvarnished, I’d ask Pella. But Horus is the oldest of our group. He’s lived a longer life, had experiences I couldn’t even begin to guess at, and he’s a Wanderer. I value his advice. He searches my face for a second, then goes back to scraping. “Looking back, the biggest mistake I made when I tried to defend my sister was not acting sooner.”

I quietly study the side of his face. He doesn’t talk about this, except the one time he mentioned it to me when we met. “Sooner?”

“I should have taken her and run the second I knew what was happening.”

I shake my head. “Wanderers don’t leave their zariphates.” There is safety and power in numbers.

“I know. Which is why I didn’t. Everyone I asked for advice told me to just let it be, not speak up. That this was how things worked. But if I had gotten her away from there, maybe today—” He cuts himself off and gives an extra hard scrape to the ice. “If I could go back, I’d do what *I* thought was right. Even if it meant going against every piece of advice I received from well-meaning people I trusted.”

We both keep scraping while I think about that.

“What I’m saying, is... Do you see any other way?”

“No.”

“Then you’re doing the right—”

He suddenly looks over my head, eyes turning sharp. Then, with no warning, lunges for me, tackling me to the ground hard enough that I hit the back of my head on the ice with a resounding *thwack* and a starburst of pain. He grunts once as something leaps over us.

A yell goes up from the others, and before he can get off me or I can look around, the unmistakable *shoop* of loosed arrows fills the air. That noise is drowned out by a rumbling roar.

A familiar roar.

A massive shadow passes overhead for a heartbeat. Through Horus’s arms, I can only see a sliver of what’s on the ground, but through that sliver I see Bene’s full-size talons land on a large, white-furred creature. Then a snap of his horrendous jaws, and he rips the thing in two, blood spraying across the ice.

Followed by silence.

“Horus?” Reven’s voice is razor thin. And close.



“She’s good.” Horus raises his head from where he has me covered, and I tip my head back, looking upside down at Reven, who is practically vibrating with rage. He’s also visibly breathing hard, and I think I see the ripple of another face over his.

“Reven?”

He looks down at me, then swallows. “I’ve got it.”

“You sure about that?”

He looks away, jaw tight, then gives me the signal before walking off.

“What was that?” I push Horus up off me. Then stare, jaw flapping open, at what’s left of the white-furred creature. The top half. That’s all that’s left. The animal looks like something between a bear and a cat with long canine teeth that protrude from its lips. Its paws are bigger than my head, with nasty-looking claws that glitter almost like diamonds. Arrows riddle the remains laying in a growing pool of blood, stark red against the ice. Vos and Pella, meanwhile, are putting away their telescoping bows, an inventive Wanderer weapon that is easier to travel with.

“It’s a krov,” Vos says. “A blood bear. Deadly and carnivorous.”

“*I apologize,*” Bene sounds in my head. “*I think I scared it right to you.*”

“Horus, did it touch you?” I’m still sitting on the ground, but I tug at him to check his back. I hiss at the sight of tears in his thick coat where the blood bear’s claws struck. Only, when he takes the coat off, we find no blood. The thickness of the fur lining and leather protected his skin.

I throw my arms around his neck. “Don’t ever do that again.”

He remains stiff against me, but he doesn’t push me away. “You’re my sovereign,” he says simply.

“That’s debatable.”

“Not to me.”

“Well, it’s debatable enough not to be worth your life.”

He huffs a laugh and gives me a quick hug back before letting go only to lean down, eye to eye. “It is to me.”

I peer after him as he gets up and moves toward the dead creature and studies it. “At least we can eat well tonight.”

Getting to my feet, I stand next to Reven, surprised when he doesn’t immediately put distance between us. Even though he’s assured us that, since leaving the Shadowwood, he hasn’t heard the voices anymore, he still hasn’t come within ten feet of me, even in our shelter. Not since he was attacked.

“You sure you’re okay?” he asks softly.

“Your dominion is trying to kill me.”

He makes a sound that might be a scoff or maybe a laugh. “I felt the same way about yours.”

That’s the closest I’ve heard to humor from him—at something I said, at least—in a while, and that pokes at the open wound that is us. I can’t bear to look at him, so I watch Horus. “No one should die for me.”

I don’t realize I said that out loud until Reven says in a voice gone harshly gruff, “Yes...they should.”

What?

I whip my head around to stare at him, but his face gives nothing away. “Bene’s here.”

I get what he’s saying. Time to make a portal...if I can.

## The Queen's Tower

“Holy hells, I can’t believe you did it,” Pella mumbles from behind me.

Holy hells, I can’t believe I did, either. I made a portal. All it took was five failed attempts first.

The thing isn’t pretty, but it’s better than the first one I made in the Shadowwood. A little less thick, although, like that previous attempt, it still looks like a waterfall frozen in time, weeping downward. Fewer bubbles and cracks, at least.

Progress.

I did it on my own, even, given that my amulet is still cold and silent under my clothes. The block of glass I made from sand Bene discarded is thick and rectangular so it can stand on its own. It’s not perfect, that’s for sure, with bubbles and one side higher than the other, but it hasn’t shattered yet.

Maybe it’s like how it happened with the glass flowers I make. It just took more practice, and the goddess’s help before only hurried the process along a bit? Or maybe I needed incentive, and days of living in this frozen wasteland—plus avoiding both flying on Bene’s back and climbing that ladder—was all I needed.

“Nobody breathe on it or touch it.” Who knows how long it’ll hold together? The sooner we’re through, the better. “Bene,” I say over my shoulder. “Better shrink the rest of the way down for this. Let’s be quick.”

“Cain, can you walk with help?” Vos asks.

Cain squirms against the bonds holding him safely to the pallet. “Get me out of this thing, and let’s find out.”

While Pella and Tziah do that, Bene shrinks back down to his smallest raven size and shape, leaving a pile of sand beside Vos’s half-finished shelter. The others gather the bags of gear.

“Ready?” I get a bunch of nods, including one from a green-looking Cain propped up between Pella and Horus. “Right.” I face my creation. “Prayers probably aren’t a bad idea.”

I send my own to the goddess so close to me. *Please let this work.*

I pull off my thick gloves and, hands glowing and skin buzzing with

power, place my palm against the glass I made.

It does nothing except reflect a dim version of my yellow light out the back side.

“Come on,” I mutter under my breath. Okay, I plead.

I picture in my mind the portal and the room we want to go to. I concentrate so hard my eyes start to ache with it.

“Meren?” Vos comes up beside me. “Don’t exhaust yourself. If it doesn’t work, it doesn’t.”

“Not helping.”

He holds up both hands but doesn’t say more.

I am forcibly willing my power into the glass block. “Come on, damn it. Just a little help—”

Suddenly, there’s a ripple. Instead of changing all at once, first the center goes opaque. That spreads out gradually to the corners. Then the center turns clear, and that moves out to the corners, too, until, finally, it’s showing us a room on the other side.

Stone walls are all that are visible. No adornments. Nothing to tell you where you are beyond the type of stone used—gray granite from the Devotion Mountains of Wildernyss, where the Queen’s Tower is hidden. Simple and plain.

And secret.

Not the tower—though I’d only heard rumors of it before all this—but the portal. Only Aryd has more than one portal. The other dominions have one a piece. Or so we thought.

“That’s...a letdown,” Vos says to no one in particular.

“Hurry,” I urge the others in a tight voice.

I’m the last through, cutting off the portal behind me.

No alarm goes off as we stand here. No shouts. Not that there were any last time Reven and I came through this portal when he kidnapped me. That said, last time, the queen and her entourage were in Aryd for Tabra’s coronation, which left this place basically abandoned.

“If this goes wrong,” Reven says, “go through the portal to Yolyn Zag and find the zariphate.”

A shout rings out somewhere down a hallway, followed by another. And then the unmistakable sound of running. Something triggered this place, and that something is probably us.

“Maybe we should go back through now?” Pella suggests.

“No.” I position myself closest to the door and beckon Reven to come stand beside me. “We have a plan. Let’s stick to it.”

The plan is for me to act the part of Tabra and Reven the part of Eidolon and ask for an audience with Queen Istrella. We chose her of all the sovereigns because she’s Tabra’s goddessmother.

By the time the first guard shows his face in the wide doorway leading out of the room, armed and ready to fight, we are ready with me at the front, my hand lightly on Reven’s arm, which twitches under my touch. The others are all arranged behind us in order of social rank.

The guards’ jaws drop, and they glance at each other. Clearly, I’m recognized. Granted, my clothes are going to look strange, but changing in the raging cold in Tyndra was not an option, so too bad.

I lift my chin. “I’m here to speak with Queen Istrella.”

The guard in charge, based on his insignia, gives me a doubtful look. “We were not informed of any visit, and no one comes this way. How do we know —”

“Stand down,” a soft voice commands from somewhere along the hallway behind him.

Immediately every guard moves to the side, weapons lowered, standing at attention.

A swish of sound and the brush of light steps grows nearer until the queen herself appears in the doorway.

Istrella.

In her middle years, the tall and willowy ruler is a statuesquely beautiful woman. Her intricately braided, red-gold hair is so long the tips of it sweep the floor. Her dress clings to her body from the top of the high-collared neck down to her knees but flares out around her calves. The garment is made of a lush velvet in shades of brown at the bottom that turn to a deep russet at the top. Intricate needlework in sparkling golden and bronze thread makes me think of a drawing from Wildernyss of a majestic tree in autumn. Her hands are tucked inside long, elegant sleeves, the material of which brushes the ground like falling leaves.

A walking tapestry.

The queen’s soft, doe-brown gaze sweeps over us. She takes in our clothes but lingers longest on my face. We’ve met only once, personally, though she’s known Tabra all her life. This is Tabra’s goddessmother, for Allusian’s sake. Then she moves on to Reven, gaze sharper, more intent. No doubt at the

way the “king” suddenly looks younger. She also pauses on Vos, who, as Eidolon’s one-time general, has met her. Which is why he’s standing behind Reven and directly to his right.

“Queen Tabra,” Istrella finally says in a voice that is sweet as honey. “You are always welcome in my home.”

Um...seriously? “Are you not surprised to see us here?”

She slides a discerning glance toward Reven, who stares back unmoved. “After an unknown use of my portal a few months ago, we had it warded to alert us of any intruders. I’m relieved that this time it’s you.”

*Oh.* Does she know that was me and Reven last time, too? Should I mention it? Or would that cause some trust issues we don’t need? “I need to speak with you in private.”

She doesn’t seem surprised by that, either. Wary, maybe. Assessing. It’s hard to read her.

Then she looks directly at Reven. “I will speak to Queen Tabra alone.”

Without Eidolon, who she has to believe Reven is at this point? That’s bold.

Reven’s arm tightens under my fingertips. “Not without—”

I let go and walk toward the queen. “We are uninvited guests, my king. I think we can humor Istrella.”

Given the way the queen’s eyes widen, I’m guessing Reven is now glaring a hole into the back of my head. The shadows in my scar tug like he wants to pull me back.

But he doesn’t. “As you wish, my queen,” he murmurs behind me.

I’m not sure if he’s talking to me or her.

Either way, Istrella nods, then turns to her guards. “We won’t be long. Get the healer for the injured man and make them as comfortable as you can, but keep them all together until I order otherwise.”

I follow Istrella out of the room, down a level, then along a narrow, curving hallway to a wide set of wooden doors. She ushers me inside, and I pause as I take in what appears to be her private chambers, this room clearly a living space for her.

She nods for me to take a seat in a chair carved of some dark, sturdy wood in an X configuration that makes up both the legs and the back with a cushioned seat intricately embroidered with a scene of a kirin surrounded by mountains and forest—Trysolde and Istrella’s royal crest. I wonder if it’s based on the kirin I saw outside this tower the first time I came through here.

Grateful that she's seating me by the roaring fireplace, I drop down and can't not hold my hands out to the crackling flames. I'm still basically a block of ice after Tyndra.

Queen Istrella moves to stand before me. "King Eidolon—" Her gaze flickers to the now closed door at my back, almost as if she expects him to show up at the sound of his name. "Has put it out that you were stolen from the palace...by the Shadowraith who has been taking people from all the dominions."

I should have known.

I look her directly in the eyes. "If stolen means that Shadowraith helped me escape the tyrant holding me hostage, then yes."

Given how well she's handled everything so far, I'm taken aback when she sinks shakily to sit onto the matching chair across from me. "I *knew* it," she whispers through lips gone pale and pinched.

At my questioning stare, she winces delicately. "I was worried when we were there for your coronation and wedding celebration. I wondered if I should warn you."

"About marrying Eidolon?"

She nods slowly, lifting her gaze to sweep over me as if checking for physical signs that I was harmed. "I think you had better tell me everything."

My only hesitation is that I don't know this woman. Not really. Grandmother used to say that Istrella was "quiet," which was Grandmother for "weak." Queens aren't allowed to be that.

Except I don't see weakness in the woman across from me, and she worried if she should warn me about Eidolon. Trust has to start somewhere, and what I need to ask her for... That is going to take trust. A lot of it. And fast.

I take a deep breath. "I am not Queen Tabra," I say, my words dropping into the quiet between us like rocks disturbing the still waters of a pond. "I am her twin sister, Princess Mereneith."

## Not a Fairy Tale

I tell Istrella what she needs to know. Not everything but enough.

As soon as I finish, she sends for the guards to release my people. I'm in the middle of answering her questions about the amulets when Vos, Horus with Bene on his shoulder, and Hakan walk in behind Reven.

The queen nods at each as they are introduced. She pauses on Vos again, though. "I wondered what happened to you."

Vos drops into the chair she'd offered. At first, I think maybe he's not feeling well, but then he sits forward, both elbows propped on his knees. "Not much, as you can see."

"Where are the others?" I ask.

"The queen's personal physician met us at the portal and has taken Cain to her chambers," Horus says. "Pella and Tziah went with him."

Relief has me taking a small, silent breath. At least there's that.

Bene chooses that moment to fly from where he is perched on Horus's shoulder to the back of my chair. I catch the way Istrella is studying him, and I don't blame her. She's close enough to be able to tell he's not a real raven.

"Domina," I say, "I would like to introduce you to Bene. He is the consort of the Goddess Aryd." She startles at that, but I'm not finished. "And the Devourer that you would know as the Elimination."

The queen goes up in my estimation when her only reaction is to stare, first at me, then at Bene, in a calm, assessing way. She's heard Reven's story already and knows what he is, who he is. As if she'd been through enough in her life that a shadowman shed from an ageless, rotten king wasn't going to shake her, Istrella had taken that surprisingly in stride.

But it's not every day you encounter a Devourer and live.

She studies him. "I thought he'd be bigger."

He fluffs his sandy feathers. "*I like this queen. She is honest and calm.*"

"He's travel size at the moment," I say.

"*I dislike that description.*"

Istrella takes all this in with only a slight lift of her brows. "It seems you have much more to tell me."



At her urging, Horus and Hakan sit. Reven, however, goes to a window on the other side of the room, his back to us. To me, so I can't see his face. She spares him a glance but leaves it alone. Then she starts to ask questions. Even as we answer her, I wonder if Queen Istrella believes a single word—even with the book we can show her, and my amulet, and Bene as proof.

Eventually, she runs out of things to ask.

We wait for her to say something. Anything. But she continues to sit with her back straight as an arrow, hands folded within the material of her sleeves on her lap. She's quiet so long, I glance at the others. Vos shrugs, but Horus gives me an encouraging nod.

"Oh dear," the queen sort of sighs to herself.

Oh dear and off with our heads? Oh dear and she'll help us? I'm not fluent in that kind of oh dear.

She glances down, fluffing her sleeves with a small lift of her arms, then lifts her gaze. "I, too, have a story to share."

I blink. At least twice. An uneasy whisper of the shadows within my scar have me glancing to Reven, but his back is to the room still. Lately I only feel him like that when his control is slipping. Arms crossed, he's staring out the window. He doesn't *look* like he's struggling.

I gesture for Istrella to continue.

"My king and I are bondmates." Her smile is soft, wistful, and pained.

A sound of surprise squeaks out of me before I can stop it. Soul binding is serious magic. Rarely done. A vow and ritual well beyond simple marriage. One reserved for two people who trust each other implicitly. More than that, two people who don't just want to be together but who *have* to. Through the rest of eternity. From this life into Allusian, the hells, or the next life.

A compulsion. Fate. No one is entirely sure.

"We met as children. I've adored him all my life. And we were happy. Blissful. He loved my hair so much, I promised never to cut it." She lifts her arm like she might touch a lock but drops it back into her lap and clears her throat. "Years ago now, my king lost his dear mother in a sudden hunting accident. In his grief, Trysolde was befriended by Eidolon, who encouraged him to go to the burning lands." She glances at me. "I believe you call it the Land of Eternal Death."

There are two of us in the room from Aryd, and Horus and I both exchange a wary look. Our Sacred Tree, which never stops burning, sits at the top of the entrance of Muertum Canyon, which borders those lands. Guards them.

Not much is known beyond those lands being a gateway to souls in the afterlife.

The queen continues. “Trysolde went there seeking to commune with his mother’s soul, but he returned to me days later in a...state. He said a spirit in those lands told him where to find an amulet that could cure his sadness.”

Every single one of us sits forward at this, and Reven, still at the window, stiffens, then slowly turns.

The queen visibly has to gather herself. “Trysolde started digging throughout the Zirium Groves for this trinket.”

“Did he find it?” Reven demands, his voice missing its usual velvet.

Istrella nods, but a shaft of worry slices through my hope because her expression goes flat-lipped and desolate. “It’s similar to Meren’s, though his is made of a black glass. After he found it...he started to change.”

Change? That sounds ominous. And familiar. I’m thinking of Tabra. “How?”

“He started talking to it.”

Talking to it? I meet Reven’s hard gaze over Istrella’s head.

“Small ways at first,” Istrella says. “But then his thoughts, his words, turned darker, and he grew...” She shakes her head. “Distant. Not himself.”

She swallows, and I have a feeling what comes next is worse.

She looks directly at me. “I am Hylorae, like you. I am able to shapeshift into a tree.”

A tree. Seems pretty innocuous to me.

“Over the years,” she continues, “as my powers have grown, I have to become this tree for longer and longer each year. It’s how I feed. How I sustain myself.”

I share another glance with Reven. What does this have to do with the amulets?

“Trysolde—” Her voice breaks, and she takes a moment to collect herself. “One spring, he found me in that form, and he...” Istrella shudders, her mouth working as though she’s forming the words, but the sounds just won’t come out. “His power is over metal. He can form it into any shape he wants.”

Rejection crawls through me. Please tell me he didn’t—

“In what I swear to the mother goddess was a trance, he took an axe to me. I shifted back to human before he could kill me, and my guards eventually stopped him, but not before—” She holds her arms up and allows the long, billowy sleeves to slide back.

I feel myself blanch. Who wouldn't?

Goddess above. Trysolde cut off his queen's hands. His *bondmate's* hands. She's had her arms hidden in her long sleeves this entire time, so I didn't see sooner.

Istrella lowers them—skin stretched across the ends like silk pulled too thin—into her lap. “When he realized what he had done, he was *horrified*. He begged me to forgive him, but I...” She presses her lips together like she's stopping the words of anger and bone-deep disappointment. “I couldn't trust him after that, so I built my tower.”

*This* is why she built the tower? To get away from her bondmate? That's a lot bigger than the usual marital issues.

“What happened to his amulet?” Vos asks gently.

The queen addresses him directly. “I don't know. He sent a missive saying he would bury it where he'd first found it, begging me to come back. And I considered his request. However, he's continued to change since then, becoming nothing of the man I once knew. These days, he only shares his thoughts with Eidolon.”

I could see it. In Aryd, when I was trapped and pretending and they were there to celebrate my sister's coronation and wedding. I could see then that something wasn't right with the king.

I look directly at Reven, who is already staring back at me with resignation in his eyes, because he knows what this means. We have to get that amulet away from Trysolde if he still has it.

“Where is the king now?” Reven asks.

I know by the way Istrella lowers her gaze that it's not good. “He is with Eidolon...” She glances at me. “In Aryd.”

Son of a bitch. We can't go there. We're not ready to face Eidolon. And what if he called for Trysolde because he learned of the amulet and now he has it?

“My king should return in two days,” she adds.

Two days. Two more days when we already spent so many in Tyndra. Although Cain needs time to heal, I hate waiting like this. The sands of time are moving faster through the hourglass than I can keep up with.

Reven takes the decision out of my hands. “You should stay here in your tower when we go to him,” he tells Istrella. “You shouldn't suffer more because of us.”

She lowers her gaze to her lap, seeming to inspect her arms with their

missing hands, but nods, and I can see the weight of what she's doing—sending us to deal with her bondmate—might crush her, because she suddenly appears small and brittle when she's anything but.

Something—the goddess in the amulet, I have to assume now—made Istrella's lover do that to her. It turned him into something he's not—poisoned his soul, or whatever is happening to him.

Exactly like my sister.

*Oh, Tabra.*

If the goddesses are as dangerous as all that, then the previous twin queens of Aryd had good reason to trap them. Except mine hasn't changed me. If anything, she's helped me. And Eidolon's amulet did nothing to me when I wore that one.

At least, not that I could tell.

Or I've got this all wrong, and something else is at play here that we can't see yet.

After we're done with the queen, her servants escort us to our rooms. I'm in mine maybe ten minutes before there's a knock at the door.

I swing it open and blink. Because it's Reven. Alone.

We stare at each other. He opens his mouth, then closes it. Huffs what I'm pretty sure is a self-derisive laugh. "I checked on Cain. He's awake, if you want to go see him."

That's what he came here to tell me?

"Oh." *Oh?* I cringe at myself. Of all the inane replies I could have come up with, that's the worst. Could he hear the disappointment in my voice?

After another second, he nods, then walks away. I listen as his footsteps echo off the stone floors. I wait until he's gone before I leave. It doesn't take long before I bump into a servant who shows me where Cain is.

"You don't have to be here." Pella's voice sounds on the other side of the door, muffled but clear enough.

I pause with my hand on the cast-iron doorknob. Is she talking to me? I didn't think I made a noise, and the wooden doors in this place are thick.

"Don't you need to eat or piss or something?" are her next words.

Definitely not talking to me.

I press my lips together to contain a sudden snigger, because I have a feeling I know exactly who is in there with her. Hakan may not be much of a talker, but he says a thousand words with a look. And he looks at Pella a lot.

Before we'd left the zariphate, I would have probably stood out here grinning and settled in for a long listen at her expense. That or walked away. But Pella isn't who I'm here to see, so I push my way inside. Sure enough, Hakan is standing across the room from her, right by the door. I'm not sure who she's glaring at harder now—me or him.

She points out the door. "Both of you just leave us alone."

"Pella..." The threadiness in Cain's voice makes my stomach clench. Even when I was five and he was seven, he's always been the strongest person I know. Nothing makes Cain weak.

Walking through the portal and to here, even with help, must've taken it

out of him. Pella leans over her brother, her ear close to his mouth to hear him, and I have a decent idea what he's saying, because her expression goes from solicitous concern to lemon-sucking irritation.

"Fine," she snaps. "It's on your head, then."

She stomps out of the room. "Come on," she tosses at Hakan, who follows her out silently. She doesn't bother to look my way as she passes. I sigh when she slams the door behind her. As heavy as those doors are, she really had to put some heft into it.

Cain clears his throat. "Sorry—"

"She's worried about you. I get it." I make my way to the chair Pella was sitting in at his bedside.

He's propped up on cushy-looking feather pillows, bare chest bound tightly in linens, which are pale against his bronzed skin, but I can still see the pallor underneath. At least he's still awake. "You look awful."

He huffs a laugh, then cringes. "Don't spare my feelings or anything, Mer."

"If you wanted soft and cuddly, you should have asked Tziah to take care of you."

Another huff, though with a confused frown. "That's exactly what Pella said earlier."

*Really?* "Where is Tziah, anyway? I thought she was here?"

"She went to her rooms to bathe and sleep. Don't change the subject."

"We were on a subject?"

"Yeah. You and Pella."

"I don't think that's what we were talking about."

"Uh-huh. What about you being all understanding about my sister being angry just now," he muses. "What's going on? You two are never on the same side."

"Don't worry. We still can't stand each other. All is right with the world." I tip my head. "How are you feeling?"

"Like a Devourer took a swipe at me."

I wrinkle my nose at him. "Whiner."

He makes a sound through his teeth. The Wanderer equivalent of blowing a raspberry. I grin, but my smile stiffens when he reaches out to take my hand, which is lying on the bed between us.

Touch. Deliberate touch.

Cain sobers, going quietly resolved. "He's dangerous, Meren."

Meaning Reven. I don't want to listen to this, but at the same time, I have to ask. "What happened out there?" He's silent long enough that I give his hand a squeeze. "Hey. What happened?"

"I ran toward a sound like coyotes in a kill frenzy to find him trapped in a solid sphere of darkness in the middle of a clearing, but I made a noise, and the darkness that had him turned on me. I couldn't see anything or hear anything over the screams of the shadows, but I bloody well felt the claws. Next thing I know, the dark exploded away from me. It launched me through the air, and I hit a tree." He raises a hand, feeling the back of his head with a grimace. "That's when I blacked out."

This is when I'd usually make some snarky remark, probably another whiny reference. It's a defense mechanism, and with the way my stomach is clenching, I could use it about now. I could have lost him. He went in there after Reven for me. For me. And I could have lost him. So yeah, I've got nothing to say.

"He wasn't in control, Meren." Cain isn't being pushy. He's being soft now, which is harder to sweep aside. "Those things were *attacking* him."

"I know. He told us."

"Then you know you can't be with him."

"I've fought his Shadows before." Not an experience I want to repeat, but sending Reven away, exiling him or abandoning him, isn't a choice I'm willing to make. It's the smart choice for our safety, but it's also the wrong one because we can't let Eidolon get to him.

"I know what I'm dealing with," I insist.

"I don't think you do. I've *seen* it. Watched him for *months*." He swallows, and maybe for the first time I see his fear. Fear for me and because of Reven. Because of what I'd face with Reven if I choose him instead.

Suddenly, I have a picture of what life as Cain's heartmate would look like. Protected, cosseted, and loved...and probably stifled and maybe even my voice ignored. Reven may be shutting me out, but beyond our relationship, what he doesn't do is ignore my voice. Hells, he's often the first or only person in my corner.

I love my friend, but I think he has more of his father in him than he realizes.

A sigh escapes me. "Cain—"

"No. Let me say this so I can feel like I did my duty as your friend."

Is that all I am to him? A duty?

Except he tugs my hand, the one he's still holding, and flattens my palm against his heart, the beat thumping against my skin. "I've been in love with you since I was sixteen."

My eyes go wide, and my heart takes off like a Wanderer stallion set free.

I shouldn't be shocked. He proposed, after all. But despite that, I didn't see this coming.

"I was an idiot and didn't say anything, didn't do anything, for the thousand different reasons my father and Pella and Magda and Ledenon told me I couldn't."

They all saw it enough to warn him off? Goddess, no wonder they treated me the way they did. They were probably terrified he'd do exactly what he offered and make me his heartmate—and that was before they knew who and what I am.

"I shouldn't have listened to them. I should have told you how I felt and claimed you as mine as soon as I knew."

My heart flips over a little. How could it not? I used to daydream about hearing Cain say words like this to me, even knowing it could never be because of who I am. The shadows inside me curl, like they're forming a fist to strike at him, or maybe at my feelings.

Taking a breath, I shake my head. "You couldn't. My situation... I couldn't..."

"I know." He swallows. "That doesn't make it easier now. And I'm sorry I left you in the palace the day you faced Eidolon. I left you behind—"

"Don't."

He wanted me to run off to the desert, abandon the politics to my sister, and live my life with him.

"If I'd been there—"

"You'd probably be dead."

He snorts a derisive sound that is so Cain, I crack a smile.

His hand sneaks into mine. "I made wrong choices, and now I see the way you look at him. You used to look at me that way, at least a little bit. Like I was your hero."

I lean closer, willing him to hear me. "You still are. Always."

Which is when my scar freezes so icy cold it burns and I have to hide a grunt of reaction.

Cain's familiar smile holds no humor. "I may always be your hero, Mer, but you've *never* looked at me like you do at him. He's not just a hero to you,



he's..."

*Everything.*

Neither of us says it.

I blow out a breath. "I'm sorry if I hurt you."

His hand tightens over mine. "You love me," he insists. "He's come along and confused things, and yeah, you're a queen and all—"

*Princess.* I don't correct him.

"But you love me. You always have."

"Cain—"

He holds up a tiny glass rosebud, and any words I might have said die in my throat. I made that. Made it and dropped it one night in the desert. I knew he had it, but...

"This is my reminder that we will always be important to each other."

*Oh, Cain.*

"And even if you say no, I want you to have something from me." Out of a pocket, he produces the golden bracelet—the golden cuff etched with the symbol of a sand fox, Cain's family sigil. The one he already tried to propose to me with...twice. He slips it on me before I can stop him.

We both stare at it, and he runs his thumb over the smooth, surprisingly light metal.

"Choose me." His words are so soft I have to lean closer to catch them.

Forget cold—the shadows that connect me to Reven go numb. Not like when I'm cut off. This is like how I felt just after our fight with Eidolon, when I was alone. Like the pain of all that had happened was too much to take and so the only way I could deal with it was to not feel it at all. I almost run from the room to go find Reven, but I can't leave Cain right now. I owe him this moment.

He's searching my eyes with a desperate kind of hope that is cracking my heart into pieces. "I'll be good to you," he insists. "I'll spend my life keeping you safe, making you happy. I'll fight at your side if I have to, take down Eidolon, and then we can live. *Live, Meren.* I know, in time, I can make you forget him—"

"Cain." His name is a weary sigh.

When Reven kidnapped me, Cain was the only one who followed, who tried to save me. He went after Reven in the woods and faced those shadows, also for me. I know that.

Looking at him now, mangled because of me, a thousand different

memories bubble to the surface.

Learning to make a shelter out of sand. Playing the funny stone game that makes him so competitive. Getting him to laugh after I won. Watching with my heart in my throat the first time he competed in Sher Eshine. It's a brutal competition Wanderers play as soon as they reach the age of reason, wrestling on horseback. He has a hoof-shaped scar on his back from that first year he joined in the games.

It would be so easy to love him. To build a life with him. I can see it, our future together after Eidolon falls. Once upon a time, it was all I wanted, but what I felt for Cain was a young girl's need to escape her destiny, and his was the only friendly hand being extended.

He must see what I can't say in my eyes, because he lets out a long, harsh breath. "Don't answer," he says. "Don't..."

I don't speak.

Instead, I run a thumb over the sand fox on the bracelet before I go to take it off.

But he stops me. "It's yours. It was always going to be yours."

I have no idea what to say. What to do. "Thank you," I whisper.

His face hardens. "I told you once that I would always keep you safe, and I meant it. I'm not going to let him hurt you."

"It won't come to that." I swallow. The others know, and so should he. "We're shadow bonded, Cain. He healed me, saved my life, but doing so meant putting his shadows inside me."

I watch as the last remnants of hope drain from my friend's face, leaving him pale and shaky. I hate that I did that to him. Hurt him like that.

Jaw clenched, he stares at me. "That doesn't mean you're safe from him."

"He knows that." Believe me, he knows.

"Do you?"

I grimace.

"If he gets worse, if he loses control, promise me you won't try to help him."

"I can't—"

He squeezes my hand again, bringing it up to place a kiss on my knuckles. "Please give me this at least."

The thing is, Reven would want the same thing. But promises should be kept. "I can't."

## The Past Collides

Leaving Cain to rest and heal—from his wounds *and* from me—I pause halfway down the hallway by a large window.

Here, like in all of Nova, glass is forbidden, so I'm grateful for the heavy velvet curtains that keep out the chill of the Devotion Mountains, where the Queen's Tower is situated.

I draw one back, prop my elbows on the cool stone of the sill, and close my eyes, inhaling long and slow. Here, the air is crisp with snow and the underlying fresh scent of pine. It also feels thinner, like I can't quite catch my breath. I'm starting to realize why Grandmother and all the queens before her chose to do nothing but hide. I get the feeling going against Eidolon will cost me everything.

With a sigh, I open my eyes and let my gaze sweep across the view. Beyond the window is a sheer drop to a stone terrace that seems to wrap around most of the tower. Mountains rise and fall all around us in jagged, majestic spurs bathed in celestial light as far as I can see, blanketed in a forest of pine trees.

I didn't exactly get to appreciate that the last time I was here, since I was being kidnapped at the time. It's beautiful.

I don't know how long I stand here. Part of me needs a minute, though that frustrates me. I had enough minutes when I was with Eidolon. I shouldn't need more to get myself together.

The other part of me is secretly hoping for Reven to come to me after what I felt in my scars.

Which is probably why I'm watching movement in an area beyond the tower a long time before it registers. It's difficult to tell in the dark, but there is definitely someone down in an area that I think might be a garden.

With a frown, I lean forward—like that can actually help—staring hard.

Is it a servant? The queen? I wouldn't think it's one of my group, except the way this person moves is...familiar.

Then they do something with their hands that's impossible to miss, and I jerk back from the window, the curtain dropping into place with a muted

*thud*, shock spiking my heart rate.

I know *exactly* who it is.

Anger overtakes the shock, burning it away in an all-consuming rush. I take off through the tower, my fury building as I stomp my way down to the doors leading outside on the ground floor. No one sees me go, and no one stops me.

I'm honestly not sure what I would have said if they'd tried.

As soon as I'm outside, the chill of winter air hits my skin. Hells. I took my Tyndran coat off earlier. This is nothing like the dominion we were just in, though. Shrugging it off, I'm out into the night and into the forest surrounding the tower. I take a path that I think leads in the direction of the place where I saw movement, until the dense brush parts and I find myself at the edge of a night-kissed garden.

A water garden.

I stumble to a stop. Water is precious in Aryd, and to use it only for beauty is unheard of. The dark pools edged in frost reflect the clear, starry skies. Within the water, or more like appearing to float on top of the water, a pathway of spring-green grass swirls in spiraling loops, some with purple and white flowering plants at the centers. Winter flowers? I reach out and touch velvet-soft petals that are also rigidly formed. My fingers come away smelling of their delicate, dreamy aroma.

I drop my hand to my side. While this place is beautiful, I don't have time for the serenity it offers.

I step onto the path. The grass is spongy but firm beneath my feet, not floating but I suspect built up on platforms from underneath. I don't see the sunken circular space at the center of the huge garden until I'm closer. The walled-in pit is lined in plush-looking pillows with a crackling fire contained in an open stone hearth at the center. A tiny oasis of silk and fur and warmth surrounded by water. An open-air hideaway.

All the opulent comfort does is stoke the ire in me.

Because sitting right there warming herself, her salt-and-pepper hair scraped back, giving her that perpetually shocked expression I'm so familiar with...is Omma.

"Did you know?" I demand. I'm too furious to worry about lowering my voice.

Before she can answer, I'm stalking down the stairs toward her, channeling Reven. I don't think I've ever been this seriously enraged at anyone. Like I

can't contain it and might lash out if I don't.

"Did. You. Know?" My voice rises with each word. I manage to jerk to a stop, my hands fisted at my sides. The only alternative is throttling the woman who raised me. "Answer me!"

Omnia's face is a study of calm, giving Reven's emotionless blankness serious competition as she rises from her seat. She's only a little taller than I am. Why did I ever let her have the power over me that she did?

"Know what?" she asks calmly.

I want to hurl a pillow at her head. Or a rock. A rock would be more satisfying. "What Eidolon is? What he can do? Did you know about the curse he had placed on me as a baby? About what's inside this?" I jerk the amulet out from under my clothes and dangle it in front of her nose.

Her shoulders go back, her chin up at an imperious angle that usually comes right before I get punished for my insolence. I'm waiting for some Omnia-like come back, but as fast as she puffs up, spine going ramrod straight, she immediately deflates.

Sinking down on the cushioned seat, she puts out a shaky hand to steady herself. Even her gaze skitters away from me. "I have no idea what you're talking about," she says, sounding more tired than her years. "But I have no doubt it's bad."

"Bad?" I cross my arms and glare at her. "The state of our people in Aryd is bad. What I've learned, what I've been through, is—"

It's a disaster I'm still trying to stop. Like a lone tree trying to hold back a tempest.

My jaw is clenched so tight it aches. "Why did you and Grandmother, or the twins before you, do noth—" I choke on the word. Breathing in through my nose, I try to find some source of calm. "Nothing."

Omnia finally looks me in the eyes. "You're angry."

"You think?" I stare at her, swinging wildly between the urges to strangle her and laugh. Not an amused laugh. More like delirium.

Before I can work out what to say to that, she sighs. "I've been looking for you since the night of your sister's pre-coronation celebration, when you were taken from the palace."

Her words knock me back a couple of steps. "I don't believe you."

Omnia's pinched lips actually quirk in a half smile I don't think I've ever seen from her. I can almost hear the rusty creak of her face trying to achieve the never-used expression. "I've been sneaking in and out of that palace for

seventy summers, girl. You think I don't have secrets and ways? You think I don't have my own spies in the palace? People I trust?"

My mouth hangs open like a fish on a hook. "But...you let me believe that you..."

"That my time was done? It is." She shrugs. "That I abandoned you and your sister? Never that."

What is she talking about? She hated me. Resented me. Resented her own life. Was harder and colder to me than even Grandmother. I sit beside her. "I don't understand you at all."

Her sharp eyes might soften and dull, but is that sadness real?

"I know." She raises a hand toward me as if she might pat my knee but stops when I stiffen and lowers it to her lap. "I raised you the same way I was raised. To do your duty to your sister and the crown, but survive, too, if you can. That means no attachments to distract you. Even me." She makes a face. "Believe me, I know how attachments to others end up hurting in the end."

I think I might see years of regrets and experience flicker over her face. I'm just not sure I believe it.

"I hoped that Eidolon would leave you and Tabra alone the way he had me and my sister. That maybe he was done with whatever he wanted from our family. However, I couldn't be sure, so I did what I could to prepare you. But I...I loved you every single day."

My throat thickens. The little girl in me that only ever wanted her affection wants to believe those words, even as part of me can't absorb them.

I think she must see that, because she sighs and sits back, straighter this time. "I can't change the past. I don't think I would anyway. It made you who you are, and that got you this far."

And just like that, we're back to normal.

"Now you want to take credit for me?" I scoff. I'm not ready to forgive. There's nineteen years of history here that tell me not to.

She studies my face, the way I'm holding myself. "It took me ages to track you here. I lost you in the desert completely and must have just missed you in Tyndra. I assume that glass monstrosity of a portal was your doing?"

Wait, she went to Tyndra? She found—

Oh, hells in a handbasket, I left it there. The portal I made to get us to Wildernyss. I left it standing in the middle of an icy field.

This is exactly why Tabra should be queen, not me.

At least Omma isn't telling me off. "How did you know to come here?"

An impatient hand waves my question away. “No time for that. Tell me everything.”

“Why?”

She gives me a familiar, end-of-her-tether scowl. “What do you mean *why*? I’m not useless. I can help.”

I stare at her.

Omnia wants to help? My first instinct is to laugh in her face and then walk away. The reason I don’t, though, is she could be useful. She knows things. She clearly has skills, or she wouldn’t have found me, and she’s essentially a ghost. Plus we can use all the help we can get.

Damn it.

For the second time today and the umpteenth time in general telling this story, I walk her through everything as quickly as I can. At least I don’t have to explain the Arydian royal history or Eidolon’s treachery to our family to her. That helps speed things up.

She says nothing beyond a few clarifying questions, and when I’m done, she sits for the longest time in silence, staring off over the water garden.

Then another sigh and a grimace. “I wonder...”

“Wonder what?”

Another grimace. “The Hag showed me a vision once—”

I jerk up a hand. “Hold on. The Hag?”

“Miriam,” Omnia corrects.

She knows her name? I didn’t even know that. Everyone in Enora called her the Hag.

Omnia sits up straighter, very proper, and bends a look on me that kicks up old habits like lowering my gaze. I fight the urge and win.

“She’s not the Vex she allowed everyone to believe,” she says.

Well, damn. “I knew she was too good at catching me.”

That earns me an eye roll. “She showed me her power only once. Some kind of...seeing—not foresight. Hindsight, maybe? But a vision she could share, like watching it in my own mind.”

“What did she show you?”

“A sand nymph talking to someone I couldn’t see who was locked in a dungeon. It made no sense at the time. I didn’t even realize it was the same sand nymph who blessed you and Tabra at your birth. They all look alike to me.”

Which is such an Omnia thing to say. Sand nymphs are as varied in looks

as humans.

I'm afraid to ask. "What did she say?"

"She said that she bound his power to the second born."

Bound his *power*.

Instead of surprise or panic, everything in me goes numb. Because it makes sense if I put it together with the words of the curse itself that I heard an echo of the first time Eidolon and I locked eyes.

*Upon first glance, her soul shall be bound to his forever, so that good may balance evil as the goddesses will.*

The difference is the wording. "Soul" versus "power." Does that mean because our souls are bound, I can access his power? Or because his soul is bound to his power, which is now bound to me, that means I can—

I cut my thoughts off before I go in circles with this all night long.

Goddess, I am so tired of riddles.

Omnia holds up her hands. "I know I'm guessing, but it's better that we explore every option we know about."

Which sounds like something I would say. I shift on my cushion. "No. It makes sense. We should talk to the others. See what they think." I'm done with secrets. After Reven was attacked in the Shadowwood, I promised myself no more. Not with my friends and allies.

Secrets are dangerous. I've learned this the hard way, but at least I've finally learned it.

"Is there anything else I should know that I don't?"

After a long, searching pause, Omnia shakes her head. "Turns out I didn't know all that much." Then her gaze shifts to fall on the amulet back around my neck and still hanging outside my clothing. "What's your plan moving forward?"

I lay it out for her quickly.

After taking a second to mull it over, she gives a haughty sniff. "I'd say you should send me to one of the dominions to talk to a sovereign, but I think, given that the old queen of Aryd is well known to be dead, that wouldn't be wise."

"Probably not." Now I'm picturing several sovereigns dying from shock. King Panqui of Tropikis is the oldest. I doubt his heart could take it.

She ignores my sarcastic muttering. "My power can't help in any way," she says more to herself than me. Then her mouth forms into a sly smile.



“The zariphate.”

What now? “What about it?”

“Your sister is there, and I want to see for myself the state she’s in. More to the point, it sounds as if this Zariph Cainis needs someone...formidable...dealing with him.”

And there’s no one more formidable than Omma—both as herself and in full queen mode when she used to stand in for Grandmother. The man won’t stand a chance. I actually almost smile.

“I’ll have to get Pella to take you.” Or maybe Cain after he heals. He won’t be able to come with us to approach Trysolde anyway.

Omna shakes her head as she gets to her feet. “I’ll find them.”

How exactly does she think she’s going to do that? Even Cain had to have predetermined places to meet. I also stand up. “Um...”

She lifts a single imperious eyebrow. “What? You think I never bothered to learn about *all* of my people, including the Wanderers? I have ways to track them down.”

I pause, then make a face. “I really should stop being surprised about anything these days.”

She eyes me and can probably see right through to the scared little girl I still feel like around her. Actually, I feel like that most of the time. “I used to think that attitude of yours would get you discovered—or worse, killed.” She huffs a laugh. “Now I think it probably saved your life.” She looks for a second like she wants to reach out to me but doesn’t. “Don’t lose that.”

Then she makes her way up the stairs, where she pauses. “I’ll take care of the zariph and your people and your sister. You worry about the amulets.” She glances over her shoulder at me. “Use what I’ve taught you. Do your duty. Never trust Eidolon.”

It’s almost exactly the last thing she said to me the night Grandmother died and Omna passed her torch to me. Only its sounds different this time. Like she cares.

Her gaze hardens. “Not even his Shadow.”

Reven.

I cross my arms. “That’s my choice to make, Omna.”

Her lips pinch together, but then she huffs another laugh, this one unamused. “See? Attitude.”

I watch her walk away.

It turns out that I never knew the woman who raised me at all.

## Come Find Me

When she's gone, I flop against the pillows lining the pit in the water, gazing up at the stars. What seems like forever ago, I used to lie in my room in our hovel and watch my star in the sky from my window. When I was really lucky, I could lie in the dunes in the desert at night and be enchanted by the blanket of starlight overhead.

Who knew a small part of me would someday long to return to that time? Simpler days when the balance of the dominions didn't rest on my shoulders.

I pick up my amulet and look into it.

"I know you're stuck in there and probably can't do anything about it," I say to the goddess slumbering inside. "But if you could see your way to no more surprises or revelations for me for at least fifty years, I would really appreciate it."

No answer, of course.

With a sigh, I drop it and return my gaze to the skies. "Or maybe bring my Shadowraith to me?" I whisper. I could use his face right now. Even if seeing him hurts.

I stare out into the darkness. I'm not in trouble, so I doubt he'll hear me. I talk to him anyway. It's all I have left.

"I miss you. So much. We may not be separated by distance, but we're apart all the same. It feels even worse than when I was trapped in the palace. And I get that we barely had time to form any feelings for each other, but I miss the stupidest things anyway. Like how you deal with my sarcasm. Or the way you light up when you smile. But mostly, I just want to hold your hand and tell you things."

Things like how afraid I am. I don't like to admit that to the others. But to him...

A tendril of sensation suddenly unfurls across the scar in my side, and shadows rise and swirl around me, obscuring my sight. But these aren't mean shadows. These are warm and comforting, and when they fade away, I'm still in my water garden hideaway, but Reven is, too. Standing before me, his back to the fire.

And...um...he's scowling. "I felt your anger, but I didn't know where you went." He hurls the words at me like an accusation.

My anger? Oh. Probably because of Omma. "I—"

"You shouldn't have left the tower alone."

"I know, but—"

"Then I heard you whisper to me the way I used to. Like the Vanished."

I sit up straighter at that. He heard me? How much? The darkness is only supposed to carry desperate pleas for help, right? Am I so broken that I don't even know when I'm desperate?

"You scared the shit out of me." And when I scare him, the Shadows get worse.

I'm on my feet in a hurry. I want to wrap my arms around his middle, hold him tight, but he won't allow that. "I'm sorry."

"You're going to age me prematurely, Mereneith Evangeline."

"I didn't mean to this time."

"So all those others were on purpose?"

"Not on purpose, exactly." I duck my head, suddenly sheepish. "Omma was here."

He takes a jerking step forward, the anger in his face transforming to something else. Something not directed at me for a change. "What the hells did *she* want?"

"Pretty much my response exactly." I shouldn't be so...touched...that he's this upset on my behalf. "I've never seen her that way." I bite my lip. Should I tell him the next part? "Implying she actually loved me. Wanted me."

He stiffens, silent for a long moment. "What else did your Omma want?"

Stick to the important stuff, I guess. I quickly tell him about the encounter, what she's doing now, and the vision about the sand nymph, which I'm already adjusting to knowing. I think maybe I've become desensitized to shock now.

When Reven says nothing, I glance up to find him staring at me like he's seeing me for the first time or something.

"What?" I ask.

He glances away, then back to me. "You know how I trapped all those soldiers' souls in the Shadowwood and the temple?"

"Yeah." And then started avoiding me even more after. Why is he bringing this up now? "Are you trying to scare me or something?"

"It's—" He shakes his head. I expect him to say dangerous. "Terrible. I did

that.”

For a flash of a moment, I can feel the weight through my scars, the *guilt*, as if the entire world was on my shoulders, crushing me. What Reven feels.

And he won't let me help. Let me comfort him. An ache blooms under my ribs, and I rub at the center of my chest. “But you stopped them.”

He shakes his head. “I don't think *I'm* the one who stopped the shadow souls in the woods.”

Dread joins the weight and the ache, like a heavy stone tied around my neck. I don't want to ask, but it's already coming together with the curse and Omma's story about the Hag. “Then what stopped them?”

“You.”

My heart pounds against the bones of my ribs like a trapped bird trying to get out of a cage. “I didn't *do* anything. How can you be sure?”

Reven's gaze softens, like he sees how that scares me and wishes he could take the blow for me. Even his voice gentles. “I heard your voice. I heard you yell, ‘*Let him go.*’ And then they stopped.”

The blood drains from my face in a rush, and suddenly Reven is there, hands on my arms, helping me sit back down. Then he shoves my head between my knees. “Breathe.”

By now, though, I've already come out of the shock.

“Breathe, Meren,” he says again.

“I *am* breathing.” I scowl at my shoes. He doesn't let me up, though, and I swat at his hands. “I did say that. I yelled the words *Let him go.*” Twice, I think.

Silence, then the pressure of his hand at my back disappears and I sit up and we stare at each other. He's so close. Right there.

I swallow. “But that doesn't prove that I—”

“That you controlled those shadow souls somehow?” He grimaces. “I don't know. What your Omma told you about the sand nymph's curse could mean you have some way to use Eidolon's power. To use *my* power. But it's vague...” He glances at where my scar is. “Honestly, I have no idea. Did it feel like you made the shadow souls in the woods stop?”

I think back. I was terrified for him and furious at the darkness for hurting him. But did I do anything? Or, in my opinion, a worse question...if I was the one commanding the darkness, did I do the attacking or the stopping or both? How could I do any of that and not know? I shake my head.

“There's more, though. I got me and Cain out of the woods, and he was

mumbling all those things about you needing to stay away from me, which riled them up good. After that, he accidentally hit you”—he scowls—“and Eidolon’s Shadows tried to—” He takes a choppy breath. “They went quiet when I touched you.”

I stare at Reven. “What?”

He shakes his head. “It felt like when I manage to lock them deeper inside me, but I didn’t do that. Did you feel that?”

“No...” I pause. “Maybe? I could see it because your face stopped doing that thing. But no. I didn’t feel anything. Don’t you think if I was doing any of these things, it would feel like when I use my power?”

*That is unmistakable.*

Except...I haven’t always felt my own power at work. Not at the beginning, at least. And my power does come out more with emotions. Uncontrollably in the earliest days. Stronger lately.

Everything piles up over me until I feel...buried.

“Seven hells.” I drop my head to his chest and lean into him. It’s either that or quietly scream, so I go with that, even though he tenses against me. I expect him to immediately set me away, but he doesn’t. I close my eyes and will him to give me this. Just for a moment.

After a pause, he rests his chin on the top of my head.

Maybe because...

A new possibility pierces the darkness I’ve been living in since he told me we couldn’t be together.

“Does this mean you don’t have to stay away from me now?” The question comes out small. “If I can help you, I mean.”

He takes a breath, and his hands slide up into my hair, tipping my head back, and we stare at each other.

“We don’t know anything yet,” he says. “Not for sure. Definitely not enough to ignore my...problems.”

I can see he hates this, too. For once he’s letting me see, though I’m guessing he’s still hiding exactly how much.

I swallow. “I’ve made this all harder for you.”

He bends over me like he wants to shake me. “You’re worth it.”

I sigh. “Is it awful that part of me wishes I could just let someone else figure this out? The zariph or the other sovereigns. I was supposed to be the throwaway. Not the one fixing the world.”

He sits quietly with that a moment. Not judging, though. “After I was shed

and ran...” Reven’s clearly choosing his words carefully. “When I realized I couldn’t kill what was inside me or take my own life and end them—”

“I hate that you even thought about it.”

He must have felt so alone. Something I am familiar with. I want to kiss him and burrow into him more and hug him all at once. His stubborn chin is right there. If I went up on tiptoe, I could press my lips...

“Meren.”

His fingers squeeze, tugging my hair. My name is both a warning and a sigh on his lips. He clears his throat. “After that, I thought there was only one thing I could do.”

“What?”

“Hide. Take myself far away from the world. Remove the threat until nature could take its course and I’d die of old age. But then I heard *you*...”

I lift my gaze to encounter blue eyes so bright, so intense that the air seems to be sucked out of the space between us.

He smooths the hair back from my face. “Knowing you were out there, that you needed help—that gave me a reason to keep going. Your voice was the first. Then I heard Vos...and others called to me...and I found a purpose. Now it’s your turn.”

His hand stills on my cheek.

I frown. “Are you saying I’ve found my purpose?”

He searches my face, grave, and yet something else glints at me from his eyes. Something like pride or encouragement or even faith.

His fingers trail from my cheek to my jaw. “I’m saying I think you always had a purpose, Meren, and you just couldn’t see it until now.”

Is that true? I consider my life and Omma’s life, which was the trajectory mine was headed toward, and shake my head. “I don’t think so. My destiny was to either die pretending to be Tabra or raise another hidden princess like me and fade into obscurity when Tabra died.”

“Or become queen if she was the one killed.”

True, but I never considered that likely.

My biggest fear comes out of me in a whisper. “I don’t know if I can do this. Any of it. Especially not without...” *Without you*, I was going to say. Or am I being selfish again?

“I know,” he says in a voice gone darkly soft, his gaze both tender and... scorching.

*Holy fires of hotness.*

My breath stutters. “Don’t look at me that way unless you can mean it.”

We’re so close, our breathing mingling as we stare at each other. His fingers at my hip dig in, sending a surge of yearning through me, tightening in my belly, in my chest. Everywhere.

*Kiss me.* I want him to lean in so much. *Just kiss me.*

“Hells,” he mutters, then brings his mouth down on mine hard.

Elation sweeps through me in a starburst, and I’m kissing him back, drinking him in like someone who has been lost in the desert.

*Forget the hells. This is heaven.*

“Damn it, Meren.” He grinds the words out, then cups the back of my head the way I love and goes back to kissing me.

I’m all things joyful relief and burning need. The taste of him, the feel of him, is like coming home. He’s been right there, with me, and I’ve missed him so much.

We break apart on a gasp. He tips my head to the side so he can feather his lips down my neck. His hands turn bold, sliding down my back, slipping under my cloak, spanning my waist, as his mouth makes his way back to mine.

I sigh into the kiss. Goddess, the way he kisses.

His touch takes away every worry in my world and replaces it with both peace and such aching want that I turn restless in his arms.

He’s not losing it. He’s with me.

Is this working because of the curse? Can he touch me now? Can we be together because of whatever it is in me that calms the darkness in him?

He nips my lower lip and soothes it with a kiss that is hard and hot and out of control. I whimper into him, swallowing his answering groan, his shudder against me raw and real. Sensations arc through my body like lightning waking my skin, waking my soul.

“Take what you need, love,” he urges in a voice so deliciously dark I tremble at the sound. “We’ll give you whatever you want.”

*Wait.*

His fingers dig into my flesh, but it’s different now. Behind my closed eyes, the night around us changes. The darkness changes. So does his kiss, taking on an edge. Almost angry.

Even the air around me changes, chills, the warmth of the fire and the man against me gone. I pull back on a gasp to find his face a mask of blankness, not entirely Shadow, but not entirely Reven, either, those inky shadows

flowing from his back like spidery arms. They curl around so they're cocooning not him but me. No, not cocooning. Caging.

Fear plunges my need into a snowbank.

I try to wriggle out of his arms, but his hand flashes out, grabbing me by the wrist, which he lifts up. Cain's golden cuff gleams in the firelight.

A muscle on the side of Reven's jaw ticks, his turquoise eyes going hard as diamonds.

"I—"

"Don't speak."

He squeezes his eyes shut, rolling his shoulders. He grabs me by the waist like he has to hold on to me to anchor himself. Then those spidery shadows suck back inside him. Slowly. Agonizingly. All of it a visible struggle punctuated by the way he's gripping my arm. Unconsciously, because he's focused only on his control, but he's going to leave bruises.

"Go." The word is guttural, punching from him, his eyes still closed.

I have to peel his fingers away, but I manage to work carefully out of his grasp and slowly back up.

He's shaking so hard I'm surprised his teeth aren't rattling loose. He looks...sick. Pale, sweat beading his forehead. Fighting.

My heart shrivels at the sight. At what this means.

I'm his weakness. The walls he put up between us weren't him taking away my choice, like I thought. Those walls are protecting him from *me*. He's isolating himself, denying himself, to protect me.

A lonely ache for him—for us both—wells up inside and threatens to take me to the ground. He meant what he said that night in the desert outside the zariphate camp. He'd let the world burn as long as I'm okay. And that world includes him.

The pain of what I have to do now—do for him in return—feels like that glass spike skewering me in my gut all over again.

It's time to stop making this worse for him—to make it easier, even. Like he said about me...he's worth it.

"I said go, Meren," he snaps. His eyes flash open, but behind the walls he's trying to brick back up and underneath the anger, I see the desperation and the fear. It's almost frantic.

"*Please.*" His voice breaks.

Without another word, I turn and climb out of the pit. Every step feels like another piece of my cracked heart crumbles to dust inside me, and I'm trying



my dammedest to not let him see the way my shoulders shake or how I have to keep dashing away my tears.

# Part 4

## Sham Sacrifice

## Remirel

I walk through the portal in the Queen's Tower, through a sister portal, and into a room in the temple in the capitol city of Remirel. It's only been a few days, but it's felt like eons.

I'm the last of us to come through, with Reven at my side.

At my side physically but not in any other way. I'm trying to make myself believe that's okay. I've been trying to make myself believe that—stick to the decision I made not to be the source of his pain and problems—for days. It blows. But this is what you do when you care about someone. He taught me that.

I pull my shoulders back, assuming a regal posture, channeling Omma and Grandmother and every other princess and queen of Aryd who's had to put aside her own wants.

Besides...I'm supposed to be queen now anyway.

The others—Vos, Horus, Hakan, and Pella—came through earlier so as to not look like they're with us. Bene, too, with Horus this time. He won't come into the castle, but he'll stay outside, just in case we need his help. Cain's too weak, so Tziah stayed behind with him. I'm honestly not sure Vos should've come, either. The pallor to his skin reminds me of when we first met, and he's coughing more. He has been ever since we went to the Shadowood.

But the others didn't say anything, so neither did I.

The Wildernyss portal, like all the ones from other dominions I've seen, is unique to this place. The portal glass here is blue like the sky at twilight or Tziah's skin. The room where it's housed is simple, but the frame holding the glass is quite ornate, edged in a carved wooden frieze depicting vines of flowers.

In a magical illusion created by a wood Hylorae ages ago, the carving winds around the glass, as though the vines are growing and blooming as we watch. At the top, a dragon perches, its long tail wrapping around to form the base on which the glass sits, its maw open to guard the precious enchanted glass. I've heard that on certain Wildernyssian holidays, it even blows fire.

I wish I could stay longer, take my time to look more closely. Not only

here but throughout the city, which Omma so diligently taught me about. I've always wanted to see the jugglers and acrobats in the squares, the markets where farmers, woodsmen, and hunters bring their goods, and the puppet shows, or even go to a simple tavern.

But there's no time for that.

We arrived in the earliest light of morning in order to avoid the priestesses in the temple and the crowds in the streets. Also because I insisted sooner was better. After what happened with Reven, if I have to sit around the Queen's Tower with nothing to do but wait and think, I'm going to lose it.

After I left him in the water garden, I went back to my room and didn't even bother to try to sleep. Not with my mind spinning in a dust demon made up of my feelings. I came out of that night with a numb heart and a decision. I'll stop wishing, hoping, or thinking we have a future. Because we don't. It's something I should have known, should have realized, this entire time. So I'll focus on the only thing I can try to do something about: stopping Eidolon.

Only one acolyte, dressed showily in purple and silver vestments, goes wide-eyed as she takes in the finery of our clothing. We're dressed to impress a king, after all. It takes her a second to collect herself and nod at us as we make our way outside.

The sunlight is intense outside in a different way than Aryd, but almost more so. Maybe because the dominion is closer to the sun way up here? Not that you can tell from Remirel that Wildernyss itself is soaring among the clouds. The air feels a little thinner is all.

From where we stand, the walls and spires of the castle rise well above the city, the banners of Wildernyss with Trysolde and Istrella's insignia of a kirin emblazoned in a field of deep purple hanging from parapets and blowing in the breeze.

In short order, Reven and I approach the castle together on horses that Horus stole for us in the city—from someone "who could afford the loss" is the way he put it. Mine is a gorgeous creature, sleekly black and built on bigger lines than the Wanderers' horses. Reven is on an equally impressive roan. We're both dressed in finery borrowed from Istrella.

The others are making their own ways into the castle separately. Just in case.

"If this goes sideways and I lose control, you have to get out of here," Reven says in a hushed voice for me alone. "Get back to the portal. Find Vos. Cain."

I thought I had the numb thing down, but my throat thickens at the sound of his voice, at how close he is, the way he leans over. That's the first time he's spoken to me alone since—

*Stop it, Meren.*

Why can't I make this easy on myself and on him and just not feel anymore?

I force myself to take a deep breath, one I hope he can't sense, and focus on the words. What he's asking goes against every instinct I have, even with our current status, but I nod.

At the gates, we are stopped by a guard. One who doesn't recognize me or Reven. When I give our names—or, rather, Tabra and Eidolon's names—his eyes go wide while at the same time his brows lower, which makes him look like a startled ghoul.

He glances behind us. "What are you doing here alone, domines?"

I channel pure Grandmother as I lift my chin and pin him with a glare that says both it's none of his business and I don't give a shit what he thinks. "Do what you must to inform your king and queen," I say with a deliberately soft menace. "Or see what happens if you leave us standing here too long."

Grandmother used to speak like that. As children, when we heard that tone directed at us, Tabra would immediately start crying.

The guard actually pales.

I swallow a smirk. What do you know? It works.

Shadows pulse around us, dimming the brightness for a flash. Here, then gone.

*Oh.* Never mind. He wasn't afraid of me.

I don't risk a glance at Reven. Goddess, I hope that was on purpose. A demonstration to get things moving.

Immediately, the guard starts barking orders to bring us inside and inform the king of our presence. The king's chancellor is sent out to meet us and escort us inside. After dismounting, Reven prowls along at my side, a dark, silent king who doesn't deign to answer the questions of underlings.

Goddess, the way he moves sometimes. Even in this treacherous moment, I have to not let myself get distracted.

The chancellor keeps flicking him glances while directing his questions to me. I respond with curt nonanswers, partly because I have no intention of giving away anything and partly because I'm trying like hells to remember any details either Omma or Tabra shared with me about this particular castle.

I'm supposed to be my sister right now, and, as Istrella's goddessdaughter, she's visited here. Several times, actually.

I don't want to take a wrong turn.

We round a corner, and I jump, hand to my throat. There's no way the massive stuffed bear, standing on its hind legs with its paws raised and teeth bared in a menacing snarl, could be missed. Not because of its size, but because the enchanted decoration actually turns its head to pin us with a ferocious stare, a growl rumbling up from inside it. It guards the entrance to the throne room and will only growl at those who are not direct family. A warning and an alarm.

Tabra used to be terrified of visiting here because of this thing.

"Goddess, I've always hated that thing," I deliberately murmur.

At that, the chancellor smiles and relaxes. Tabra must have jumped every time she saw it, too.

He snaps his fingers, and the bear goes back to just being stuffed. Meanwhile, we're now standing before a set of wooden doors painted in glorious golds and silvers and covered in Wildernyssian runes, particularly the symbols for loyalty, arts, and storm—their goddess's patronage. But I see within the paintings the scythe of a reaper as well. Death.

Good thing I never was one for omens.

It takes four strong men to force the doors open. But before I can pass inside, a man cloaked in purple and wearing the sigil of the king's council comes forward. A gorgeous man in an overdone way. Tall, broad shoulders, strong jaw, and sharp gray eyes that sweep insultingly over my person from head to toe.

Reven moves in front of me, and the man's steps falter a bit before he gathers himself.

"I am the warden of the castle," he informs us in a deep, self-assured voice. He would be impressive if he wasn't still standing a decent distance away from Reven.

My grandmother, who never trusted a pretty face, would have ground him under her heel. I stay silent. So does Reven.

The man shifts his weight from one foot to the other. He's fidgeting. Good. He clears his throat and lifts his chin. "I must ask that you discard any weapons you may have."

Is he kidding? He thinks Reven is Eidolon. This man has to know who and what he is. Asking us to discard weapons is like asking the sand not to stick

to anything.

My knives are hidden in a few accessible spots as always. Would he dare to search a queen? I'm going to take the risk that he wouldn't. "We carry no weapons."

I'm pretty sure that fourth circle of hell, where the liars go, is becoming more and more a future destination of mine.

The warden glances at the chancellor. I roll my eyes. "Do you really think we need to?" I wave at Reven.

The chancellor hesitates, then nods. Sometimes it is good to be queen and have a Shadowraith at my side. I stand perfectly still, waiting until the doors are opened completely, then follow the chancellor inside.

"Queen Tabra Eutheria I of Aryd and King Eidolon Calix I of Tyndra," he announces with as much pomp as one can have in an echoing stone chamber the length of a cathedral.

The diamond-shaped throne room of Wildernyss is monumentally huge, rising several stories overhead to buttressed ceilings. Black-and-white checkered marble floors gleam in the light pouring through diamond-shaped glassless windows that are covered in purple silk that manages to keep out the cold yet is so sheer it lets in the light, casting a pale lavender hue over everything. The large room is almost empty—maybe six men that I can see standing about.

That's good. Fewer witnesses is better.

The king sits at the end of the long aisle that is lined in diamond-shaped archways. He looks tiny from way back here. Behind him rises an intricately carved stone frieze depicting the wonders of Wildernyss. Among the mountains, I can make out various creatures, including a basan and a deathworm, both of which I've encountered up close and way too personal. All positioned above a kirin whose massive, twisting rack of antlers holds the weight of the dominion. At the tip-top, a raven takes wing, reminding me of Bene, who is waiting outside somewhere.

But where is the bird in the carving's mate? A single raven by itself is another omen of death. There must always be two.

*You're not here for omens.*

Ignoring the carving and the way my heart squeezes with each step forward, I start a regal, stately walk down the long aisle. Reven keeps pace beside me. A sudden moment of déjà vu—this sense of having been here before, perhaps in a past life—washes over me. But the familiarity includes

Reven walking at my side, like once upon a time, we could have been here as queen and king for a friendly visit. Or like that could have been our future if things in this life had gone a different way.

“Okay?” Reven whispers.

“Yeah.” But I need to stop letting myself get distracted.

Halfway down, those great doors behind us close with a clanking, ominous rattle. Trapped.

Reven’s arm tenses under mine, and I know he doesn’t like that the same way I don’t.

Taking my courage by the throat, I focus on the king.

The king who doesn’t even bother to rise from his throne.

I know what to expect as I near him. When I met him in Aryd, I’d wondered if Istrella had married later in life to a much younger man. Not that Istrella is old by any means. My confusion came from the fact that Omma had taught me that they are both, by now, in their fifties, but Trysolde had looked—still looks—as if he’s in his twenties.

Russet-colored hair untouched by silver gleams in the sunlight, and his ruddy skin glows with health. His muscles and toned body are obvious, even through his layers of kingly garb. A slim band of gold around his forehead is his only nod to a crown. His hands, gnarled and curled in on themselves, are the only part of him that show any sign of aging.

He lounges in his throne with an utter disregard for me, arms resting on the ornately carved seat.

Actually, that disregard includes Reven, who is supposed to be Eidolon in this play we are putting on. And Istrella seemed to think Trysolde had become Eidolon’s...friend? Puppet? Wouldn’t he stand for the king?

I stop at least thirty paces from the stairs that lead up to the dais where his throne sits, but I don’t bow. Instead, I dip my head and place my fist over my chest. Reven mimics the action—an appropriate greeting for visiting royalty to the ruler of the dominion. “Honor to you, Trysolde son of Tymberlane, King of Wildernyss,” we say in unison.

The king does not rise or welcome us in a similar manner, though. Eyes a clear, striking green take me in, then shift to Reven. “Eidolon, my friend, you didn’t tell me you would be visiting so soon.”

Trysolde’s voice does not match his outsides. This handsome, virile man speaks in a high-pitched scratch of sound that is uncomfortable to my ears. When we met in Aryd, I wondered how Istrella listened to that all the time



without wincing.

“And with your missing bride in tow. Excellent. You were so... concerned...with her absence.”

Just my damned luck... Eidolon had put out the rumor that I'd been taken by a Shadowraith, and Trysolde was with him in Aryd at the time.

“Unharméd, as you see,” Reven murmurs. “I overreacted.”

“So silly,” I tack on. “I was not taken, like my heartmate thought. I'm terribly sad to have worried him.”

“Where were you?” Trysolde asks.

Goddess, that voice is like walking on broken glass. I take my time answering, keeping my features composed in what I hope is a pleasantly bored expression. “I was in search of a special gift for him. Actually, it's why we have come to visit you here.”

After a long beat—during which I'm sure Trysolde is waiting for more—the king lifts his eyebrows, mouth flattening with irritation. “And why is that?”

“I heard you might have the item I've been looking for.”

“What do you seek? And why do you think I might be of assistance?”

*Deep breath. Here we go.* “When she was last in Aryd, Queen Istrella mentioned a trinket.”

He taps a gnarled fingertip against the arm of his throne, considering us with a gaze edged in something I can't pin down. But his curiosity and maybe the need to impress Eidolon has him leaning forward slightly. “A trinket, you say?”

I nod. “One she believed you have.”

Trysolde's throat works under the taut skin there, and the look in his eyes darkens to more than suspicion. Instinct has me wanting to back away, but I hold my ground. At the same time, the room dims slightly.

“And what trinket is that?” Trysolde asks in a voice that dares me to say it out loud.

“An amulet made of black glass.”

## Underneath It All

I don't know what I expected, but it isn't for the king to laugh. A humorless, penetrating bark of a sound, revealing teeth blackened as if lined in tar. The few people in the room move to circle us.

As if *we're* the threat.

Do they not see the state of their sovereign?

Yes, at first glance, he appears bursting with good health, almost too pretty to look directly at. But it's like evil is wearing a Trysolde skin suit.

The daylight dims even more. I keep my focus on the king and hope really, really hard that Reven is the one doing that thing with the light and it's not the Shadows...or something else.

"An amulet?" Trysolde says through his sour laughter. The king's gaze lingers on Reven a moment, then moves back to me. His eyes narrow suddenly as his shoulders hunch over. "You don't know what you're asking for."

All it takes is that one small gesture—the way he rounds his back, folding protectively over himself—and I know. He's wearing the amulet now. He lied to his queen about getting rid of it.

*His goddess is here. With him.*

My own goddess remains silent.

"I know more than you think."

Trysolde scoffs. "So do I. For instance..." He points a gnarled finger. "I know he is not Eidolon. And you are *not* welcome here, young Queen of Aryd."

Every one of his men slowly straightens, and I know they are readying for a fight.

Despite my pounding heart, I bend a haughty look of command, one I know Grandmother would have clapped her hands to see, over this pathetic, power-mad imitation of a king. "I'm not leaving without it."

His lips curl back. "Then you aren't leaving alive."

At his nod, the men circling us attack. But it's Vos's ice, not shadow, that shoots through the room, freezing at least three of them where they stand. A

familiar whistle shoots by me as Horus emerges from a side chamber behind the throne and runs past, bow and arrow already nocked again and firing. But more of Trysolde's people emerge, too. By the sounds of fighting behind me, I know the others made it inside and are taking care of them.

In the midst of the fighting, I walk slowly toward the king, who is cowering in his throne now, face ravaged by hate and fear.

"Your queen wants her bondmate returned to her." I have to raise my voice over the sounds of fighting. "And I *will* have the amulet hidden beneath your clothes."

At the mention of Istrella, Trysolde's expression ripples. If I hadn't been around Reven so much, I don't know that I would have caught it. Caught the flash of the true face, the true heart, of the king. This man is so altered that he's lost himself.

But he still loves Istrella. Underneath it all.

Reven is at my back as I move forward. The shadows remain undisturbed around me as I continue to approach the king, and I'm hoping that means he's holding them in reserve until we really need them.

Out of the corner of my eye, Trysolde's warden comes at me, getting close. But Hakan takes him down, holding a wickedly curved dagger to the man's throat.

The entire chamber goes quiet at that moment, and I have to assume my friends took care of their business. The way the king is watching me, like he'd slit my throat and drink the blood that spills, I know I shouldn't remove my gaze from him, even to ensure that all the threats have been neutralized. I hold out a hand. "Give it to me."

"If you want it, you'll have to pry it from my stiff corpse."

So fast I don't expect it, Trysolde lunges at me, snapping up a staff I hadn't noticed propped against his throne. The metal staff reforms in an instant to a scythe, the razor-thin blade glinting at me with nasty intent. With a shout to rattle the stones of the chamber, he swings it above his head and hurls it at my chest.

Time seems to slow as the weapon tumbles end over end, the *whomp*, *whomp*, *whomp* of it cutting through the air pounding in my ears. I gasp and only have time to raise my hands in a pathetic defense.

In that instant, a wall of shadow slams up between me and the scythe. The weapon hits with a muffled *thump*, then drops to the ground, clattering against the marble floors. I barely notice as I double over my belly, wrapping

my arms around myself as a queasy sensation threatens to upend my breakfast all over the floor.

Because it almost felt like those shadows came from me.

“For that, you die.” An unworldly voice has me jerking upright to find the wall of shadow still raised between me and the king. Reven stands in the center of the roiling darkness, as though the wall is part of him and he’s part of the wall.

Whatever Reven is doing, Trysolde is so frozen in fear, he looks like Vos hit him with ice. A stringent odor hits my nose, and I glance down to find a yellow puddle seeping out from under the wall...from the king.

I scoot back. *Mother goddess. This is very, very bad.*

## One Down

I reach out to touch the wall of shadow, hoping maybe it only blocks dangerous things like scythes, but nope. It's solid, enclosing the dais. Hellfires. I pound a fist against the wall. "Reven!"

He doesn't react. Not so much as a twitch.

When I brush my hand over my scar, the sensation that feeds through me is rage. Pure, unadulterated rage. I'm pretty sure he's so far gone he can't hear me or feel me.

I need to get around this wall. Fast.

Edging to the side, I reach an angle where I can see more of the side of his face through the veil. Fear steals the breath right out of my lungs because he's doing that thing. The Shadows inside him are cycling, taking over in rapid succession, each face his and yet different. Cunning. Furious. Sneering. Bored.

*Not Reven.*

I do the only thing I can think of to get their attention. "Look at *me*, asshole."

The Shadow snaps his head to the side, staring at me, faces still contorting and twisting and changing. Huh.

"Do you remember what happened last time you tried to take him over?" I shout. "I'll kill you all. Don't think I won't!"

The wall of darkness stutters, then starts to curl in on itself, unfurling in streamers that reach for me.

I lurch back. "Don't test me again." There's a wobble in my voice that gives away my fear. Goddesses above—or in the amulets or whatever—please don't let them have heard that.

Movement draws my attention back to Trysolde. The scythe has turned into a molten metal and is returning to him at his call, his hands glowing yellow at his sides. The mass slithers up the stairs. Reven jerks his attention back to the king, loosing a growl so sinister, even my heart stutters.

"No!" a feminine voice cries out.

Before either man can attack the other, tree roots sprout up from the floor

between them, growing and layering until a hedge of intertwining branches forms around and over the king. A forest of thorns.

Istrella.

Shadow pitches forward, hands on his knees. Reven? But no. The darkness he's wielding doesn't dissipate around him, still reaching for me.

Reven thrusts out a hand behind him...toward me? Confusion keeps me in place. Is he telling me to stay away or asking me to touch him? To try—

I'm at his side on my knees before I even think to move. *Please let this be what he wanted me to do.* I reach out tentatively. Only when I take his hand, darkness shoves me away.

The hells with that.

"Back off," I growl and lunge for him, grasping his hand hard. If the shadows want me off, they'll have to peel me away.

"Meren." That's all he says. A barked reflex of a word. But it's Reven's voice, not one of Eidolon's Shadows.

Is he back in control? "Reven?"

He shoots his other hand up, chest still heaving. "Don't let go."

Let go? If this is helping, I can do more than that. I wrap my arms around his middle, pressing my face to his back. *Please let this make it easier for him.*

His muscles ripple under my cheek as he breathes. Then he pats my hand and forces himself upright. Bringing us both to standing, he pulls me around to his side so I can see his face, determination hardening the sharp edges of his features. Lacing our fingers together, he bends a look on the barricade of foliage before us. The shadows, still wavering in the air like they don't know what to do, suddenly shoot out from him again. Forming into a single thin band, shadow punches through the queen's thorny tomb, and I think I hear the metallic *tink* of a chain on the other side. Is he trying to take the amulet?

Reven wraps his hands around the line of shadow like a rope and pulls, but nothing moves. He digs in, leaning back, the muscles of his arms and back straining the seams of his clothes.

Still no movement from the other side.

A great yell punches from him, reverberating all around me. Something on the other side gives way, and Reven flies backward. In a blink, he disappears, then reappears in a crouch.

The rope of darkness dissipates, but whatever he pulled out—something still shadowy and shapeless—floats up to the buttressed rafters. I think maybe

a menacing laugh goes with it, reminding me of the temple in Tyndra, and then it's gone, too. Reven stares up at it, chest heaving.

"What just happened?"

He doesn't look at me. "I'm not sure."

He's not sure or he doesn't want to tell me?

That's when I hear Istrella. A small gasp, then, on the other side of her hedge, low murmurs. Loving murmurs. I can only make out a few words. Only the queen speaks.

"...time to let it go..."

"...can't you see how this has ruined you...ruined us..."

"...return to me, my love..."

Then the soft, heart-wrenching sounds of sobbing. The king.

With a creak like leather being twisted, the prickly hedge starts to move, branches unwinding and unbending until, through a gap, Istrella's handleless wrist emerges, a black glass amulet so like mine dangling off her arm.

I reach out to take it.

"Stop."

I snatch my hand back at Reven's curt warning.

"We don't know what the amulets can do."

Right.

Visibly struggling, a small tongue of darkness retrieves the amulet from the queen. Then that pocket of shadow where I know Reven hides things appears and the necklace is slipped inside. Where Eidolon's Shadows can't find it, but also, I suspect, where it hopefully can't have any adverse effect on anyone.

Smart. And maybe the most self-sacrificing, foolish move Reven could make, given the way he's already battling evil. Carrying around a potentially dangerous amulet is only going to make things harder for him.

As the pocket closes, disappearing from sight, the darkness inside me tugs uncomfortably.

There's movement from within the thorns and brambles. Branches pull back one by one, drawing back into the queen. She kneels before the king, who still sits on the throne, elbows propped on his knees, head in his hands.

As we watch, the forced youth that had held him in thrall falls away. A groan of pain escapes his lips as he doubles over and rapidly ages before our eyes. It's like he's experiencing all of it at once, twitching and moaning as his body catches up with time in a process that is both fascinating and gruesome

to watch. When he lifts his head, his eyes are no longer as bright, his hair not so red. There's silver at his temples and age spots on his cheeks. He's still a handsome man, but now he matches his queen. He stares at Istrella, searching her face, then crumples.

"Istrella," he whispers. Then his breath hitches. "It wasn't me."

Tears welling in her eyes, the queen smiles and places her lips to his cheek. "I know."

He reaches for her hands, but when he only encounters the blunt ends of her wrists, he drops his gaze to stare, stricken. His expression breaks. "The voice told me you were evil..."

Voice? Is he talking about the goddess inside the amulet or something else?

"What have I done to you?" he whispers.

Istrella surges forward, wrapping her arms around him. "You could never, my love. It wasn't you."

Trysolde takes a shuddering breath, gathering her close against him, holding her so tightly, fingers digging into her flesh. I worry he might snap her, but she makes no protest. As they hold each other, she looks back toward us. "Thank you."

All I can do is nod.

Horus is the one to break the moment, though his voice is low, respectful. "We have to go."

The king is no longer entranced. That's obvious to anyone with two eyes and a brain. His people won't try to stop us as we leave, but there's an urgency underlying Horus's voice.

He's right. The plan was to get in and out as fast as possible.

Trysolde and Istrella get to their feet, still wrapped in each other.

"Go," she says. "We can't keep your presence a secret easily, but we won't be the ones to tell Eidolon, either."

That's the best they can do. We don't wait, making for the door.

"Sorry, brother," Vos tosses at a man on the floor who's nursing a bleeding nose. "Stay out of my way next time."

He gets a blood-soaked glare in return, which only makes him grin. Behind him, Hakan grins, too. So does Pella.

No one stops us as we burst out of the room. We did it. We actually did it. As long as we get out of the dominion safely, we now have two of the six amulets. Four to go.



That moment of jubilant back-patting lasts all of two seconds before Reven wobbles, then leans heavily against the wall, skin going clammy pale.

“Hells,” Vos mutters and moves to Reven’s side, levering him up so he takes Reven’s weight. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Is there a back way out of the castle?” Horus asks, glancing over his shoulder as we make our way through the empty halls. The people must’ve heard the ruckus of the fight and cleared out, because the place is almost as barren as the Tyndran temple.

“There are many ways out of the castle,” Reven says in a thready voice. “But only one way over the moat.”

“Better check for blood, then,” Horus says. “The guards won’t know what happened and aren’t likely to let us pass if we appear looking like we’ve been in a battle.”

We all pull up short at that, because he’s right. If we don’t want to be stopped on our way out, not looking like we just busted a few heads together is a good start. Reven and I are fine—that much I know. The others, however, were in close-quarters hand-to-hand combat. Pella, in particular, is covered.

“I didn’t do anything all that violent,” she insists when Hakan lifts a single eyebrow at her, although I’m pretty sure he’s amused rather than horrified. Pella doesn’t see that, though, and grumbles, “That soldier spit a mouthful of blood all over me.”

“You knocked out his teeth,” Hakan points out.

I’m the only one with something on hand that can cover her up. “Here.” I whip the fur-trimmed cloak off my shoulders.

She backs up like I’m offering her poison. “I can’t wear that. They’d know. I’m not wearing anything near that nice, and it will look strange.”

“Not if you keep it closed,” I say. “It’s better than the blood.”

Without a word, Hakan takes it from me and wraps it around her.

Pella goes as stiff as a bamboo reed as he ties the collar around her neck. Her gaze is trained on him like she’s waiting for him to strike her. “I thought you couldn’t touch.”

His gaze flickers to her. “I can if I’m very, very...careful.”

“Keep moving,” Vos says, hefting Reven along.

We make our way out of the rest of the castle unhindered. When we hit the open courtyard where everyone is going about their daily lives as though something huge hasn’t just happened inside, Reven insists on walking on his own. Somehow, he manages to do it without looking like he’s about to fall

over, and the guards allow us to pass through the portcullis without comment. I shouldn't yet, but I breathe a small sigh of relief, glancing over my shoulder. We haven't been followed, and we haven't been stopped.

All we need to do now is get to the temple and the portal within.

We can all rest when we get back to the Queen's Tower—

“Release the queen and the Shadowraith to me, and no harm will come to you.”

The people around where we stand at the end of the lowered drawbridge scatter like sandrats abandoning a building on fire.

Standing before us is a soldier in Tyndran uniform, but black, rather than white. The insignia on his distinctive armor is that of a general. I recognize his gleaming bald head.

General Quinten.

I don't dare a glance at Vos or Reven. With the general stand at least twenty soldiers, and by their faces, I know these are well-trained fighters. No doubt a few Imperium are among their ranks.

Quinten's gaze travels over our ragtag little group, pausing on me, then Vos, before narrowing on Reven.

Vos doesn't hesitate. His power snaps out from him with an audible *crack*, encasing the soldiers in ice the same way he did in the throne room, only this time, rather than just their feet, he's trapped them in tombs of it.

*My stars.*

Pella grabs my arm, tugging me along as she backs us all up onto the bridge.

"That will only hold them for a few minutes," Vos says. "Reven?"

Reven is barely standing. There's no way he should use his power now. "He can't—"

"He has to!"

Immediately, shadow reaches for me, but I jerk back—not like that should stop him, but it does. "Can you do this?"

He glances at the frozen soldiers. "I have no choice."

Seven hells.

"Take the others first. I can help here." I ignite the glow of my hands, pulling sand up from the bottom of the moat, sifting it through the loose mud and muck.

"Are you kidding me—" Pella's protest is cut off mid-word when Reven grabs her and Horus and they're gone in a puff of darkness.

A terrible noise, rhythmic and pulsing, clangs against the insides of my

ears. The frozen ice sheathing the Tyndrans starts to vibrate. That's the only warning we get before it explodes in a blast that sends shards everywhere, knocking us all to the ground.

Horus throws himself over me, grunting with the impact of the ice, then comes up firing his bow. One of Quinten's soldiers goes down.

Vos throws out a wall of ice, but this time, that horrendous pulsing comes sooner. General Quinten, hands raised and lit with a sickly yellow glow, smirks. That sound is coming from him. He's attacking Vos's frozen defense as fast as it forms. If he can do that, my glass and sand won't stand a chance.

On a nerve-rendering shout, the soldiers run at us.

Like the lash of a whip, lightning almost blinds me as Hakan sends a bolt screaming past us across the bridge, hitting a soldier in the chest. It's too bright to see what happens to that guy, but through my stupor, the strangest taste of metal coats my mouth, along with a burning scent in the air.

Reven reappears and immediately pitches forward and vomits.

"Take her," Vos snaps, though he doesn't look away from what he's doing.

Shadow reaches for me, but just as fast, it fades, like dark mist burning away in the sun. Dawning horror breaks over Reven's features a beat before a new darkness descends, covering the city in night.

Eidolon.

"If you two would only cooperate, it wouldn't have to be this way," the king's voice calls from across the bridge. But then he appears out of nothing, standing before us, utterly casual in his stance. Like he's taking a walk in a park.

Asshole.

The king raises his hands. Reven moves in front of me even as I brace.

With no warning, the moat explodes, water erupting in a massive wave. No...not the water. The sand from under the water shoots into the air, and I'm not the one controlling it. It swirls in a violent tornado, the sound of which makes it impossible to hear the screaming of any people still nearby as they run.

It happens so fast, I don't realize what it is until Bene, growing rapidly to full-size Devourer form before our eyes, comes down on top of where the king was standing. I catch Eidolon's look of shock before he disappears. The last thing I see is Bene roaring to the high heavens, a challenge loud enough to wake the dead, before darkness surrounds me in an instant, stealing my vision.

I can feel Reven's hand wrapped around my arm. At least, I hope it's him.

Then my vision clears and I'm standing with Reven and Hakan beside the portal in the Remirel Temple.

Reven is gone before I can blink.

"Halt!" A shout comes from behind me.

I don't bother to look. Quinten is a smart man. So is Eidolon. I have no doubt he has soldiers positioned in this temple in case we tried to flee this way.

Bet that bastard didn't see a goddess-damned Devourer coming.

Igniting my power, I push it into the portal in front of me. The carved dragon guarding the glass stares down as the image changes, and Hakan and I jump through to find Pella and Horus already waiting in the Queen's Tower, both with weapons trained directly on the portal. Cain and Tziah are with them, also ready to fight.

I cut off the portal.

"Eidolon showed up," I tell them. "Bene surprised him, but..."

How long could that surprise last, really? Reven, Vos, and Bene are still out there. I want to keep the portal open for them, but I can't.

How in Nova did Eidolon know we were in Remirel? In the capital today of all days. I don't think Istrella would have warned him, and we haven't been back to Aryd. Is our spy problem closer than I thought? One of us? Except...Omma. Omma went back to Aryd, and I told her our plan.

Seven burning hells.

We watch the glass and wait. Our murky reflections stare back at us, serious and tight-lipped. I don't realize I'm fisting and unfisting my hands until the movement catches my eye in the distorted reflection. I'm not the only one. Horus is fidgeting with his bow.

Pella takes to pacing behind us. "They should be here by now."

Nothing happens.

Tziah comes up beside me, slipping one hand into mine and squeezing tight. All I can do is squeeze back and wait. I hate this. I hate not knowing. I hate anyone being in danger. I did this. I put them in this situation. This was all my idea.

Tziah taps her heart, then holds her hand toward the portal, and I think I know what she's saying. They'll make it out. They have to.

I would know, wouldn't I? If something happened to Reven. I'd feel it in my scars, right? Except he's been blocking me even harder since the night in

the water garden. Still, I slide my free hand over the scar in my side, which flutters at my touch but nothing else.

*I would know. The shadows would tell me.*

The words loop in my head.

I can't lose him. Or Vos. Or Bene. Any of them. Losing these people, these true friends, would devastate me. Losing Reven, even when he can't be mine...I think that would end me.

My muscles bunch with every passing second, winding tighter and tighter until I might snap. Then the glass changes.

"Drop!" Vos shouts as he holds the portal open with one glowing hand on it, then starts coughing so hard, it takes me a second to comprehend what he said. But Tziah is faster and yanks me down by our joined hands right as arrows fly through the portal, barely missing us.

Soldiers are right behind Reven, who sprints through the temple rooms toward us. Bene is dog-size again, flying through the Remirel temple overhead but behind where the soldiers are. He bellows that horrible, ground-shaking challenge of a Devourer, and it's enough to stop the soldiers dead in their tracks.

It buys us time.

Reven and Vos tumble through to our side just as Bene whizzes over the soldiers' heads and through the portal as well. Vos cuts off his power, and the glass changes in an instant, reflecting us now, all our faces a tumult of shock. We all lie on the cold stone floor, the sound of our harsh breathing filling the room.

"Report," Hakan demands. "Is anyone injured?"

"Perfect as a pearl," Vos says through more coughing. He sits up and wipes the back of his sleeve across his mouth, leaving a trail of blood.

"Um..." Pella points.

He glances at the blood, then wipes it on his pants.

"Reven?" I ask, rolling over to push to my hands and knees.

No answer.

I shove myself to my feet, whipping around to search for him, and choke. He's standing strong, shadow swirling around him like how I picture the waters of the great whirlpool that sits at the mouth of the Marianan inland bay. His eyes are consumed with darkness as Eidolon's Shadows play across his face.

He's not fighting them off. He's...embracing them?

My heart drops to the ground. Heavens to hells, this will *not* end well.

There's only one thought in my head. One that didn't work in the water garden but did in Trysolde's throne room. I think. Which makes this a wild, stupid gambit.

I lunge for him.

Cain grabs my arm. "Don't!"

I break his grip and get to Reven in a breath, hands on either side of his face, willing him to hold on.

"I'm here." I say the words softly and with hope. I'm speaking to him. I'm also speaking to the shadows I supposedly can control. *Listen to me.*

The shadows flowing from him wind past me, but it's like I'm not even there. Not even a whisper of a touch.

"Reven. Look at me, damn you."

He tips his chin down then, and a face—not his—settles over his features. His crooked mouth tilts. "Reven can't come now, love. You'll have to deal with me."

I reach down and press a hand to my scar. No movement inside me, either.

It's not working.

The last thing I want to do is kiss a Shadow, but...

I crush my lips to his, willing him to find me through the things gripping his soul. "Come back to me," I murmur against his mouth. "I know you're in there. Come back."

A *shunk* whistles past my ear, followed by a hollow grunt from Reven. He shoves me bodily behind him as he wheels on Cain. With a wave of his hand, the arrow protruding from Reven's shoulder disappears into a wisp of darkness.

A minor display of what he could do to Cain himself.

"You *shot* him?" I shout. "Are you out of your *mind*?"

To my right, the glass of the portal suddenly changes to clear, revealing at least twenty soldiers standing in the portal room of Wildernyss. Hells, of course they could get here. Several saw where we went.

On the heels of that realization, I see him.

Eidolon.

He stalks through the Remirel temple toward the portal, raising glowing purple hands.

Like a moment out of time, Reven slowly looks at me. Blinks those midnight-black eyes. Then turns back to Eidolon, face going hard.

*Oh no.*

Cain grabs my wrist and jerks me away before I have a chance to brace myself for what I know is coming.

Shadow explodes from Reven. The familiarity of the silence, the nothingness that takes me over for several heartbeats, strikes a chord of horror, because I know what he's doing.

This is the same as the night in the Shadowwood when he obliterated the soldiers and barbarians bearing down on us. The same night he trapped their souls there, turning that safe haven into something evil.

I exist in that emptiness long enough to whisper his name, not that the sound penetrates the nothingness around me. Then my vision returns abruptly, the sensation like running into a wall. I barely have time to see that not a soul stands on the other side of the portal, every soldier gone as if they'd never existed.

Only Eidolon still stands there, untouched, his face etched in shock.

Then his lips stretch into a wide, crooked smile, turquoise eyes glittering with unholy delight. "Look at what you did." His gaze slides to me. "Even you can be corrupted. If it's for *her*."

Reven's eyes roll back in his head, and he collapses, hitting the ground with a heavy *thud*.

Movement from the other side of the portal has me tearing my gaze from him as Eidolon raises his glowing hands.

On a guttural cry, I throw my hands up with only one thought, and the glass of Istrella's magical portal shatters.



## Letting Go

A breathless silence hangs over the room. Shards of glass are suspended in the air like raindrops that froze in time. On a shriek, I shut off the power and drop my hands, and all the glass falls to the stone floor with a tinkling hiss.

Tziah makes it to Reven's side first. She looks up, signing that he's okay, just out cold.

Shock is starting to take over. I'm vaguely aware of the others talking as I'm staring at Reven and going back over what happened.

Mother goddess, what he did...how fast he went so dark. He's going to add that to his heaping plate of guilt. And I shattered a portal. Istrella's secret portal. And what if Reven can't come back? Eidolon's Shadows are in charge, and I can't...

Cain is in my face, giving my shoulders a tiny shake. "We have to get out of here. Meren." Another shake. "Can you do it?"

Do it? I blink at him.

"Make a portal," he says. His dark brown eyes are imploring and frustrated at the same time.

A portal? Reality whips through me. Eidolon saw where we were. He can't make a portal, but the bastard can shadow. We can't stay here.

I glance at the ground. The remnants of the other portal are scattered all around me.

*Please, goddess, let this work again.* I just need incentive, right? Not having Eidolon show up while Reven is unconscious should do the trick.

Lifting shaking hands, I pull my power forward again in a tingling rush of warmth. It happens at the pace of a sand slug, but the glass forms little dunes that merge until I have one pile. When I will the mass to change form, it does, turning golden and glowing with the heat, melting and molding together until new glass begins to form into a solid piece.

Relief is a stomach-clenching twist when, on the first try, I make something usable that doesn't shatter or fall over. Thank the goddess.

Black dots dance across my vision. I pushed myself too hard, too fast. I might pass out, but at least we'll be able to get away from here.

As soon as it stops glowing, I put my hand to it and picture the portal I want to go through on the other side. I grab Cain's arm to steady myself. "Go," I tell the others. "Fast."

We're through the portal to Yolyn Zag, Reven dragged by Horus and Vos together, Cain practically carrying me despite his own injuries, and trying not to draw attention to ourselves—which is pretty damn impossible, given our various modes of dress, all for colder weather, the bloody state of some of us, and the unconscious Shadowraith who looks like King Eidolon in our midst.

Cain and Pella leave the rest of us hunkered down in the temple with Reven and return fairly quickly with clothes and horses for all of us. I don't bother asking how. They manage to throw Reven over one horse's back and disguise him as a sack of supplies. By some miracle, we make our way out through the city and beyond into the desert without incident.

Which means Eidolon, Quinten, and their men haven't tracked us down.

Or they have but decided not to attack. Yet.

I'm thinking Bene has the most to do with that. No way would they expect us to have a Devourer on our side. It'll make them rethink their strategies, at least.

And then there's the issue of Reven disappearing goddess knows how many of Tyndra's soldiers. The last time he did it in the Shadowwood, he managed to take out the soldiers in the tower twenty or more leagues away. I'm guessing none of the soldiers in Wildernyss were safe. Quinten, if he survived, will need to regroup. And Eidolon...

Well, now he knows what he's up against.

But do I?

Eidolon's words circle over and over in my mind.

*Even you can be corrupted. If it's for her.*

It wasn't the words, entirely, but the way he said it. Almost gleeful, like he was delighted to see exactly how dark Reven is willing to go. For me, though? He was protecting all of us and probably trying to kill Eidolon... right?

By the time we meet up with the zariphate, at sunset two days after getting to Aryd, Reven is awake. And himself, thank the goddesses. He was Shadow when he passed out, so we weren't sure.

After a single, groggy blink, I got a single surge of gut-curdling guilt down the line of our connection before he came to enough to shut me off again. Since then, he's been shaky, silent, and set apart from us even more than

before.

I hate it.

I hate that he's hurting. I hate that there's nothing I can do to help him. I hate that he can't let me try anyway. And that I understand why.

Being understanding sucks. No wonder Pella is always so grumpy, as an empath.

Just for added fun for me, Reven also still has anger radiating off him like a mirage in the noon sun, all directed at me. And judging by the looks I've gotten from Cain, for once those two are on the same side. They're both mad at me for risking myself to help him.

All of this to say that, as we come into the camp, every single one of us is hot, sweaty, exhausted, and in a piss-poor mood.

The zariphate camp is bustling when we reach it, having just settled after traveling through the heat of the day, still sticking to that pattern of evasive daytime traveling. As I dismount, I see Reven, under the cover of the chaos of greetings stirred up by our arrival, stalk off by himself. I try not to watch, but I do anyway, until he's out of sight. When I look away, it's to find Cain staring at me over the back of his horse.

Not at me. At the cuff on my wrist. A flicker of happiness crosses his features, but then he glances up to catch me watching and schools it.

I don't bother to hide a long sigh. All I want is to get to a tent and be alone for a while.

"You're here!"

Vida's cry is a welcome distraction. She runs my way and throws her arms around me. I guess I'm getting used to how much she likes to hug, because I don't even stiffen. Just hug her back.

"You okay?" she asks.

I nod, then start digging through my saddlebags. "I have something for you." I produce her shears. On a sheer stroke of luck, I'd given them to Tziah, who'd had them in her pocket when we came through my portal.

Vida gives a small squeal of delight. "You remembered!"

Which makes me smile. At least *someone* is happy.

She hugs them to her chest, and then her eyes light up as she looks over my shoulder. "Oh my goddess, Hakan!" She runs to him, though she's careful not to touch. A happy reunion, if the small crack of a smile he gives is any indication.

"My son has returned!" the zariph booms as he appears from around the

side of a tent.

None of us are in a talkative mood, and maybe Cain's father can see that, because after clasping hands with Cain and nodding at Pella, rather than demanding details, he takes one look at the rest of us and says, "Bathe, eat, rest. We'll leave in the morning after sunrise. We can talk before we break camp in the morning."

We should be going to the next dominion in the morning, not continuing on with the zariphate. Eidolon could be closing in on another amulet as we sleep.

Zariph Cainis blocks my path before I can leave. "Your...er...Omma arrived."

It's probably the stress, but I can't stop from huffing a laugh, and then blink in surprise as the zariph offers a genuine, if rueful, grin.

I glance around. "Is she making herself useful?"

"That's one way of putting it." He harrumphs. "Your sister is now housed right beside my tent."

I'm pretty sure he wouldn't appreciate me laughing about that, which would probably come out sarcastic anyway, so I nod. "I'd better check on them both."

Cainis nods, and no one, not even Cain, stops me.

Sure enough, they've set Tabra up right in the center of the camp. A lone tent with a wide moat of sand surrounding it. All the other tents, including the zariph's, are a good distance away, but this is much better.

"Meren," a voice calls out before I go inside.

Horus hurries toward me.

Eyebrows raised, I wait for him. "Do you need something?"

He hitches his chin at the tent. "You shouldn't go in there."

"It's daylight. Tabra should be okay to visit for now."

He looks at me in question.

"The zaripha told me Tabra is...more herself...in the daylight."

He still looks dubious, though, so I say, "Achlys will probably be in there, and there are guards." I wave at the Wanderers standing on either side of the opening.

Horus doesn't even spare them a glance. "I'd feel better if you let me check first. You go clean up, and I'll come find you."

Does he think I'm reckless, too, after helping Reven? I'm doing the best I can. "I can't ask you to—"

“You didn’t ask. I offered.”

He must catch my hesitation, because he shuffles his feet.

“I couldn’t protect my own sister, my only family, and I lost my honor and my place in my zariphate and in this world all the same. Let me serve you. Let me regain my honor at your side.”

I know what he’s asking. Picturing the rips in his coat after he protected me from the blood bear in Tyndra, part of me doesn’t want to accept the offer because it means he is tying his life to mine the same way mine is tied to Tabra’s. As a sacrifice.

A flash of a horse-sized sandy form tells me Bene is overhead. Watching. Reminding me I already have a Devourer as a protector. Except Bene’s not here for me—he’s here for his goddess. Besides, Horus has been a true friend.

This is his *choice*, which I will respect. For that reason alone, I give a small, jerking nod and use words Omma taught me. “It would esteem me greatly.”

Horus’s chin lifts, eyes crinkling and a pride radiating from him I haven’t seen before. “I’ll come get you when I know it’s safe.” He flicks a glance toward the camp.

I turn away from the tent and head to my room inside the zariph’s tent only to stop cold, still holding the door open.

Reven is here.

He’s standing alone in the center of the space. When did he circle around this way?

We stare at each other. For once, I have no idea what to say.

“You shouldn’t have—”

I cut him off. “I know. I thought because you reached for me in Wildernyss, and it seemed to help...” I grimace. “I know now.”

He settles back into an uncompromising stance, feet planted wide, arms crossed. The shadows inside me feel like nothing. “Eid—” He cuts off. “He was right.”

I slash a hand through the air. “No. He’s trying to get into your head. Into all our heads. Don’t believe—”

“It was so easy.”

It feels like everything around me, inside me, goes dead still. I don’t want to know, do I? I swallow. “Easy?”

“To let his Shadows do that.”

Wait. “You weren’t fighting them?”

His expression is torn. “I didn’t want to stop them.”

My gasp fills the hole of silence.

“The soldiers were coming,” Reven continues. “*Eidolon* was coming, and you were there.”

*For her.* *Eidolon’s* words echo in my mind. But what the king doesn’t know is that I’d also burn down the world for Reven. Corrupted. That’s what *Eidolon* said. Because of me. If he hadn’t passed out, would he even have regained control? I reach out a hand, but he leans back, so I drop it. “So...we need to figure out if I can actually do anything. You need help.”

“I don’t deserve—”

“Stop.” It comes out harsh and frustrated and scared. “Just stop it. You showed me your heart the day you showed me the Vanished. You *save* people—that is the core of who you are, no matter the evil you come from or that you contain. You deserve to be helped.”

His jaw works. He holds up a hand, ticking off on his fingers the words he’s now throwing at me like weapons. “I could kill the Vanished as easily as I saved them. I’m not sure what I did to Trysolde. I wiped out those soldiers at the temple. Again. Even knowing what that means. Fuck, Meren. Those souls are trapped now because of me. Their deaths are on my hands. That temple will be—”

He cuts himself off, and I can see the guilt working under his features, and it’s killing me.

“Meren?” a voice calls into my room.

Horus. I almost forgot that he was going to come for me.

## Achlys's Story

Horus is waiting outside my door. Is he paler, or is it a trick of the sun that is starting to lower in the skies? Oh goddess. "Is Tabra—"

"There is no change."

I balance somewhere between relief she isn't dead and disappointment that she isn't improved. I'd hoped, with both Achlys and now Omma tending to her, that maybe...

I follow Horus across the open expanse of sand between the tents the Vanished—who have been moved, too—sleep in and Tabra's at the center. Reven comes with us, sending surprise rippling through me.

Horus draws back the flap, and we duck inside. Achlys is there, kneeling beside my sister, who lies still on the ground. She wipes at her face with a cool cloth. Her expression is controlled, but I can see the love in every gentle touch.

Omma is standing off to the side.

My last thought about her was that she might have been the one who betrayed our location in Wildernyss, but as soon as I see her face, I know that she can't be the traitor. Her information must have made it to the traitor when she arrived in the zariphate.

As soon as she sees *my* face, she scowls, an expression so familiar I actually relax. Now I'm nostalgic for her scowls? That's messed up.

She also puts herself between us and Tabra.

No. Not us.

Between *Reven* and Tabra.

She eyes him up and down at her imperious best. "So, you're the Shadowraith Meren told me of."

I have no idea what Reven does, because he's standing behind me, but I do see the way Omma takes a tiny step back.

"So, you're the woman who...raised her," he replies softly.

I know that tone. I'm not surprised when Omma actually swallows. "I did the best I could."

"Uh-huh." Every doubt and accusation lives in that one sound.

Leaving them to square off, I check on Tabra, who seems to be sleeping peacefully. She's still chained to the ground, but Achlys has made her comfortable with soft cloth around the shackles to protect her skin, extra pillows, and a thicker pallet to sleep on. I want to believe that Tabra looks a little better, but I would be fooling myself.

I won't wake her, not when she's sleeping so soundly. I know we can't stay long. It'll be dark soon, and not as safe, but I can take a moment to just be with her. I look up at Achlys and pat the floor at my side. After a small hesitation, she joins me, and we both watch my sister sleep.

"Will you tell me about the two of you?" I ask.

Given the way she stills, she probably thinks the question came out of nowhere, but I've wondered for a long time.

Achlys draws a pattern in the sand with her fingertip. "I knew I loved Tabra when I was twelve."

Blinking, I stare at her. Tabra hasn't even admitted the true status of their relationship to me yet. Achlys has never openly acknowledged it, either. "Twelve?"

She nods, not looking at me. "When I was ten, I was brought to the palace by my mother, who served the queen until her death."

"Why Aryd?"

"Mother had a disease in her chest, like she was drowning, and the dry air here was supposed to help. Though I grew up in a small village my entire life, my mother had served the queen in Tropikis. We rarely saw her in those days. When she got sick, that domina sent her here. Mother brought me because I was finally old enough to learn her skills."

I remember that much. Achlys was "given" to Tabra...and therefore me... at the time. Grandmother felt that she'd grow with us. I even remember her mother, also a redhead, who would often come show Achlys how to do things.

It's hard to imagine, but Achlys was even quieter then, with big, fear-filled eyes and freckles that stood out in stark relief against her pale skin. "You reminded me of a timid ghost."

She huffs a small laugh. "I was scared of everyone and everything. This place and the palace were so different from my village, and because I was assigned to the princess my first day, the other servants resented me."

"I remember Tabra hating that. She was worried for you."

She blinks at me. "She knew?"



“We both did.” I grimace. “She tried to fix it once, talk to the woman who headed the servants at the time, but it only seemed to make it worse for you.”

Achlys nods.

“So what happened with you and Tabra?”

“I was doing Tabra’s makeup. By then I’d started to figure out there were two of you.”

I smile, laying my cheek against my knees.

She goes back to tracing the sand. “I dropped an expensive tin of gold dust, and it broke on the marble floor. One of the other girls got so angry she tried to hit me.”

I straighten. “Who?” I’ll kick them out of the palace as soon as this is over.

“It doesn’t matter.” Achlys’s smile is the closest to self-satisfied I think she’s ever shown in my presence. “She’s gone now. Tabra jumped between us so that she was the one who took the hit.”

I whip a startled gaze to my sister. She’s still sleeping, though, and Achlys chuckles.

“I’ve never seen your sister—even when it was you pretending to be her—so angry. She was only twelve, and the other girl was fifteen and quite tall. But Tabra backed her into a corner using the softest, scariest voice.” Achlys smiles to herself, gaze going hazy, clearly lost in the memory. “I didn’t know she could sound like that. Like a little angry, buzzing bee. I haven’t heard it since.”

“I can’t even picture it.”

She shrugs. “That girl was dismissed from the palace. None of the other servants ever bothered me again. But the fact that Tabra would put herself between me and harm...for a servant, a nobody... I knew I’d love her the rest of my life.”

I give a hum of contentment. That’s how love should be. At the same time, a deep sadness wells up that I didn’t know this before. My sister and my friend have had this secret life that I only flitted in and out of, oblivious most of the time. I wish...

No. It’s too late for wishing, which changes nothing. I can only change how I go forward. “Did Tabra feel the same?”

Achlys hesitates. “I don’t know when she fell in love with me. I didn’t let myself show her my feelings for years or ever believe she could feel the same. But on your sixteenth birthday, I was getting her ready for the name day celebration. The other servants had left the room on her order as I

finished her hair. When I was done, she placed her hands on my face.”

Achlys reaches up to touch her cheeks, which flush deep red. “She said, ‘Someday I hope you’ll let me kiss you. Because I really want to.’”

My heart stutters in my chest. My sister being so bold. And so... Phew. If Reven did that to me right now... “Wow.”

“Yeah,” Achlys whispers. “Wow.”

I look across at Tabra...or what’s left of her. Even hollowed-out and sallow, her face is so peaceful in sleep. A desperate wish to wake her and get her side of the story, learn when she fell in love with Achlys and how she dared to approach her, all of it, washes over me. But I don’t. Maybe another time.

“I’ll take care of her.” Achlys reaches over and takes my hand. “I’ll put myself between her and harm. Always.”

I squeeze her hand. “I wouldn’t trust her with anyone else.”

The words aren’t even out of my mouth when a subtle movement crosses Tabra’s face.

*A familiar ripple.*

One I’ve seen cross the face of someone I love more times than I care to count.

Which is when the thing inside my sister smiles.

“Mother goddess.” I scramble back in a flailing of arms, trying to drag Achlys with me. I don’t stop until I hit Reven’s feet. “It can’t be—” I reach behind me to grip Reven’s ankle. “Did you see that?”

I catch the stricken expression tightening Reven’s features.

“See what?” Omma demands, peering down at my sister from where she’s standing on Tabra’s other side like she’s expecting a saw-scaled basilisk to slither out from under Tabra’s pallet.

But I’m already on my feet, grabbing Reven’s arms. “*Did you see it?*”

His eyes go flat like dark pools of moonless midnight as he stares at Tabra. “I wasn’t sure what I pulled out of Trysolde.”

I frown. What is he talking about? “That thing that floated away?”

He doesn’t answer.

I picture that moment in Wildernyss. Reven struggling so hard with that rope before it finally gave way, followed by the shapeless form of darkness that floated to the top of the room before dissipating, right before Istrella gave us Trysolde’s amulet.

Was that—

I glance at Reven, the question on my tongue. But his expression is so dark, I know whatever answer he gives me will be bad.

“I know what Eidolon poisoned her with.”

Draw the  
Poison Out

“What poison?” Achlys demands when neither of us speaks. “Can you fix it?”

The blood leaves my head so fast, I think I’m going to faint. I train my gaze on Tabra, who is still sleeping. I know what I saw. I *know* it.

A face. *His* face.

That can only mean one thing. I take a shuddering breath. “Is it—”

“Yes.”

Son of a viper. I can’t fix this, but Reven might be able to. Except we were just talking about how his control is hanging on by a rapidly unwinding thread. What I’d be asking him to do is huge. Do we even have a choice, though?

“Reven, can you...” I trail off. I can’t even get it out.

A muscle ticks at the side of his eye.

“Can he what? What aren’t you telling us?” Achlys demands, climbing to her feet. “What’s wrong with her?”

“A Shadow,” Reven says, his voice dangerously low. “Eidolon poisoned her with a Shadow, and he did the same thing to King Trysolde.”

I frown. I’m not so sure it’s a Shadow. Not if Reven took them all. Eidolon wouldn’t be after him if there were spare Shadows hanging around.

“Leave the room,” Reven growls. “*All* of you.”

Omnia reacts at the same time as me. “The hells you say!” we both snap.

Reven slashes me a glittering look. “Goddess damn it, Meren—”

I tip my chin up. This is nonnegotiable. “She’s my sister, and you’re my...” I pause, swallowing hard. “I am *not* leaving.”

He glares at me, and I glare right back.

“Horus.” Reven takes me by the shoulders, backing me up across the room. He positions me beside the Wanderer, as close to the door as he can put me without backing me out of the tent completely. “Be ready to get her out of here. Knock her out if you have to. The others are on their own, but watch them.”

Horus nods once. “You have my word.”

“Hey!” I say to him. As my guard, he should only be obeying *my* orders now.

“My duty is to your safety, domina,” he replies. “His order aligns with that duty.”

Reven stalks back over to Tabra, ignoring Omma, who shakes her head but doesn’t dare try to stop him. Back turned to me, he sucks in a breath and brings his power forward, purple light filling the tent.

I wrap a hand around my amulet. *Please don’t let this end in disaster.*

He holds out one hand toward Tabra, then...nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

I shift on my feet. “Um. What’s happening—”

He hunches over her. “Seven hells. I feel it. It moved at the sound of your voice, Meren.” He drops to his knees, peering closer. “It’s buried inside her, like a tick dug under the skin.”

Omma makes the sign of the sun over her heart. I’ve never once seen her pray or show any kind of faith until this moment.

He puts his hands on either side of Tabra’s face, and she opens her eyes, staring back at him, utterly trusting. Reven leans in and whispers something in her ear. Tabra’s peaceful expression flickers. No. The *face* inside her flickers, and I’m pretty sure it smiles at Reven like it did at me.

Taunting.

Reven’s posture changes, morphing to something of pure, determined concentration. Leaning back slightly, he holds his hand above her heart and wraps it in a fist around something I can’t see. Then yanks hard.

Without warning, Tabra’s head flings back, chest arched into the air, and her eyes and mouth open on a silent scream, agony visibly gripping her body.

“Tabra!” Achlys surges toward her.

Omma snags her by the arm, keeping her back. “Don’t. Let him do this.”

Reven jerks forward, the thing inside her fighting him. He places one hand on the ground beside her and stares into eyes gone soulless as he continues to pull with the other hand. Darkness pulses in the tent. The flames in the brazier flicker before going out, leaving only the light from his hands.

Reven growls and yanks again, and suddenly I can see it. The thing in his grasp writhes and fights, which is when I realize that this isn’t like a snake he can pull out of a hole. This thing is like a poison, like roots of a tree spread throughout her.

I can't look away.

He pulls harder, shaking with the effort of it like he did with Trysolde, and there's a shift of movement under his own clothes. Then another. And another, and my scars buzz with awareness. The Shadows inside Reven. Sandrat opportunists.

He doesn't stop.

An eerie wail pours from Tabra's lips, and her body starts to convulse, the thrashing of her arms and legs pulling at the chains with metallic clanks.

"He's *killing* her!" Achlys cries out, straining against Omma's hold, and my great aunt drags her over to us.

"Horus!" I point without taking my eyes from what Reven is doing.

Horus wraps his arms around Achlys, not letting her loose as Reven fights the thing inside Tabra and she screams and screams and screams. Achlys claps her hands over her ears.

My blood runs cold despite the desert heat. What if he *is* killing her? What if he loses himself in the process?

*But she's dead if we don't try.*

I tell myself that over and over as sweat breaks out over Reven's exposed skin and soaks the back of his shirt. The shadow inside her is too dug in. Too strong.

No. I'm not losing either of them tonight. We've dealt with too many blows, and I'm not doing this. Not another blow. The burn of anger flares inside me.

"Get out of her!" I shout, willing the darkness to weaken.

Reven suddenly gains ground, and for a painfully hopeful moment I think he's got it by the tail. Then, with an abruptness that grates at me, Tabra goes silent, leaving the room still, all of us holding our breath.

Her eyes snap open, and she smiles at Reven. A foul expression crosses her face—an exact copy of my face—and twists it into something unrecognizable. "I'm no Shadow. I'm the dead."

I should have known. A ghost. Another one of Eidolon's? Like the one who told me about the king taking souls out of the burning lands. Is this what the king is doing with them? Possessing people?

The ghost sneers. "Your maker pulled me from the depths of the hells. You, young Shadowraith, are not strong enough to do the same."

That's not Tabra speaking. That's Eidolon—or, rather, an old layer of him. And not a Shadow that Reven missed. This is another ghost.

Like the one I talked to.

The thing inside Tabra chuckles at our stunned expressions. “He promised he’d give me another lifetime in another body if I did his bidding inside this one.”

My skin goes tight everywhere, the shock like bugs crawling all over me. Eidolon did that? Holy terror. Did Reven know that was possible?

“I know *you* can’t put me back where he found me,” the ghost taunts Reven with a sneer. “And you can’t let me go. You don’t want one of us walking the lands, loosed from the hells, even in the form of darkness.”

Reven rears back like the thing hit him but then centers. “You can’t have her.”

“Even if you could get me out, you have nowhere to put me.”

Reven glances at me, and my heart drops to the soles of my feet, because I know. I *know* what he’s thinking.

He says nothing as he faces my sister. The shadows inside me pull in tight, as though readying themselves for something big.

Then Reven smiles. “You’re wrong.”

Then he puts his mouth over Tabra’s—not touching, just hovering—and draws in sharply. The thing inside her sets to screaming again, and Tabra’s eyes go wide, bulging from her skull before they roll back, her body going limp. But the screaming goes on and on and on as Reven tries to swallow the evil from inside her into himself.

I drop to my knees, my hand over my mouth as I watch in horror.

Tabra gives one final wail, and Reven snarls, pressing his mouth to hers hard.

Darkness bleeds into the room, tendrils stretching up the tent walls and across the floor all around us.

Then, with jarring abruptness, the darkness dissolves and everything stops. Reven drops to the ground and rolls to his back, chest heaving.

## Revulsion

Reven swallowed that thing.

Another form of Eidolon—a ghost that has already lived life as a man—is inside Reven now, joining all the Shadows.

I can't move. Can't speak. It's like I'm one of Tyndra's icebergs right here in the desert. Like every bit of warmth just got sucked out of me the way that ghost was sucked out of Tabra.

Horus releases Achlys and strides over to me. I'm vaguely aware of the way he's watching me closely.

I swallow, staring at Reven. Unable to look away.

I'd thought... Goddess, I'd thought he'd pull the shadow out like he did with Trysolde. But of course it makes sense that he'd swallow it, since he's already a vessel for evil. What's one more? I know that's what he was thinking.

What a self-sacrificing, really-bloody-stupid thing to do. "Reven," I whisper.

"Don't worry, princess. I'm okay."

Breath punches from me at the stupid nickname. Thank the goddesses. Every one of them. Well, maybe not Wildernyss or Tyndra.

"Meren?" Tabra's voice is barely audible.

She's cradled in Achlys's arms, too weak to even lift her head, but her amber eyes like mine seem to hold more color already. Horus lights the brazier, and in the glow, I can see how the color of her skin seems healthier, too, pinker. But unlike with Trysolde, she doesn't change beyond that. She is still pale, the bruises under her eyes still shocking, her frame still skeletal.

But she's herself.

I drop to my knees in front of her. A sob wells up from within me, and I can't hold it back. Surging forward, I wrap my arms around her, though I'm still careful to be gentle. It's like holding a broken baby bird. "Thank the goddess," I whisper into her hair.

My sister isn't going to die. I haven't lost her.

I look at Reven, who I'm still mad at for swallowing that thing, but...



“Thank you.”

After a second, his gaze softens, and he gives a small nod before standing.

“What happened?” Tabra’s voice is still thready.

I sit back, brushing the limp strands of hair out of her face. “You were possessed, sissy. By a ghost. But you’ll be okay now.”

Tabra stares at me, then slides her gaze slowly to Achlys. Tears silently streak down our friend’s face. “Don’t cry,” Tabra whispers. “If Meren says I will be okay, then I will.”

To hold back another sob, I bite down on the inside of my cheek so hard I draw blood, the taste of it metallic in my mouth. Together, after we unchain her, Achlys and I explain everything. Then we sit, the three of us, for the longest time. Quietly.

Eventually, Reven moves to stand behind me. I think maybe he even touches my hair, though he doesn’t say a word. He doesn’t have to.

Closing my eyes, I gather the strength to move out from under that touch, from the silent support that is all he can allow himself to offer, and do what has to happen next.

I would stay here with Tabra for the rest of the night, but I meant what I said. She’ll be okay. I’ll have plenty of time with her. My sister is going to live. We have two amulets. We have Eidolon’s Shadows and now one of his ghosts. And we know more than we ever have, thanks in part to another of his ghosts and a Devourer.

What is my life?

Chaos aside, we’re not moving fast enough. Given the way Eidolon showed up in Remirel, it’s time for something more drastic.

And the king’s ghosts have given me an idea.

## Unexpected Allies

Omnia and Horus follow Reven and me out, leaving Achlys with Tabra. After all that, Omnia doesn't look like the woman I've known all my life. She looks small...and scared.

Welcome to my world.

What Reven is, what he does, is terrifying. What we just witnessed was terrifying. If Eidolon can possess people with his ghosts, that's terrifying, too.

We need to get ahead of the king, and, without meaning to, Trysolde's story and the ghosts of Eidolon showed me a possible way to do that.

I take Reven and Omnia to the zariph's tent and send Horus to gather the others. I hate doing this to them when we've already been through so much and need to rest, but it can't wait.

"What happened?" Pella demands as she enters the space.

"The thing inside Tabra happened."

Vos sighs. "Just one night of peace would have been nice, Meren." But even as he says this, he claps a hand on Reven's shoulder. "You okay?" he asks in a low aside.

Reven nods.

"Are we all going to stand around staring, or is someone going to explain?" Cainis snaps. He wasn't thrilled by my insisting we wait for everyone else.

We fill them in. When we're done, no one speaks.

"Well...that explains a lot," Omnia murmurs.

"Explains what?" I ask.

"That explains what I was seeing." Omnia shakes her head, every single one of her seventy-some-odd years etched in her face. "I only used my power on your sister once, and that was all I needed."

I stare at her. Omnia is a soul *Enfernae*. Tabra is, too, though the specifics are still in question, but Omnia's version is the ability to see what afterlife a person's soul will be sent to. She's never told me what she sees, not even my own future.

Omnia clasps her hands in front of her. "Tabra's soul was destined for the

Allusian heavens. But..." Her expression darkens, and she becomes the hard woman I've known all my life. "When I arrived here, I saw a different fate. I saw a soul meant to be in the seventh circle of the hells."

"That can't be good," Cain mutters, voice as dire as I've heard from him.

The breath gets trapped in my chest. The seventh circle is for the worst of all humanity—rapists, murderers, child abusers, committers of genocide. People with souls so foul they can never be redeemed.

The seventh hell. That's where some of Eidolon's incarnations have gone? *That's* what he put in my sister? Is the one I talked to in the desert—the one still on the loose somewhere—also one of those? I'm guessing not. But what about the ghost inside Trysolde?

Oh holy hells and damnation. Was there a soul trying to get inside me all those months with Eidolon? Am I carrying it already without knowing? Is that why the shadows are doing weird things around me?

We need answers, and we need them now.

There's only one thing I can think to try, a place I can go for those answers, and it's probably the worst idea I've had yet. "I need to go to the Land of Eternal Death."

If Omma's words filled the room with thick dread, mine send a crackle of anger through it.

"No," Reven snaps.

"Have you lost your goddess-loving mind?" Cain shouts at the same time. "You can't go *there!*"

*There*, the Land of Eternal Death, is the burning land of souls in Aryd. I am well aware no one in their right mind would want to go.

I take a deep breath. "Eidolon knows too much that we don't yet—why the goddesses were trapped, where the other amulets are, why he's doing what he's doing, how to stop people from being possessed by his souls, how to stop him."

Vos crosses his arms. "That doesn't mean we send anyone off to get possessed like Trysolde and Tabra."

"Tabra wasn't possessed there," I point out. "And for all we know, Eidolon put the soul in Trysolde a long time ago."

"You don't know that," Horus says. "You weren't there when either happened."

Fair point. I grit my teeth. "We need to stop reacting and guessing or we'll never get ahead of this. We need to know *everything.*"

Cain's face is a storm cloud. "No. We stick to the plan and get the other amulets."

I throw my hands in the air. "We don't even know where they are! What happens if we manage to get to the remaining sovereigns and they have no idea what we're talking about? Or if Eidolon already got to them and they're possessed, too?"

Reven says nothing, but he doesn't have to. Whether he believes I'm right or not, his stark rejection of this idea beats through my scar.

"That doesn't mean we risk you going there," Cain argues.

"We don't have time to debate this," I say. "He's escalating. He's never tried to marry an Arydian queen. Reven took his immortality. We took Tabra and the last chance he has to do whatever it is he's trying to do with the goddesses. He's putting ghosts into people, for goddesses' sake. And he's desperate. He also keeps finding us. We need to get ahead of him."

Cain snaps his mouth shut.

"Meren is right."

I startle at the words because they come from Pella. By the set of her lips, she's not thrilled to be speaking up for me. "We need more answers than we've got, and faster. We might be able to find them there."

"I agree," Omma chimes in.

Well...hells. If she and Pella are the only ones taking my side, maybe I need to reconsider this plan. Even as I think that, though, I reject it. Omma and Pella agreeing with me just tells me how horribly right I am.

The Sleeper  
Among Us

I'm still with the zariphate three days later.

We've moved every single day, trying to stay out of Eidolon's net. And Tabra isn't getting visibly better.

Three days and nights of quietly worrying over my sister. She's still herself, but I would have expected more progress. Any progress, really. Part of me—a part I haven't shared with anyone else yet—worries that Reven didn't get it all out. Is it possible to leave part of a ghost behind?

This is why, even after a long, face-meltingly hot ride under the brutal sun, instead of dragging, I'm practically bouncing in my saddle. Pent-up frustration and impatience will do that.

I've been avoiding my friends since we stopped for the night because I knew if I didn't, I'd start arguing with them again. We've spent three days in a standoff. Half of us agree, and half are trying to come up with a different plan. Tonight, we need to make a decision. Do something, damn it.

Needing to bleed off some of my irritation as I go over and over my arguments in my head, I grab a satchel and head out to one of the wells Cain made earlier when we stopped. It's the first thing he does at each new camp. The horses are always watered first. Always. Without them, a zariphate faces almost certain death. I went out after him and built up sand walls around the holes to make it easier to draw the water out.

I don't actually need more water, but sitting in my room stewing is only making me crankier. The fading heat of the day rises from the sand even as the cool of the night air caresses my sweat-caked skin. The ground gives way with a soft hiss as I plod along. But tonight, not even the familiar scents of sand and the zariphate are all that comforting.

I reach the well out in the dunes designated for the Vanished when I hear Vida's voice. "Meren?"

I glance over my shoulder as she tops the rise nearest me, a sealable leather satchel in her hands. I'm not exactly in a mood to deal with anyone, so I turn my back on her. "I'm not the best company right now, Vida."

“You shouldn’t be alone out here.”

I sigh. I guess coming up with an idea that could get me killed makes everyone else believe that I’ve also lost every instinct for self-preservation. Besides, Bene is circling overhead. As if the Devourer would let his goddess wander off while she’s around my neck. After that encounter with Eidolon, he’s gotten as bad as Reven and Horus about keeping tabs on me. “I’m fine.”

Vida leans a hip against my wall around the well anyway and watches, satchel clutched to her stomach, as I lower mine on the rope someone provided.

The silence drags on, scraping along my nerves like brushing against a mammillaria cactus. I hate being at odds with friends. To break the awkwardness, I ask, “With all this moving around, have you been able to be in contact with your family?”

She doesn’t answer. I glance at her. “I’m sorry. Is it hard to be so far from them?”

Her answering smile looks like her usual brand of cheerful, but something feels off about it. I can’t pin down what.

“I’m used to it now,” she says slowly. Almost carefully. “I don’t mind not seeing my mother so much. I’m one of ten, so she was always busy. As the oldest, I was mostly seen as an extra pair of hands more than a child. My father, though...” Her lips tilt as her gaze drifts, clearly visiting memories. “I was his little girl. His angel.”

“That’s cute.”

Another smile, then a huff of a chuckle. “He had the greatest laugh. Big and loud, and his belly would jiggle with it. I miss that sound. And the sound of my youngest sister singing. *She* is the angel with a voice like that. Although hearing her over my brothers’ constant bickering was a challenge.” She shakes her head. “I swear, they can fight over the silliest things. The last time I saw them, Lefwin was angry because Torkel smiled crooked at him.”

I chuckle. Brothers are something I’ll never have. Cain comes closest. Or he did when we were kids. Now, with very adult feelings on his side... Things change, I guess.

“That’s not even the worst example.” Her own amusement fades slowly. “But to answer your question, no. I haven’t talked to them in a while.”

I glance over her shoulder, off into the dunes. “I used to hate it if I went too long without seeing Tabra.” Cain, too. He’s also family, just as strong but in a different way.

She nods. “I miss them every day, and I worry about them, but everything I do is to keep them safe, so I have that to hold on to.”

“I’m sorry you have to be apart at all.”

She gives a little sigh. “I knew that if anyone could understand it would be you.”

Heat surges into my cheeks. I’m not used to being the sister with the compassion. That’s Tabra’s strength. We fall back into silence as I hoist my water up from the well.

“You know we love you and are just worried about you, don’t you?”

My hands pause on the rope, the weight of the full satchel dragging at me. Until recently, declarations of love have been few and far between for me.

“I know,” I mumble, then keep hauling.

“You don’t have to do everything yourself. Or alone.”

I hitch the satchel over the side of the well and let the weight pull me down to drop it on the ground, where I tie it off. “I’m the queen.”

“No. You’re not,” she says. “Tabra is.”

Which makes me expendable again. Yet another reason for me to be the one to go do this.

“I know you’re worried that she’s not improving much. Isn’t that even more reason not to go to the burning lands yourself?”

The arguments have changed recently from not going at all to sending someone else.

I repeat the same point I’ve told to every other person. “Only royalty can enter and be able to find their way out.”

“That’s just a legend. We don’t know for sure.”

“Yes, but since we have a royal to do the deed, let’s not test the theory. Reven can’t go. The shadows in that land...” That’s the last place he should be.

“The zariph—”

I shake my head. “He’s a high-ranked leader, the ruler of his people. But not royal.”

I close my eyes. I’m so tired of fighting this. Fighting my friends. I understand a little better now why Omma was as harsh as she was with me. This existence, as decoy and bodyguard and sometimes ruler—the decisions I’m being forced to make are all impossible.

What I’m not showing any of them is that I am terrified by this entire prospect. So much that I’ve been shaking a little every time I think about it,

driving my horse to twitching by gripping my reins tight to stop my hands from visibly trembling.

If the others knew that, it would just add to their arguments against my going. For the first time, I'm happy Reven has cut off our connection.

"Omnia could go," Vida points out. "She's lived a long life."

I've already thought of that. So has Omnia. I breathe out, breathe in, and open my eyes to find Vida's face a study of concern. "She's coming with me."

Not only that, but Omnia wants to take Tabra. Something about asking about what that ghost did to her.

Her eyebrows shoot up, and she blinks. "Oh. Okay. I thought I was going to have to push harder."

Yeah. I haven't told Reven or the others yet, either, mostly because I haven't had a chance. Omnia decided today and talked to me about it while we rode here. She'd been hesitant because, apparently, the one and only time my grandmother tried it, it didn't go so well. Beyond saying Grandmother got lost, she didn't give me details. She clearly made it out, though.

"Omnia will go in first, but if she doesn't come out, I'm going in after her. We're taking Tabra with us."

I will Vida to agree with me. One more person on my side would be nice.

"Wow. You really are determined to do this." An odd note rings in Vida's voice, and I frown. "If you're taking Tabra, why not send her in if Omnia fails?"

Frustration makes me breathe through my nose. This is why I avoided everyone today. "Because Tabra is queen, while I am, and always have been, the sister to be sacrificed."

Her chin juts forward. "Not to us you aren't."

*Oh.*

I look at my feet, my frustration bleeding away as I try to contain the sudden wellspring of burning at the back of my eyes. That's the second time today she's made me feel valued. Loved.

"Dearest." Vida wraps her arms around me. She's such a hugger.

I let my chin rest on her shoulder.

"I guess I'm not used to mattering," I say, trying to huff out a laugh, make it a joke. It sounds more pathetic than anything, though. Poor, pitiful princess.

"You matter more than you think," she murmurs. Then, softer yet, something that sounds like, "Goddess, forgive me for this."



I frown. “What?”

I catch a distinctive scrape of metal on leather—the sound of a blade being unsheathed. On a gasp, I go to yank away, but her arm around me tightens like a vise.

Her face spasms. “I’m sorry.”

## Out of My Hands

Cain and I used to wrestle when we were kids. It wasn't just play—it was training to fight. The Wanderers are skilled at hand-to-hand combat and learn from a young age. Cain taught me some moves.

Which is why, despite the shock that this is happening, when Vida goes to plunge the weapon into my body, I block her with both my hands. Then I grab her wrist. In a twisting move that breaks her hold on my neck, I spin so my back is to her, her arm yanked above my head. Then I roll, careful to avoid the pointy end of the blade. No, not a blade, I recognize on an extra stab of shock. The sewing shears *I* brought her.

Only Vida is quick, too. In a flash, she's on her feet and facing me.

As if she has also been trained. She's a seamstress. How is this possible?

Rather than go at me with the shears again, she snatches at the amulet swinging from my neck, wrapping her fist around it and whipping me violently by the chain, which by some miracle doesn't snap. I trip and end up on my back on the ground, the breath leaving my body in a painful *oomph*.

Vida straddles my chest, her knees on my wrists, pinning me to the ground. I kick and thrash and buck, but I can't dislodge her.

"I'm sorry." She keeps saying that. She's sorry but she raises her weapon anyway.

"Why are you doing this?" This *isn't* her. Maybe she's possessed like Tabra was.

Her hand wobbles. So does her chin. "I have no choice. He has my *family*."  
Her family.

Oh goddess, her family who we were just talking about. Her father with his jiggling belly. And her sister who sings. And her bickering brothers.

My mind splinters with a thousand questions. There's only one "he" that she could be talking about. Eidolon. When did he take them? How long has she been under his thumb? Why does he want me dead now?

"I'm so sorry." She sobs the words. Then yanks on the amulet and, at the same time, strikes.

Thinking I can knock her away with sand, I pull my power forward so

hard, the telltale whistle of sound doesn't register until there's an arrow protruding from Vida's shoulder.

On a grunt of stunned pain, she drops her shears. I have to lurch to the side to avoid them hitting my face, and my movement finally tumbles her to the ground. Before I can begin to absorb what just happened, Horus is pushing her legs off me and trying to drag me away. In the same instant, Bene lands on a dune nearby, beside Omma and Tabra. When did they get here?

I only let Horus take me so far away before I'm struggling to get up. "Vida," I say, stumbling back to her. "Tell me what you know."

She blinks as if trying to wake herself from a nightmare. She pushes herself to kneeling and stares at the arrow protruding from her body. Where Horus shot her shouldn't kill her. All he did was stop her.

"I had orders," she whispers. "Kill you, get Aryd's amulet..."

Eidolon knows I have Aryd's amulet. How? While he'd know that the rulers of the dominions were given them, he'd also know that Trysolde's ancestors buried the Wildernyssian one. I don't think he'd assume any of the current rulers are lugging them around. He didn't seem to be aware of mine when I left the palace. I can't be sure of that, of course, but wouldn't he have taken it from me if he'd known?

Dread makes my stomach plummet. He didn't know when I was in the palace, but he knows now because she told him.

Silent tears make tracks through a fine dusting of sand covering her face. She doesn't look up. Doesn't look at me. Even from here, I can see the way her entire body starts to quiver. "I had no choice."

My heart is breaking, cracking like the walls around my dominion. "Why didn't you come to me? To Reven or Vos? Anyone? We would have *helped* you."

Finally, she lifts her head. It's not me she looks at, but Horus, who has another arrow nocked and trained on her. "Help my family," she whispers to him. Pleads.

Then she snatches the shears from the sand and runs straight at me.

Horus doesn't hesitate. I barely register the sound of the loosed arrow before it's sticking out of her chest. A kill shot this time.

"No!" I think I scream. Everything inside me goes blank at the sight of blood gurgling out of her mouth as she drops to her knees.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, then flops forward, the life draining from her body.

I scramble over to her, but somehow Horus beats me. With almost frantic hands, he pulls her onto his lap and wraps his arms around her. Head bowed, he murmurs prayers I've only heard at a distance growing up around the Wanderers.

I fall back onto my ass in the sand and slip my hand into her limp one. My heart waits for her to squeeze it back, but she doesn't. Of course she doesn't. She's gone already, mercury eyes glassy now and staring up at me.

"Damn it, Vida." Horus's whisper is a scrape of sound. "What did you make me do?" He dashes away a tear before it has a chance to fall.

Wanderers don't cry. That's not how they grieve. Which makes every silent sob, every heave of his shoulders, that much harder to bear. A gavel of my own pain and guilt.

He's known her for years. Years together in the Shadowwood. Years with that cheerful smile and her insistent friendship that can win over even the most guarded person.

I would know.

But he still killed her. For me. To protect me.

And now it's killing him.

This is what the ageless King of Tyndra does to people. What he turns them into. Forces them to become.

"We need to go."

I jerk my head up at the sound of Omma's voice to find her standing close by, holding Tabra up. My sister's sunken eyes slide from Vida to Horus, silent tears streaking down her cheeks. Omma, though...she's looking at me with the uncompromising hardness I'm all too familiar with.

"Don't cry over someone who tried to kill you, girl," Omma says in a voice that matches her face.

I didn't realize that I'd started crying, and I swipe at my cheeks, hating that she can see my tears. "She was my *friend*."

"She was just desperate." Horus breathes deeply. "Desperation is as close to depravity as a pure soul like hers can get. Trust me. I know."

I drop my gaze to Vida's face and brush her hair out of her eyes. Eyes that look shocked by her death. "I would have helped her."

"Of course you would have." Tabra's voice is thready but sure. She's always believed I could do anything.

I always thought she was silly for that kind of faith in me.

Horus lays Vida gently on the ground, then whispers a final, well-used

prayer over her, asking the goddesses to look kindly on her soul.

Omma waits for him to finish, at least, before stating what I'd already realized. "Vida knew *all* of our plans."

Her words yank me unforgivably into what happens next. I don't have the luxury of mourning. Because she's right. After staying behind to take care of everyone while we went to Tyndra, the Vanished voted Vida to be the representative for those from Wildernyss. She's been in on all the discussions since we got back.

Hells.

Memories pile up, the poison of suspicion leaking into each one. Vida has to be how Eidolon knew where we'd be when we went to Trysolde. I told Omma, who brought the information back to the zariph and the Vanished... and Vida.

Did her spying start before that? The soldiers who came to the Shadowwood and killed so many of the Vanished—was *she* their source of information?

I'm staring at her face, her dark silvery hair spread out over the sand, and suddenly I don't know it at all. Don't know *her* at all. And I never did. I was lulled into some sense of friendship because I craved it, and maybe she could see that. Took advantage.

I don't want to believe that about her. I want to believe she was my friend.

"It's likely the king is aware of our plans now, too," Omma points out. Her eyes are still hard and cold. She always was one to point out the ugly facts.

Horus pushes to his feet. "We should assume Eidolon knows that we're going after the amulets, but he can't have heard about the burning lands yet. The zariphate has been on the move too much. She hasn't had time to get that message to him."

I shake my head. With ghosts of Eidolon wandering around... "We can't be sure of that."

"Which is why we need to leave now," Omma says. "The time for debate is over."

"*I can fly you there,*" Bene says.

Me in midair with nothing but a fall to my death if I slip off? Hells no to that. I'm in a desert full of sand. I'll make a portal.

What I don't say is now—thanks to Vida—I'm questioning the Devourer's motives, too. He didn't stop Vida's attack. Is that because he wants his goddess released? Eidolon would do that for him. Or try to.

Doubts pummel me. What if Eidolon is waiting in the burning lands for

me? What if it's a trap? Should I tell Reven?

No. Definitely not. He'll either stop us or insist on going, too, and Reven with his tenuous control in a land of death and souls would be a disaster. Especially with goddess-knows how many of Eidolon's ghosts wandering around in there.

"I'll go with you," Horus says.

"No, you will not," Omma says with all the authority of a former false queen. She hefts Tabra against her side, which tells me how much she's holding my sister up. "We are going with Meren."

Tabra's eyes snap wide open. We haven't had a chance to talk to her about Omma's idea. "Me?"

Oh good, maybe she won't want to go. I glance at Omma, hopeful. "We could leave her with Horus."

Tabra's face suddenly takes on a mulish cast, chin jutting out. Is that what I look like when I get stubborn? "What if it's not just royal bloodlines but only the sovereign who is allowed to enter?"

There goes that hope. She's still as frail as a new bamboo reed. It's even more shocking when she's up and walking because it makes me wonder how her bones aren't snapping under the strain of staying upright.

"I can be helpful, too, Meren. Not just some burden to be dragged around."  
Hells.

"So I'm going."

This is happening.

I twitch my signet ring, taking in each of them. "What about everyone else?"

"We'll continue to move the camp. And I'll keep the peace as best I can," Horus assures me, but there's no hiding his grimace at the last part. There will be no peace once Reven and Cain find out what I've done. They'll probably make Vos freeze me in a brick of ice the second they find me.

"Omma is right," he continues. "You don't have time to argue this with the others. Eidolon may have more spies. If he doesn't know about this plan yet, this is your only window to try." He speaks with an urgency that I can feel like a rush under the skin. "Go. Bene will protect you."

Just up and leave. No word. No warning.

What would Reven do in this situation? Actually, I don't have to ask myself that. Because if it meant protecting me, he'd go and deal with the consequences later. We may have dealt with our spy problem, but the

Celestial Alignment is still drawing closer. Which means Eidolon is, too.

“Okay,” I say.

The other three look at me, then each other, and Horus nods. “I won’t tell the others about this until you’ve had time to get away. If you make it out of the burning lands, meet us in Tropikis on the night Morta is full.”

The third moon. The death moon.

How fitting.

Already Bene is gathering more sand into himself, his body growing larger, reforming. At the same time, he shapeshifts, taking the form of a huge horse, wings outstretched to either side, head that of a lion, his tail a serpent’s, slashing back and forth.

“No. Uh-uh. I’m not flying on your back. I can make a portal.”

Omnia arches a brow. “Right here next to camp? It’s dark. They’ll see the glow and be here before you cobble together anything of use.” Before I can protest, she adds, “I saw what you built in Tyndra.”

As much as I want to bristle at the insult, she’s right.

Someone shoot me. Looks like flying is in my immediate future no matter what I do. I try not to think too hard about that.

“After you move the zariphate again, split up Reven, Cain, Vos, Tziah, Pella, and Hakan,” I say to Horus. “Some of you go to Savanah and the others to Mariana, just in case I fail, or in case we get lucky and they know where their amulets are. We’ll all meet in Tropikis.”

If Eidolon is trying to lay a trap for our next move, splitting up means he’ll have to pick one place to go himself—Tropikis, Mariana, or the burning lands. At least two of our groups will make it. Hopefully.

“*You may ascend,*” Bene says with a flap of his wings. He’s not full-size, barely big enough to fit the three of us.

It takes effort to get Tabra on. Then Horus cups his hands to give Omnia and me a boost. I’m at the front with Tabra behind me, and Omnia at the back—the two of us keeping her upright between us. Her head rests on my back like the effort to climb on left her unable to hold it up any longer.

Maybe we *shouldn’t* take her.

Before I can say so, Horus backs away and bows in the traditional Wanderer gesture of protection. “May the goddesses watch over you and return you to us.”

I can see in the hardness of his jaw and the way he holds his shoulders that he’s hating this even though he told me to go. He promised to protect me.

Time is against us now, spilling through a broken hourglass.

“Goddess guide your steps,” I offer him in return.

Bene must take that as a signal. He doesn’t jump into the air immediately. Smart, because a Devourer carrying three women would definitely be spotted by the zariphate. Instead, he runs off over the dunes.

I glance over my shoulder to find Horus staring after me. With every pound of Bene’s hooves, I expect Reven to appear in a swirl of shadow and stop us, but he doesn’t. Not even a hint of him. I’m beyond tempted to touch my scars, to offer words of... What? What could I say that wouldn’t make this harder?

“I’m sorry,” I whisper—to him, to all our friends—and hope the shadows bring him my words eventually. Words that echo Vida’s when she tried to take my life.

Horus was right. Desperation is the road to depravity.



The One Who  
is Missing

The Sacred Tree of Aryd is a few leagues away when we get our first glimpse of it from Bene's back. Not that I can see much around all his bulk. We stopped once we felt it was safe enough for Bene to grow in size, and he's huge.

I didn't bother to try a portal. There'd be no point because where we're going has no sister-portal waiting on the other end, unlike the temples and the queen's towers I've tried to get us to before. So, after Bene grew to full size, we flew here. The entire goddess-forsaken distance. In the skies. High up.

His large, lion-like head and mane block the wind for us, giving us the ability to talk, but they also block the view directly ahead or I probably would have seen it sooner.

Honestly...I think a view from the ground would be much more awe-inspiring.

"I wonder if we can see the western ocean from here," Tabra says. She's leaning into me, her chin propped on my shoulder. "Maybe even the shores of Savanah across the channel separating our dominions."

*No thanks.*

"I mean..." she continues blithely. "Think about how high we are."

*I'd rather not.*

"Are we above the walls?" she asks next, raising her voice to direct the question to Bene. "I've been trying to see them, but of course, they don't reflect light."

I groan. "Tabra, can we not—"

"No," Bene answers her. *"I have never discovered how high they reach. Too high for me to fly over."*

Which is why he had to wait for a crack in the glass to get through to try to find his heartmate. I couldn't even imagine. I tell her what he said and hope that stops her from talking about how high up stuff is any more.

In the distance, the flames of the Sacred Tree reach into the night, reminding me of the angry red streamers that fill the cities of Aryd during

Parethnia, the festival of female fertility. Golden embers drift even higher, turning into a glittering spray to compete with the blanket of stars, and yet no smoke. The huge desert willow never stops burning and is never consumed by its fire. A gift from our goddess. A miracle.

We could use a few more of those.

“It’s beautiful,” I murmur.

“I saw it with Grandmother on our fifteenth name day,” Tabra says. “But only in daylight. At night it’s even more impressive.”

Omnia clears her throat. “I came with Atlice once, when we were girls.”

I startle a bit at the sound of Grandmother’s name. Omnia rarely uses it. The three of us haven’t talked about Grandmother in general. I’m not sure what we would say. In fact, I can’t think of a single time that all four of us were together in the same room. Not once.

“Do you miss her, Omnia?” Tabra asks, the wind snatching at her words.

If this was Tabra and me, after a lifetime of keeping each other’s secrets, I know I would miss my sister. Omnia, though...she is made of harder stuff. So, for that matter, was Grandmother. Loveable isn’t exactly a term I associate with either one of them.

Omnia hesitates, and I turn as much as I can to try to see her face and find the creases lined with something that might be regret. “She should be here now.”

“She’d just tell us we’re being foolish and send us home.” I can’t help the bitterness that creeps into my words. After all, Grandmother did nothing to stop Eidolon. She holed up like generations of twins before her and thanked the goddesses he never came for her during her time on the throne.

Omnia frowns at me, but I don’t take it back. “When we were growing up, Atlice was the one who wanted to go after him, end his reign. I just wanted to expose him to the world.”

Tabra and I both jolt at that, swinging stares over our shoulders, as much as we can, to Omnia. She stares right back.

“What happened?” I ask. What made the fight go out of them? Why did they give up and leave it to Tabra and me? They didn’t face anything like we’ve had to.

“He killed our own grandmother before we were even fifteen years old.”

That’s right. I knew that. Omnia made sure I knew of each of the murdered twins in our line, including all the gory details of how they went. Tabra leans forward to rest her cheek against my back, different from before. Like she’s

hugging me. I don't have to ask why, because I'm thinking it, too. The twins in our line have all lost their sisters at some point—such is the wheel of life—but the way it happens, the way we live... I can't imagine how much more alone I'd feel if I lost Tabra.

Omma continues. "My own Omma had to play both roles after that. She was queen with Atlice in the palace. I lived alone in the hovel until she'd come for me, continuing to teach me how to be the hidden twin. And then our powers manifested, and we were..." She shrugs. "Disappointments."

She's always hated that her own power was what she saw as weak. I didn't know she felt the same about Grandmother's ability to turn objects she touched into sand. Nothing too big, though. Growing up, I had no idea that Omma hated that weakness because it meant they couldn't go up against Eidolon, but I see that in her now. In the regret.

She twitches her shoulders, clearly done with sentimental reminiscing. "For my sister, for all the sisters that came before us, I'm going to help you kill that sandrat bastard of a shadow *Enfernae*. Even if I die trying."

Tabra snorts a laugh. "Now I see where Meren got her attitude."

"Hey," I protest. Until—well, now, I guess—Omma hasn't exactly been my choice of role model.

Omma gives a dry cackle of a laugh. "She could do worse."

"I could do better, too," I mutter.

Tabra pokes me in the side with a finger. Right where she knows I'm ticklish, and I squirm.

"*Not long now,*" Bene's voice sounds in my head.

I have to translate for Tabra and Omma. We all go silent, getting ready for what comes next.

I don't know about them, but I'm scanning the flat, mostly empty horizon. Is Eidolon here? Did he send anyone after us? At least we have a full-size Devourer for protection.

The Sacred Tree draws nearer and nearer until it is directly ahead. I don't realize that Bene has been dropping lower to the ground until the tree is right in front of us. Even in the dark, I can see the charred, black husks of its leafless branches. And the flames aren't just red. There are so many colors. Within the reds and golds are wisps and hints of greens, blues, pinks, lavenders. There, then gone, like spirits.

I twist the cuff on my wrist. Cain wanted us to make our troth as heartmates under this tree. I can picture it, though now the image in my mind

sends sadness swelling up in me. Sadness because he and I aren't who we once were. Not anymore.

And I don't know what we will be in days to come. After all this. If we survive it.

Tilting, we swoop past it, and I whip around to keep staring only to lose my balance, since I'm precariously in place on Bene's broad back. I grab a hunk of his sandy lion's mane to keep from sliding off.

"Careful."

"Careful." Tabra unknowingly echoes Bene's warning, fingers gripping me harder, though I still barely feel the touch, she's so feeble.

"Sorry." I face forward reluctantly.

A second later, we land close to where the canyon that marks the border between the land of the living and the not drops away.

Returning to the ground is like jumping an obstacle on the back of a really big horse, only a lot more awkward because my legs are spread so far wide and I can't grip with my thighs. Bene comes in like a shooting star. Unfortunately, this close to the ground, to see it rushing up to me... I've never gone this fast in my entire life.

My nerves hold a wrestling match in my stomach, and I try to remember what Cain taught me about horses. Move with their body.

Suddenly, Bene tips back, wings catching the air in a violent thrash of beats, and all four hooves strike the ground hard enough to jolt all three of us forward with teeth-rattling violence. Omma and Tabra crash into me, and I'm so focused on keeping Tabra from falling that I forget to hold myself on, so I go sailing.

I land with a *ploof* and a grunt in a sand dune, the fine black dust of the Obsidian Desert spraying up and covering me. If I thought it was going to be soft, I was wrong.

"Meren!" Tabra yells from Bene's back, where she and Omma managed to stay put.

She should *not* be yelling. What if someone has laid a trap for us? Only I can't talk to tell her that. There's no air left in me to speak. I lay here winded, reviewing the twists and turns of my life that brought me to this precise moment, until Bene comes over, nosing at me.

"Are you deceased?"

"No," I groan.

"That is good."

Is it, though?

“Are you all right?” Tabra asks.

Aside from my pride and a few other bruises? “I’m okay.”

Omama grunts. “Then get your ass up, girl. No time to waste.”

## They Do Exist

Bene looks up at the first vague glow of light entering the predawn sky. *“Time is slipping.”*

“If you haven’t noticed, time does that a lot,” I mutter under my breath as I haul myself up and sneeze as I brush the black dust off my backside.

He means it literally, though. He and Omma have told us how getting into the lands requires us to be at a certain place when the sun rises. I hurry to the mouth of the canyon. Bene tromps along in my wake, Omma and Tabra still perched on his back, until we get to where the land abruptly drops away.

Or I should say that Bene stops where the ground drops away, and I stop a good twenty paces back from that.

The mouth of Muertum Canyon, at the bottom of which we should find the gates to the land we’re here to find answers in.

*“Going by foot will not work,”* Bene says. *“I forgot how narrow and steep the path is and how much time descending can take.”*

Narrow and steep. Two words I could do without hearing.

Before I can ask for an alternative, he takes to the skies, Tabra and Omma both giving startled yelps before he snatches me up in what shifts into a sandy talon instead of a hoof.

“Seriously?” I manage to protest.

He ignores me, flying in tight circles that make my head spin and my stomach heave all the way to the bottom of the canyon. At least he sets me down more carefully this time. He lowers to his belly to let them down, too, though immediately Tabra has to sit on a nearby rock, knees pulled into her chest and her chin resting on them.

Standing beside her, I look around at a dry creek bed, boulders, canyon walls, and dead shrubs, all black as a starless patch of glittering night sky. Many would likely consider it ominous. Not me. Fascination stirs inside me. Black isn’t a color of death to me, but a color of comfort, a place to hide. The place in between when Reven shadows us.

Nothing around us, however, looks anything like a gate—just regular old rock walls. “Is this the right place?”

“You always were impatient,” Omma complains. “Just watch.”

Watch? We don’t have time to sit around.

“*Any moment now.*” Bene’s face is tilted upward. He’s watching the skies. Overhead, the setting three moons peep over the edge of the onyx-colored canyon walls.

“What happens when the light—” On the opposite side of the canyon, a brilliant glimmer of the sun peeks over the top of the land.

I gape at the rare sight. I’ve seen both the sun and the moons awake in the sky at the same time before, but from this vantage point, it’s almost as though they are playing peekaboo with one another behind the canyon walls, greeting each other with a kiss of light before the moons hide away for the day as the sun rises into the sky.

And in that kiss of different shades of lights, both hot and cold, I imagine me and Reven. Sun and moons. Desert and ice. Like the celestial orbs, will we only ever be granted a precious few moments together?

The sun draws higher, and the moons disappear. A strange shimmering on the ground catches at my attention.

A thousand embers ignite all around us, reminding me of the Sacred Tree and the way I make glass. Tabra slips her hand into mine as the glowing orange embers blanket us in light. Flirt with us, even, as they float higher in the air in a dance of fire and magic. The light warms the canyon walls...and reveals a man.

No, not a man. A giant.

Tabra’s grip tightens. He is a hundred feet tall at least. His face and body are etched from layers of obsidian rock, all crags and crevices where features should be.

Great. A *rock* giant. My power over sand won’t touch this creature. I’m not sure Bene can do much, either. If things go badly, Tabra, Omma, and I—the last of Aryd’s royalty—are dead. Eidolon will be thrilled.

The giant sits with his back against the wall of the canyon, one leg outstretched in front of him all casual-like, but I suspect he’s anything but. He’s blocking what I can now see is a narrower crevice that leads away to the south.

A slot canyon—I’ve heard of them, especially in the Crimson Desert, but never seen one. Not that I can see all that much now because of the massive bent knee in my way.

Directly across from him, on the other side of the entrance to the crevice,

the canyon wall has crumbled away in a rockslide. We will have to climb over his leg and a ton of boulders to enter. And not wake the giant up in the process.

“Oh my heavenly goddess,” Tabra breathes.

I can only nod, suddenly wishing Reven was here to witness this with me.

“What?” Omma murmurs beside me. “No snappy comments?”

I don’t bother to look at her. “I’m saving them all up just for you.”

“Something to look forward to, then.”

See? This is why Omma and I should not do things together. We both have to have the last word.

Bene gives me a nudge that I’m sure he thought was gentle but makes me stumble forward. “*We should make haste.*”

Right. Hurry to conquer a giant when we have zero usable powers at our disposal. “Um...do we sneak past him?”

Bene shakes his head. “*That will end in your death.*”

Wonderful. “Then how?”

“*We ask nicely.*”

“I smell humans,” the giant rumbles in a voice that is as deep and smooth as water in an underground cistern. The silky voice is completely at odds with his rocky appearance.

Dust and pebbles fall from above, kicking up a hazy cloud as his eyes open. Heart clogging my throat, I wait for whatever is coming next. Bene can get us out fast if he has to. I hold on to that thought hard.

“No,” the giant murmurs now, to himself, I think. “I smell *sovereigns.*”

At least he didn’t say a queen and two stand-ins or something.

At another not-so-gentle nudge from Bene, I clear my throat and wave at my sister, who isn’t exactly a picture of regal perfection on her rock. “May I present Queen Tabra Eutheria I of Aryd. My name is Meren—”

“Mereneith Evangeline XII of Aryd. And the other is Mereneith XI. No soul’s existence escapes us here, even those who are not recorded in the Book of Names. We know of you.”

We? Who else is he talking about? The dead?

“Um.” Nerves make me quippy. “All good things, I hope?”

“We don’t see the world in terms of good or bad.”

He said it again. We. I glance behind me and around us but only see the canyon.

“My name is Basalt.”



How appropriate.

The giant raises his hand, taking out of his rocky pocket, of all things, a pipe. A pipe he proceeds to light, then smoke in the form of dust puffing out of one end. “You wish to enter the Land of Eternal Death?”

Why else would someone come here? “Yes.”

He nods thoughtfully, as though this is a ponderous thing.

I glance at Bene, who is still watching the giant carefully. He said to ask politely. I’ll give it a try. “May we have your...err...blessing to pass?”

“For them...no.”

We all straighten at that. “Why not?” Omma demands.

“They may be of royal blood, but Soul *Enfernae* have a tendency to attract the dead. Souls attach themselves on the way out.”

Given a soul recently got violently *disattached* from my sister, I’m glad the giant and I can see eye to eye on that. I round on Omma. “Why did you think you could try it, then? You said you’ve been here before.”

Her lips pucker, and for a beat I think she won’t answer. But then: “I’ve never tried to enter. I waited here for *Atlice* that one time.”

Fair enough. “But...I can go in?” I ask Basalt.

“That depends.” Basalt sends another puff curling into the sky. What is he smoking, anyway? He and the pipe are both made of rock.

*Not important.*

With a terrible groan of stone against stone, Basalt leans over us, alarmingly close. Which is when I realize he doesn’t have two arms...he has many.

Not a garden-variety giant. A *centimane*. The massive hundred-armed creatures of legend from before even the time of the goddesses. This just gets better and better.

“Someone has been breaking our rules,” he says. “Getting by us unseen. Is it you?”

I inch back. “No. I don’t even know your rules.”

“Not you.” His gaze narrows on *Tabra*. “You. You have the scent. You’ve been touched by the dead.”

My head swims for a second, but before I can ask, Omma steps in. “Is it still in her?”

Basalt leans back. “No.”

I drop my head on a sharp breath. *Thank the go—*

“But she is not long for this life.”

I stumble back like his words could tip me over.

“She is damaged. Whatever deceased spirit possessed her was keeping her alive, and as soon as it was removed...” Basalt sits back up with more terrible rock-on-rock sounds. “I can smell the rot. Our burning lands will see her soon.”

Tabra drops my hand on a whimper.

“No.” I spin and crouch in front of her to take her face in my hands. “I’ll find a way to fix this.”

Her eyes swim with tears that spill over. “You can’t fix everything, Mer.” She takes a shuddering breath that shakes her whole frail body, then offers me a wobbly smile. “We can figure it out later. You have important things to do.”

As if saving her life isn’t important? Actually... I straighten. Maybe I could get an answer to healing her in there, too?

I rise to my feet, facing Basalt. “What are your rules?” No way am I risking breaking them.

“We have only three. The first two you know. Royal bloodlines only. No Soul Enfernae. The last is that visitors may take no soul but their own outside the borders of the lands.”

After my encounters with ghosts of Eidolons past, there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that the king has been the one breaking the rules. How did he pull his past selves out of their afterlives without this giant seeing or knowing?

That man is a sickness that just keeps giving.

“Souls are disappearing from our lands. My mate, Scoria...” He nods at the avalanche of rocks across from him. “She has gone to find them and bring them home.”

There’s a centimane wandering my lands, searching for runaway ghosts of Eidolon right now? A stark shiver leaves footprints as it tiptoes up my spine. How long until she finds the one who spoke to me?

Part of me wants to ask how Eidolon is doing it, but I worry that if I do, even knowing who took the souls will make Basalt bar my entrance. Let alone how easily he might mistake my curiosity for information gathering so I can do the same thing. I catch a glance from Omma, who gives a tiny shake of her head. Is she thinking the same thing?

I’ll tell him about Eidolon on the way out. “I promise to keep your rules.”

He puffs on his pipe, considering me for the longest time—so long that I

wonder if he even heard. Then, finally, “Very well, young princess of Aryd. You may pass.”

The Gate  
of Hells

He said I could take no soul but my own out of the lands. Just in case, I pull my amulet from around my neck and slip it over Tabra's head. "She'll keep you safe."

If something happens while I'm gone, Bene will watch over her the way he has been me.

Tabra gives a little jolt and swings her gaze to Bene. "Wait. I heard that."

I frown because I didn't hear anything. "What?"

"He said he'd watch over us."

I didn't hear that. I glance at Bene, then at Tabra, then down at the only thing that's changed. "The amulet." Of course. It makes sense now. "You can hear him because of it."

I look from Tabra to Bene and wonder if he's saying anything to me. But it doesn't matter for what I'm about to do.

"I'm ready."

Basalt bends his other knee, drawing back his massive leg to reveal a gate on the other side. No...not a gate. It's a monolith that appears to writhe and flow with movement. What is it covered in?

Tentatively, I take a step forward, then another. The second I'm close enough to comprehend what I'm seeing, I stumble to a stop and try damn hard not to retch.

Eyes.

The monolith is covered in eyes. Naked eyeballs with no lids or lashes, unblinking. They twitch and twirl, aiming this way and that, as though seeing a million different things at once.

"The gateway to the soul is the eyes," Basalt says like it explains everything.

"Doesn't make it any less gross," I mutter to myself.

"Speak up, princess of Aryd."

I clear my throat. "What do they see?"

At the sound of my raised voice, every eyeball flashes to me. Eyes of

different sizes, shades—different species, even. Staring.

I gulp.

“They see the souls still walking Nova. They watch all.”

Ugh. Have these things been watching me, too?

Before I can move, several of the eyes catapult from the monolith, but in the air, they instantly transform into butterflies. Butterflies of a thousand different colors with eyes painted on their wings.

My entire being comes alive at the sight, and I nearly fall to my knees to pray.

*Miracle.*

The word whispers through my mind. Butterflies were said to have died off a thousand years ago. I’ve never seen one outside of drawings. What starts as a trickle of departing butterflies becomes a cascade, like millions of leaves fluttering up the canyon, blanketing the sky until all I see is the colors.

This must be what it’s like to stand inside a rainbow. I reach out a hand, and one gently lands on my finger before fluttering away with the others.

“Where do they go?” I breathe the question, still reverent.

“To watch the world. Every day to watch.”

“But I’ve never seen one. Not anywhere.”

“No one does. They are not meant to be seen.” He pauses. “Go on, princess.”

The last of the butterflies disappears over the top of the canyon, and the blue skies and harsh sunlight beating down in their wake make me blink. I’ve witnessed something amazing, truly. How can I be expected to simply get on with it?

But I have no choice. The others are waiting. Worrying. Reven has to be losing his mind. Cain, too. I’d feel a whole lot better if Horus was Imperium because the two probably tried to drown and then disappear him when they found out he let us go. Hopefully Vos and Hakan were around.

I want to call out to Reven, reassure him I’m okay, but it’s not dark and there’s nothing to say that won’t make it worse. Besides, I may not be okay soon.

On that cheerful note, I make my way around the edge of the now-eyeless monolith and slowly enter the slot canyon.

The space between obsidian rock is a long, narrow channel with sheer cliffs that have been eroded by the elements and time into beautifully carved walls that curve and twist in a path that is not straight. Every so often,

sunlight pours through a hole up above me like sand pouring over the dips and flows of the walls. Waterfalls of light. A fairy land.

I wish I could stay. Take the time to appreciate the harsh beauty of the lands that the Goddess Aryd created.

I reach out a hand, brushing over the rock as I walk, expecting them to be as velvety smooth as they look, but jerk back when my finger slides across a blade-sharp edge of stone. A tiny droplet of blood pools on my fingertip, and I scowl at the wall.

Danger disguised by beauty.

Like Reven.

When I come out on the other side, I blink in the sudden starkness of the full light. I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't sunshine in a place that houses dead souls. What makes it even more brilliant is that everything—the ground, the canyon walls towering above, even the sky—is a glinting purple hue.

All made of amethyst.

Except for the black trees scattered across the land that burn like smaller versions of our Sacred Tree. The flames here, though, are purple, the same as the sands and stone—darker at the base, almost blue with it, leading up to a pale lavender at the tips of each flame.

The smell of something sweet swirls past on a light breeze, and my mouth waters. I expected a place called “the burning lands” to smell like, well, burning. But it doesn't. The air is soft and honeyed, reminding me of thick cream served over ice on holidays in the palace. An Arydian delicacy.

I shake off an unhelpful pang of homesickness and scan the area.

The place is deserted.

Again, not sure what I expected—maybe a bunch of ghosts wandering around or chatting with one another or pushing boulders up hills all day long? Instead, the lands are void of anyone but me.

What am I supposed to do now?

I glance around for a path or a sign telling me how to do this. How did Eidolon find his own remnants? How did Trysolde get the information that he did? Did he find his mother? Was she the one who told him about the amulet?

Nothing and no one appears. I guess I need to walk around. Taking a deep breath, I step out of the shadow of the tunnel and fully into the light.

“Mereneith Evangeline,” a voice says.

An aching, terrifyingly familiar voice formed of velvet and iron. How

did Reven get here before me?

I frown, casting my gaze around only to find no one there. "Reven?"

"No."

Of course not. Apparently, and no real surprise, my rotten luck knows no boundaries and has followed me here.

Because Eidolon has that voice, too.

And so do his ghosts.

The Past  
of a Lover

“I just can’t get away from you, can I?”

A low chuckle reaches my ears.

“Show yourself,” I demand, as if I have any power here.

“Very well,” he agrees almost pleasantly.

And then he’s there. Standing before me.

Eidolon. Reven. Goddess, *both* of them.

But...not.

Like the one who came to talk to me before, this specter isn’t solid, but he isn’t entirely see-through, either. He isn’t man or shadow but spirit. It doesn’t take a genius to recognize that much. He’s also younger, physically more like Reven than the king, blue-green eyes bright, no gray at the temples.

I sigh. “King Eidolon.” I don’t bother to hide the resignation in my voice.

“You know who I am?”

Unfortunately. “One of the discarded shells of Eidolon.”

Clasping his hands behind his back, crooked mouth pulling into a smile this side of infuriating, like he’s laughing at me, he nods.

“Which one?”

He shrugs. “That is like asking a ray of light which part of the sun it comes from. We are all Eidolon, and we are ourselves at the same time. No one person is only one thing—only brave or only cowardly, only quarrelsome or friendly, industrious or lazy. We are all a lot of things, a version of ourselves for different people. Adjusting in different circumstances. More of this, less of that.”

I’m getting tired of the unhelpfully vague poetic description leading nowhere. “Yeah. So what are you more of?”

His smile grows at that. Becomes Reven’s smile. The real one. The rare one that always steals my breath and my heart a little bit more every time I see it. It throws me.

“If I must define myself, I was the...*determined* version of Eidolon.”

Determined doesn’t sound so bad, I guess. You could say that I’m



determined, too, especially when my sister's life is on the line. But *what* was he determined to do? I eye him up and down. He does the same to me.

"So what happens now?" I narrow my gaze. "Do you want to slit my throat?"

"I can't physically harm you here."

Not exactly an answer, but my eyebrows wing up at the admission. That's a handy little fact Basalt could have passed on. Mental reminder to express my dissatisfaction with this entire process when I get out.

"I *could* possess you," Eidolon's ghost muses, sounding more like the king.

I scoff with more bravado than I'm feeling. "I'm pretty sure I'd vomit you back up."

Eidolon, or whatever I should call him, tips his head back and laughs, and I stare at his delight, because it's just...weird. Neither the king nor my Shadowraith are like this.

"You are a treat," he says on a final chuckle. I can't tell if he's being condescending or truthful. "I can see why he fell in love with you."

My heart stutters inside my chest.

"What? Why?"

"Because you make him laugh."

That pulls me up short. "I do?"

Eidolon's ghost smiles. A sincere smile, almost like he's pleased for... himself? Except that doesn't feel right. This shadow-shedding thing isn't the easiest to grasp. "I'm glad," he says. "I never found love in my lifetime."

That's... Should I be feeling *sad* for Eidolon of old?

"That he can love you means all of us could."

"I'll pass, thanks."

He chuckles. "Get to know us first. We're not all so bad." His smile dims as he turns almost pensive. "If I'd met you while I lived, I wonder what choices I would have made differently."

I blink. Would Eidolon have made different choices with love in his life? If I'd met him before all this, before he shed every good part of himself, would I have fallen in love with the whole man? Or is Reven the only piece of him destined for me?

"So, princess." This Eidolon gives a small flourish of a bow. "The power that guides this place has assigned me to you as your oracle, for lack of a better word. I may answer one question you are desperate for an answer to.

*Only one, so make it good.*

One? I have so many.

There are so many different things we don't know. And why did the hells send me an old version of Eidolon? Why not my parents? Or the ancestress who trapped the goddesses in the first place? I could have asked her why she did it.

"What if you don't know the answer?" I ask warily, hoping that doesn't count as a question. It's not one I'm desperate for, so...

"Then a spirit who does know will whisper it to me."

Like a ghostly message chain. That's not unnerving at all. It basically means the dead can know...everything.

"I have eternity," he points out wryly. "But you do not."

Ass.

The amusement sparking at me tells me he caught my reaction. "Ask your question, young domina."

The reason I came was to find the locations of the other amulets. Only now I'm second-guessing myself. The basest, most selfish part of me wants to ask how to heal Tabra. But I can't, and she wouldn't want me to.

Even so, it takes me a long, long moment to let that go and start working through the other options.

Would it be better to ask the whys and hows of the goddesses' prisons? Or why Eidolon wants to release them? Maybe I ask how to stop Tyndra from sinking or winter from spreading? How long before the Celestial Alignment? If I should release the goddesses? How to release them? How to defeat Eidolon? If anyone might know the answer to that, it seems a ghost of the man himself—one who knows the full history—would.

"Before I ask my question, am I allowed to return to ask another?"

His mouth curls almost cruelly now. "Smart, too," he muses. "Many don't think to ask that. Reven made a good choice."

Too bad throwing a rock at him will just pass through nothing. "What's the answer?"

He dips his head. "Once every year on the same day at the same hour as today."

That doesn't help me in terms of deciding what to ask now. I need immediate answers. A year from now, I could be dead. We could all be dead.

One question only.

Hells.

## Unhealed

Leaving the Land of Eternal Death is sort of like walking out of a dream, the way that other world clings to you. Night comes too fast for time to be real, and I have to feel my way through the dark, unfamiliar slot canyon. I don't see the end of the canyon coming until I round a bend and the larger canyon opens up before me lit by stars and the now almost full single moon of Morta.

Wait. How long was I in there?

"You made it." Basalt sounds...not pleased, exactly. Relieved.

Damn. Was it that much in question?

"They've been waiting two days."

Two days? That's... I don't even know how to take that. It felt like an hour at most to me. But what I'm frowning at isn't the lost time. There's something in Basalt's tone that sits like lead in my stomach.

"Did something happen?" Eidolon? Did he come for us? I'm already hurrying around him.

With a rumble of rock and kicking up dust, he moves his leg so that I might pass by. A small, cheerful campfire burns on the other side, and I can see that at some point they got things to make a shelter, because a basic one-person tent is set up. Omma is sitting on a rock by the fire with Bene full-size and lying behind her, curled around the tent like the walls guarding a palace, big head resting on his sandy paws.

Where is Tabra?

Omma and Bene both get to their feet at the same time. "Thank the goddess," she breathes. She rushes over and smooths the hair off my forehead, then, in a low voice just for me, says, "You made it out. I was worried, child."

That may be the first time she's ever said those words to me. It's definitely the only way she's ever touched me like that.

Did the world come to an end and I missed it? Maybe I'm still stuck in the burning lands?

She must see my disbelief, because she slowly drops her hand. "We were going to leave in the morning whether you showed up or not."

“Meren?” That’s Tabra, but her voice sounds funny.

There’s a rustle inside the tent, and Omma hurries away to crawl inside, face pinched. That’s enough to have me running to the tent. I shove my head inside, then swallow a gasp, dropping to my knees, ignoring the way I land on sharp rocks that dig into my flesh.

Because Tabra... Mother goddess save us, she looks like death might pull her into the grave any second.

“What happened?” I demand in a voice gone tremulous.

“I’ll be fine,” Tabra assures me.

Over her head, Omma gives me a grim look and a shake of her head. “It came on fast. Almost as soon as you disappeared. She fainted.”

Tabra waves a hand. “I was tired. It’s fine.”

I share another look with Omma, who gives Tabra’s back an ineffectual pat. I can see the worry in the drawn lines of her face, the way her eyes won’t meet mine. Then she waves me out of the tent and off to the side.

She lowers her voice. “Basalt says that she doesn’t have long. Ten days at most.”

The blood drains from my head so fast that I sway. I glance over my shoulder to where Tabra’s bare feet are sticking out of the tent. “We should get her to a doctor, at least. Something. We can’t just let her...”

I refuse to say she’s going to die.

The question is, a doctor where? Given who we are, we can’t exactly wander around Aryd asking, and we don’t know where the zariphate is now.

“Tropikis still feels like our best option,” I decide. “The others should be there by the time we get there. We can ask King Panqui for access to his personal physician. Even better if he has an Imperium Healer.”

“If he’s on our side,” Omma grumbles.

I would love to throw something at her. Nothing lethal. My shoe, maybe. But Tabra would probably get upset with me and say something about attacking the elderly being not very princess-like behavior. “Do you see any better option?”

After a second, she shakes her head. “It’s where we were going to go if you didn’t return.”

Omma and me on the same side of a decision again? The entire burning lands I came from probably just froze solid for the first time since Nova created the world.

You Shall  
Not Pass

This time, we don't need to fly. Where we're going, there are portals on the other side. I even manage to get mine created on the first try. If I wasn't so blasted worried about my sister, I would've crowed with triumph.

"Bene, you'd better shrink down for this," I tell him.

We need to be ready to move fast if this works and I manage to open the portal. Our plan is to go to Yolyn Zag first. Not to find the zariphate but to then use that portal to go to Tropikis.

Yolyn Zag's portal is...safer. Ish. We have a better chance of someone not being in there and seeing us arriving from the desert—there are zero portals anywhere in a desert, and a witness seeing that behind us would find it more than strange. The risk of that happening is much higher if we go straight through the Tropikis portal, even at night, because they only have the one.

I wait until Bene's the size of a raven again and Omma has brought Tabra out of the tent, though she's visibly struggling to hold my sister up, let alone hobble her over to the portal, since she can't walk on her own. This shouldn't take long, though.

I pull my power forward, the yellow glow reflecting off the black glass I made from the Obsidian Desert sand all around us. *Please, please, please let this work.* Closing my eyes, I picture the room we've been through several times now. When I open my eyes, it's to find the room in the temple of Yolyn Zag on the other side. We hustle through.

As soon as I shut it off, I turn my power right back on. "Ready?"

"Hurry," Omma says, adjusting her hold on Tabra, who looks to be on the verge of passing out.

I do it all over again, this time picturing the portal room in Pantrea, the capital city of Tropikis. The glass becomes opaque, then clear, and I have to stop myself from taking a hasty step back as four soldiers dressed in Tropikan armor about-face and cross their spears, barring the way through.

"You may not pass," one says, looking over the three of us in our Wanderer clothing with a sneer. "Especially not with this."

The ignorant man actually pokes at the Devourer on my shoulder. Bene flaps his wings, making a sandy scratching sound right in my ear.

“*You are asking for a terrible death,*” he tells the guard, who, of course, can’t hear him. I can because I’m wearing my amulet again.

“Why can’t we pass?” Omma demands.

“No one may enter Tropikis during the Rites of Xathena.” He’s very stern and semi-condescending, like this should have been obvious.

*The Rites of...*

I would love to throw myself on the ground and pitch a fit like a toddler. Because damn it all, can we get just one break? Those highly secretive rites only happen once every seven years. Of *course* they would be right now.

Maybe the others couldn’t get into Tropikis, either? Where would they have gone instead? Or maybe they made it in before the portal was closed? Do I have Tabra pull the sovereign card? Except she’s not dressed like a queen at the moment and doesn’t exactly look royal in the state she’s in. Maybe *I* play the queen card? Except I’m not dressed regally, either. “Um... I’m looking for my friends who are probably already—”

“Let them pass,” a familiar voice calls out from behind the guards.

I almost wilt in relief, but I can’t because the guards will see. Beyond them, Cain appears. Or, rather, a masked man who sounds like Cain appears. I squint, trying to make out his clothes. It’s definitely Cain—I’d know that voice and the way he stalks toward me anywhere—but he’s dressed in black pants paired with a vest decorated in metal studs and swirling silver stitching on the lapels. The vest leaves his arms bare, the cut of his muscles under sun-darkened skin quite something.

What in Nova is he wearing?

“These are the ones you were waiting for?” the guard asks like they’re friends.

I do my best not to show all my questions in my face.

Cain moves closer and pushes the intricate mask back, his face coming into the light of the fire in the room. He clasps the soldier on the shoulder. “They’re the ones.”

“She doesn’t look too good.” The soldier nods at Tabra.

Cain doesn’t bat an eye. “I know. She’s coming for the Rites.”

I try not to startle, because what would that have to do with Tabra being sick? Or is he making this up to set the soldier’s frowning concerns at rest?

“And the raven?” Meaning Bene.

“Are you frightened of birds?” I ask sweetly, only to button my lips when Cain shoots me a warning look tinged in exasperation.

“He’s a gift for King Panqui.” Cain is being overly cheerful for some reason. “From Aryd, in exchange for allowing us to be here during the Rites. It’s what took them so long.”

*Um...sure.* Cain clearly has a plan here. I paste a smile on my face and nod along.

After a pause and what feels like some unseen signal, the four guards raise their spears. “Enter,” one says.

Still trying not to look as surprised as I’m feeling, we all pass through. Cain has to cross over to help Omma with Tabra, who can’t lift her knees high enough. Then I shut off my power. Cain gives a jerk of his head, and Omma and I follow him and Tabra out.

“That mouth is going to get you in trouble someday,” Cain grumbles as we go.

“So you keep telling me.”

The second we walk outside, I stop so hard Omma plows into me.

The portal room is up high in the triangular temple, putting us well above the city roofline, with large steps leading down into the streets. What I’m staring at, though, is the view. I’ve known about the cliffs of Tropikis for as long as I can remember, but knowing and seeing are two different things. The cliffs tower above us.

This is the sunken dominion. The Goddess Tropikis, in order to protect her people from the Devourers, dropped the entire dominion below sea level, leaving massive cliffs—some say thousands of feet high—that create a barrier around the entire land that keeps both the oceans and the Devourers out.

The capital city of Pantrea sits at the base of the cliffs to the northwestern side of the dominion, the jungle spreading out around it. When storms rage in the seas, waterfalls flow over the tops and drop into caves that spit the water back into the ocean.

It’s night, but under the light of Morta’s full moon, I can make out several white plumes of water, too far in the distance to be heard.

“Meren.” Omma gives me a little shove.

Before I can move, a tiny bird the likes of which I’ve never seen before—green with red at its throat and a long slender beak—flies in front of me, wings beating so fast it seems to float in the air. After a small moment, the

tiny bird dips its head. A bow of sorts, I suppose. Then flies off on a buzz of those wings.

“That used to happen to me,” Omma murmurs. Maybe more to herself than to me.

I blink at her. “It did?”

“*It’s not you,*” Bene’s voice growls in my head. “*It’s my goddess.*”

Oh. And here I’d been feeling sort of...special...when it wasn’t me all along.

I translate for Omma, whose pinched lips go more pinched, if that’s possible. “I see.”

“We need to go,” Cain reminds us.

We hurry down the steep, broad temple steps made of some silvery-looking stone. Once we hit the street, we slip around the corner into an alleyway that is stuck between boxy, stacked homes.

It’s a dead end, but Cain doesn’t seem bothered as he stops and helps Tabra sit on a wooden crate of some sort. She leans her elbows on her knees, unable to stay sitting on her own.

“We need to get her to a doctor.”

Cain grabs me by my arms and gets right into my face, every semblance of his earlier laid-back humor with the guards disappearing.

“What in the name of Nova were you thinking?” he demands.

“Young man—”

I hold up a hand, cutting off Omma’s protest. Cain has every right to be mad at me. They all do. I would be. I’d convinced myself all the way to the canyon that sometimes the dick move is also the right thing to do. Especially given how my visit to the burning lands turned out. But in the end, right or wrong, it was still a dick move. “Horus was supposed to tell you—”

Cain’s hands tighten painfully. “He did. And you still should have waited. Talked to us first. Damn it, Meren, talked to *me* first. I would have come with you.”

“I’m sorry.” It’s all I can say.

“Me too,” he mutters, flat-lipped. “And I plan to yell at you some more after we get you all safely to the palace.”

Safely? Is it not safe here? “I’ll follow you—”

A shake of his head cuts me off. “You need to change first so we can blend in.”

Blend in. Like the getup he’s wearing? Okay....



“Here.” He shoves a linen sack at me and two more each at Tabra and Omma. “You’ll find clothes in there. Hopefully they fit.”

I pause with the bag halfway open and try to keep my hands from shaking. Vida is the one who would have made sure I fit in. With a smile and her endless chattering, she’d have trussed me up in clothes she made just for me.

And now she’s gone.

He turns his back, and after sucking in a few breaths to ward off the sadness surging through me, I start to pull out the items in the bag. One look and I almost shove them back in. There’s no time for that, though, so I don’t, stripping out of my own clothes.

Warm air—thick with different scents of soil, wood, vegetation, and flowers that all blend together—feathers over my skin. It’s not cold but balmy. Close. Weighty. And wet. Enough that my new clothes stick to my skin as I try to pull them on. “There’s no winter here, right?”

“Nope,” Cain says.

Tropikis is the farthest from Tyndra. Even more than Aryd. “I’d heard it was covered in snow.”

He grunts a sound that might be agreement. “The snows are contained to the south so far.”

Oh.

My dress is a simple sheath of some supple black material, strapless and so short that it exposes my legs and barely covers my crotch. I’ll be tugging it down and then back up over my breasts nonstop. Matching boots come up mid-thigh. A train is attached via a studded belt around my waist and has silver embroidery that matches the arm bands and gauntlets.

Well, this is...different from what I’m used to in Aryd. Showing skin there isn’t unusual, but the rest of the look is definitely a new one for me. Ten minutes later, after Omma and I had to work together to get Tabra into her costume, Bene returns from the jungles where he went to collect more sand. He’s bigger, but he’s hidden all the various different animal features his usual form takes, including the wings, and is now shaped like a truly fearsome dog.

*“The sand in the ground is buried so deep in the soil here that neither of us is going to be useful for much if we are attacked,”* he warns me.

“You’ll need this.” Cain produces a mask clearly meant for a pet. But when he steps forward, Bene bares his teeth. He hands the mask to me. “You can hear him. You do it.”

I take it and put it to the Devourer’s face. The silver metal is shaped for a

dog with a narrower snout. With a little growl, Bene shifts his sandy form to fit it.

*“Is this truly necessary?”*

I translate for the others.

“Believe me,” Cain says. “It’s necessary.”

I fiddle with the tie. “Why?”

“The Rites of Xathena are forbidden to outsiders, and we’re not wanted here. Dressing as the locals do for the festivities will allow us to blend in and move freely through the city without being stopped.” He glances at Bene. “Even dogs.”

Bene’s fur ruffles to the shooshing sound of sand blowing across dunes, and I bite back a smile. He’s not happy, but he’s not arguing now, either.

Once I’ve got him situated, I put on my own mask. Made of surprisingly light silver metal, it covers the upper part of my face with mesh cages over the eyes that I can see out of but onlookers can’t see in. The moonlike headbands crown me in halos. A delicate decorative pattern of silver holes is punched into the thin metal—a design of swirls of thick foliage, symbols of Tropikis, and coiled among the leaves and flowers is the hidden image of a cobra, raised up, hood wide, and mouth open to strike.

It reminds me a lot of the sigil of my royal house.

Beauty and death.

Like me. Like Reven. Like my sister, who is wasting away all over again.

“How do I look?” I ask. “Can you tell it’s me?”

Bene tips his head to the side, but Cain is the one to answer. “You look beautiful. Fearsome and...yeah...” He looks away, down the alley. “Beautiful.”

Um. Awkward doesn’t begin to cover this.

At his back, from where she’s sitting beside Tabra, Omma raises her brows. Warmth creeping into my face, I glance down over what I’m wearing, then adjust my mask, suddenly happy to have it. At least I don’t have to look him in the eyes. His is, appropriately, gold and decorated by suns.

“So... Why would we be here for the Rites if she’s sick?”

“Because apparently the Rites of Xathena are like a fountain of youth and healing.” Cain pulls his own mask down. “I’ll explain when we get to the palace. Follow me.”

## Tropikis

Cain pulls Tabra to her feet and somehow manages to make it look like she's walking while I'm pretty sure he's basically carrying her. Bene prowls along beside Omma and me as we walk out of the alley and into the boisterous streets filled with celebrating revelers. Sure enough, we blend right in. Perfect. No one will find us among this hot crush.

The music is what strikes me first. There's a thumping beat, guitars, and everyone singing and laughing and talking. It's joyful and yet urgent. A true celebration. If I wasn't dealing with everything I am, I can see how it would be easy to get caught up in the sounds and the dancing and the rejoicing.

A thousand smells fill the air. They come and go as we pass them—all sorts of foods like roasting meats and something sugary, the hearty natural plants and flowers, the vines of which cover many building sides, and sweat.

Everything is in blacks and metallics. From the little I know about the Rites, which isn't much, in a few days, not only will everyone be unmasked, but all the black clothing will be shed in favor of brilliant colors. My own dress unbuckles at one side to reveal a bloodred version underneath, and the train flips over to expose vines covered with some kind of red tropical flowers.

Somehow—after stopping and starting a thousand times, trying to blend in while at the same time not getting drawn in—we make our way through the city. More than one person tries to take me by the hands and pull me into a dance. They stop every time Bene bares his teeth.

I don't think Cain is too happy about it, either, but since he has to help Tabra, there's not much he can do.

We eventually come up against a wall at the far side of the city, where the palace itself backs right into the cliffs. We follow that around several corners until we finally get to the gated entrance guarded by what appears to be a battalion of men clad clearly as soldiers and yet in the blacks of the festival, their masks all the same—copper, covering their entire face, including their mouths like they are being silenced. The only decoration etched into the metal is the image of a waterfall pouring out of the mouth hole.

Before we make it to them, a man with a mask covered in eyeballs like the monolith outside the burning lands places himself in my path.

Horus.

I was hoping for Reven. As quickly as that unworthy thought strikes, I shake it off and try a tentative smile. "I'm glad you made it."

But the expected smile in return doesn't come.

"We can catch each other up inside." Taking me by the arm, Horus leads all of us straight to the palace gates.

I frown up at him. "What are we doing here? I assumed we'd hide—"

He lowers his mask so the closest guard can see his face. The guard shoots a brief glance at me, then behind me at Cain. "More?"

Which means what? Did they arrive in small groups or something?

Cain just nods. "The last of us."

"Don't forget to leave soon," we're ordered.

Leave?

Horus huffs an unamused laugh. "Given the signal, there's little chance of forgetting."

The guard shrugs.

Now's not the time for questions, clearly, so I keep mine to myself.

Once we're inside, I get my first good look at the Tropikan palace. Like in Aryd, the main structure is surrounded by walls, though here they form a perfect rectangle, half a mile long at least. The walls, the gate house, guard towers on each of the corners, and four smaller buildings also at each of the four corners are made of the same unusual dark green stone marbled with bands of lighter green and gold.

In the center of the structures, where I stand now, is a massive garden courtyard divided into sections, each featuring a different flowering plant. A long reflection pool leads to the main palace structure at the far end. It rises out of the greenery the way I imagine the Obelisk of Nova rises out of the salt flats. The zariphate never got close enough for me to see it to properly compare.

The palace itself is made of rutile quartz. I remember that much from Omma's teaching, and I want to get closer to inspect it in person. Only found here in Tropikis, the stone is clear with a coppery-gold substance shot through it. The palace is a massive square structure with four tall, skinny spires at the center and a dome at each corner. The domes and spire tips are covered in copper, gleaming brightly in the moonlight.

Horus hurries me not to the palace but to the smaller—and by smaller, I mean not quite as massive—building in the northeastern corner, closer to the gates. The inside is decorated in silken black flowers and skulls with black swaths of material in honor of the Rites.

At the bottom of a set of wide stairs, Cain scoops Tabra up into his arms. Her head drops to his shoulder, both of their masks clinking as they get tangled up.

Horus gestures me up the stairs. “We have been waiting for you.”

With Friends  
Like These

We follow Cain into what appears to be a sitting area that is part of a suite—a room filled with the rest of the friends I left behind—Vos, Tziah, Pella, and Hakan.

Not Reven, though.

I try not to let the sting of a second disappointment take hold. I'm sure he'll join us any second. He has to feel me here now, doesn't he? Not that I can feel him. The stretching sensation in my side has eased, but I'm still cut off.

I didn't realize until right this second that going off, even with Omma and Tabra, would be as hard as it was. That having the others around to share the burden actually lightens the load.

Pella and Tziah jump up to help Cain lower Tabra onto a settee. "What happened?" Pella shoots me an accusing glare. "She looks *worse*."

As if I did this on purpose.

"The centimane guarding the burning lands said that the soul she was infected with damaged her. We should get her a doctor or a Healer if the king has one."

Healer Imperium are rare. I've only met one. Wren, a Savanahan who is with Eidolon. Or they were. They were assigned to travel with the soldiers who attacked the Shadowwood. The ones Reven disappeared.

Horus drops into a chair. "Tropikis doesn't have doctors or Healers."

"What? Any doctors at all? Why?" Omma and I exchange a look. Maybe we should have stayed in Yolyn Zag.

"The Rites," Vos says.

"What about them?"

"The king is *Enfernae*." Cain leans forward where he's taken a seat beside Tziah, elbows on his knees...and not looking at me. "Each night of the Rites, he sends out this..." He gestures at the air, then looks at Pella. "What would you call it?"

She glances outside like she can see it. "A dome of light?"

A vague recollection of Omma telling younger me about the king's powers drifts through my mind.

"A vitality bubble," Omma supplies.

All of them stare at her with questions. She shrugs. "That's what I was told by my grandmother. I don't know what it does, though. None of the other sovereigns know much more than that."

"It's different every night," Horus says. "We've already witnessed three nights. The king's power seems to heal things, or at least make things grow. It's like...renewal."

Pella takes to pacing. "Each night, it affects something specific. The first night were the plants."

Plants. I'm having trouble picturing this. "What happened?"

Tziah is the one to answer, her hands a dance, and she's smiling. Eager, even.

"They...grow?" I ask, trying to understand.

She wrinkles her nose at me.

"More than grow," Vos says. "Brown leaves turned green. New life formed. Fruit sprouted overnight. We could *hear* them expand."

Tziah nods and points at Cain, who shoots her a quick smile and an odd shake of his head as if denying something. "She ran out of the city to see it happening in the jungle, and it took me an hour to find her." His smile disappears. "I wasn't thrilled with her for that."

Again, Tziah wrinkles her nose but pats his chest in an affectionate gesture. One that surprises me, because Cain accepts that physical contact without surprise or reaction beyond another shake of his head. An exchange, incidentally, that Vos frowns at.

We weren't gone *that* long, but it's starting to feel like years. Why do I suddenly feel I'm on the outside looking in all over again? Even more so than when I joined the zariphate after escaping Eidolon.

There's a greater bond between these friends now than there was before.

What happened in Savannah? And where the hells is Reven? He should be here for this.

"What about the other two nights?" Omma asks.

Everyone shudders. Except Hakan, who is tucked against the wall, arms crossed.

Horus answers my question. "Last night was birds and creatures of the air. The night before...bugs."

That explains the shudders. “Don’t tell us about that part. Does anyone know about tonight?”

Pella, still pacing, answers. “Based on what we’ve been able to glean without asking too many questions, tonight is all water life.” She reaches the end of her path and spins around, pacing my way again. “Apparently, even the waters of the Nohzomeh River run clearer.”

I’m getting dizzy with her back and forth, so I step in front of her. “I’m still not following how this means they don’t need doctors here.”

She sighs. “Tomorrow night...that’s for *us*. Humans.”

For humans.

For...

I gasp at the same time Omma does, and we both look at Tabra. They don’t have doctors or Healers here for a reason. Tropikis is the patron goddess of healing. Did she gift that ability to the dominion’s royal line? Could the Rites save my sister?

I wasn’t able to ask the spirit how to heal her. I *chose* not to ask. The guilt of choosing everyone else in the world over my own sister has been eating me alive. The relief unfurling in my belly butts up against doubts shouting that nothing is that easy. Especially if it’s something we desperately need.

“What do you think?” I ask Omma.

The lines around her eyes soften, and I think maybe she’s as relieved as I am. “I think we finally got lucky.”

Tabra offers a weak smile. “Now you don’t have to worry about me, Mer.”

I’m not sure I’ll let the worry go completely until we see her fully healed, but at least maybe it won’t continue gnawing at me like sandrats.

We still have to stay ahead of Eidolon, which means not all of us can wait here with Tabra, but she’ll be healed. All the way this time.

Hopefully.

I should probably fill them in now on what I learned and what we have to do—I glance around—just as soon as Reven shows up.

His absence is starting to feel like a hole in the room. The others would have mentioned a problem. Right?

My gaze lands on Horus, who has now removed his mask. He’s sporting an impressive black eye that is already turning green around the edges. “Did you run into trouble?” I indicate the eye with a wave.

“Only with me,” Pella mutters.

Cain grins at her sullen response. So does Hakan, though she doesn’t see it,



since he's behind her. "She hit him when he told us he made you go," Cain explains.

Huh. I pictured Cain or Reven getting pissed, but her?

Pella mutters again, lower and to herself, but I'm pretty sure I catch the words "too stupid to live" somewhere in there. Behind her, Hakan straightens off the wall, as though backing her up.

I raise a single brow at her. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were worried about me."

Her scowl deepens. A tiny part of me feels a little better, a little more grounded at the familiar sight of it. Pella, at least, will never change.

"I am sorry," I tell the room in general. "It wasn't Horus's fault."

I look to Omma, who doesn't say anything about how she's the one who pushed for it in the first place. Which feels about right.

"Was it worth it, at least?" Cain asks.

"I hope so." How long can he stay mad at me? He's never been good at holding a grudge, but he doesn't ease up.

Tziah reaches for me, hands outstretched. Grateful, I take hers, squeezing back, warmth settling in the region of my heart. Warmth that grows and spreads as she lets go and speaks with her gestures. She taps her chest over her heart, then makes a sign that looks like she's breaking a stick, and I get that one.

"Losing any of you would break my heart, too." I pause, chewing on the inside of my cheek and debating if I should bring up... "Vida—" I can't get her name out, my throat closing up.

No one will look at me. Do they blame me? That tightness in my throat becomes a burn.

"Horus told us what happened," Vos says. He runs a hand over his jaw, still not quite meeting my gaze.

I've never seen Vos so grim. Or, come to think of it, quite so pale, even when we first met. His normally deeply black skin has gone gray underneath.

"We need—" I have to stop and clear my throat. "We need to find Vida's family. We promised. She said Eidolon—"

"Already working on it," Vos says. "One of the Vanished who knew her well..."

Oh. "I'm glad. Let me know if—"

He finally looks at me then. "It's being handled."

My stomach drops. Is this anger at my leaving or blame? Or guilt because

he cleared the Vanished as potential spies. All of the Vanished...including Vida. I still can't tell. Does it make me a coward that I don't want to know the answer? Instead, I clear my throat again. "Did any of you get to Savannah or Mariana before coming here?"

"Savannah," Pella says. "And Queen Wynega had never heard of any amulets but said she would check in their archives."

Vos leans back with a snort. "There's a character."

I'm not surprised by the comment. I've met Wynega just once at my—and by mine, I mean Tabra's—coronation and wedding celebration. In the two minutes we spoke, she told me to listen for the voices. Couldn't I hear them? No, I couldn't, by the way. Then she proceeded to have a whispered conversation with someone or something not there before wandering off.

After my encounters with ghosts and spirits, not to mention shadows and trapped souls and amulets with goddesses, I'm starting to wonder if she really was communicating with an unseen, unknown thing.

Hakan grunts. "I wouldn't expect much from my former queen."

My eyebrows try to climb into my hairline. For someone who doesn't talk much, he just said a lot. "And King Panqui?"

"We have yet to lay eyes on the King of Tropikis," Cain offers with a wry hitch to his lips.

"Um." I glance around, because we're in Panqui's palace. And what about the guards who let us into the dominion when no one else was allowed? I figured they must have met with the man to get permission.

Pella finally sits down. "His majordomo admitted us on the king's orders. Apparently, during Xathena, Panqui is not seen until the night of unmasking, which is the final night."

"When is that?"

"After the night the humans are renewed."

A few nights, then. That's good. It gives us time to do what we need to do. Hopefully we can be back before then.

The hole of Reven's absence is getting wider by the second. Why has not a single person in here mentioned him? I'm done trying not to look too pathetic by asking. "Where is Reven?"

Vos gives a little cough. Which leads into another and another. It lasts long enough that we're all frowning by the time he can take a decent breath again.

"Vos?" I don't hide the worry that creeps from my chest into my voice.

"It's fine," he says.

“Doesn’t sound fine.”

Tziah gives him a pointed look, I think agreeing with me.

He waves a careless hand. “I figure the Rites have that covered. Besides, you have bigger issues.”

“Reven?”

Vos’s mouth is a grim slash. “Let’s just say he didn’t take the separation as well as he did when you were with Eidolon in the palace.”

The boulder of dread that has been teetering over me since the second I left the zariphate drops, the weight of it threatening to crush me. “Tell me.”

Horus grimaces. “He has to be in absolute darkness to hold Eidolon’s Shadows inside.”

My legs go wobbly. It’s bad. Worse than I thought. “Take me to him.”

“No way—” Cain cuts himself off with a grimace and lowers his voice. “I don’t think it’s safe. He’s—”

The flames of the candelabras around the room suddenly flicker, and then gloom consumes the room in a rush. Not total darkness but close.

“You’re here, love.” Reven’s deep-as-sin voice rumbles through me and around me.

“Reven?” I whisper as I stare at the shape of a man standing in the doorway.

As my eyes begin to adjust, I take in more details.

I catch a flash of eyes gone entirely black.

Not Reven...Shadow.

Damnation.

Beside me, Horus makes a sound in the back of his throat and tries to get between us. Immediately, Shadow’s face contorts in a spasm of anger, and tendrils of darkness lash out at me like whips, so fast I don’t have time to do more than yelp. Fear lashing through me, I’m dragged across the room, kicking and fighting the entire way, aware that more shadow is holding Horus and the others at bay.

I slam into Reven’s body. Shadow’s arms wrap tight around me, lifting me up so that my feet dangle above the ground.

A bubble of darkness snaps up around us, enveloping us in a private place. As fast as they came for me, the tendrils of shadow disappear inside him, and the darkness in the room all around us, obscuring us from view and holding back the others, changes. Softens. Warms.

And I don’t care because he digs one hand into my hair and his entire body

convulses. On an indrawn breath he lifts his head...and it's Reven.

No faces. No shaking. Eyes a glorious, smoldering turquoise.

Then his expression crumples with what I can only describe as violent relief, and his lips are on mine.

"You made it back to me," he says against my mouth.

# Part 5

Draw Death

Consumed by  
Shadows

This is forbidden.

I fall into his kiss anyway, drown in it...only to drag myself right back to the surface. I've been trying to be good. Trying to make it easier on him. To accept that we can't *do* this anymore.

I pull away. "We shouldn't. I don't want to make this harder on you."

"No. Stay with me." He gathers me closer. Faces flicker over his. "I've been lost since you left. You're keeping me here."

Oh.

The block of ice surrounding my heart thaws in a rush. Even if I don't understand the whys and hows, or even, for that matter, trust them.

*Stop thinking, Meren. Kiss the man.*

Like he heard my chaotic thoughts, Reven lets go, threatening to toss me right back into a pile of confusion. But he doesn't release me. Not entirely. He captures my wrists as though he's going to hold me back. Everything about him stills, and my heart plummets at the thought that he's going to take it all away again. Put those walls back up.

Only, he glances at Cain's cuff before shifting his grip to lace our fingers, staring at his hand against mine.

"They're so quiet."

Eidolon's Shadows?

The darkness around us parts to reveal our very concerned friends. "What the—"

"I'm under control," Reven cuts Vos off. "Give us a second."

Then the darkness hides us again.

Before I can comment, as if compelled, he lifts my hand and follows the path of bluish veins under the skin of my wrist with his lips. An unfurling of sensation that I've been holding back hits with the first brush of contact, then claws through me the longer this goes on.

We're cocooned in his darkness. I don't know what to do with myself, but the need, the heat that his touch is building needs *somewhere* to go.

All from such a simple caress.

Different from the kiss we shared in the water garden. Different because of the relief...and the buildup. A longing. A need for the connection between us. A compulsion.

Does he feel this as intensely as I do?

A whimper escapes me.

“Hells,” he mutters as he lifts his head, his expression descending to both darkness and flame at the same time. “I’ve thought of this a thousand times, and I thought I had to stay away—”

Me, too.

I don’t know which of us moves first. Maybe both of us at the same time, but his mouth is on mine again, and all that relief that I’m not the only one feeling this burns up in a flash fire of need that I’ve been holding back for ages. Anguish and bliss all rolled together.

And through it all, I feel Reven. Only Reven.

His mouth, his hands, are everywhere, and so are mine. And thank goodness for the dark shielding us from the others now, because something inside me—some deeply held fear that what I feel for Reven is so much more than what he does for me—releases in a waterfall of relief.

I’m shaking and I don’t care, because a small part of me thought I’d never get this with him again. That knowledge, that possible future, gives my responses, the way I touch him back, an edge. Like I’m trying to absorb every single second, to memorize this for when it ends. The scent of his skin, the feel of his muscles bunching under my hands, the way he shudders when I press my lips to the side of his neck.

“Meren?” Horus’s voice finally breaks through, calling out in the night.

Hells.

Reven and I both come up for air, but we don’t let the others in. Not yet.

I can see in his eyes that he’s not going to put those walls back up again. Not entirely.

“What changed?” I have to know.

He’s still breathing hard. “I *felt* you arrive in the dominion, and suddenly...I could breathe again.”

Okay. So why did he wait to come find me? And what was with that dramatic entrance?

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “But then his Shadows rioted. They wanted to get to you, too, and I couldn’t hold them back.”

“Uh...that doesn't sound good—” He puts a finger to my lips, and I quiet under his touch.

“They stopped fighting the second we had you.” He shakes his head like he doesn't quite believe it. “They just vanished. I can't hear them right now. Not at all.”

We stare at each other, and I know we're thinking the same thing. “It has to be my curse.”

He shakes his head. “We don't know for sure what it is about you or what you're doing to stop them from killing us both. But I'm done shutting you out. I'll just have to be...”

“Careful.” I curl my hands into his shirt. “*We'll* be careful.”

His hands cover mine like he'll detach me from him, but he doesn't. “I'm serious, Meren. If I have to shadow away, let me.”

I sigh. “Fine. But for the scribes, I'm tired of being alone in this—”

He gets right in my face. “You're *not* alone.”

“I'm *always* alone.” Even now that I'm surrounded by friends. Tabra can step back in as queen after the Rites, so I'll lose her, too.

“You are *never* alone, even when I can't be there.” Reven drops his hand to feather his fingers over my scar made of shadow and magic. Made of *him*. The contact sends zaps of lightning surging through me, lighting me up and drawing a shudder of pure sensation to the surface.

The shadows inside me come to instant, decadent life, and through them I can feel...*Reven*. He's no longer closed off, and our connection, the shadowy part of me is *alive* with it. He's right here, inside me, and I feel everything about him. His need for me. The terror of reaching for me. Of daring to hope, only to lose me. Or worse, hurt me.

Everything that I feel, only more. Which only tumbles me into a riot of emotions, so many different ones that separating them out is hard—relief, peace, joy, fear to lose it all again, and an agony of need.

“I am always with you,” he says. Solemn. Sincere.

Goddess.

I've never let myself picture my future before. Only small snippets. Glimpses. Things Omma would say or do that would make me imagine myself at her age. There was nothing for me to look forward to, not then. And since all this started, I've only been able to look to the next moment. Put one foot in front of the other. Solve the problem in front of me. Survive.

I know what I want my future to look like now.



Even though I don't think I'll ever get to have it, I want to reach for it anyway, work for it. I want to make it happen, even though I know the chances are slim.

He's all I want. Is that too much to ask?

The best I can do is hope for it...and try. See if I can develop this ability the way I did my power over sand. I could give us a future, but even more than that, I could give *him* a future. He wouldn't have to cope alone anymore.

I shouldn't tell him. It's too much pressure. With everything going on, it's too much. As long as he's willing to stay near me, test this out, I'll wait.

I can wait.

I go up on tiptoe again and press my lips to his, and we sort of melt into each other.

We both pull back at the same time. "We'd better get back to the others," I say.

Taking my hand, Reven removes the darkness, and we're standing in the room. I blink in the sudden light of the braziers.

Our friends blink back at us.

"You can go to the hells for scaring us like that," Pella snarls.

Before we can answer, a horn blasts within the castle walls, so loud it feels as though the very floors shake.

I jump, not expecting it, and suddenly, in a swirl of shadow, Reven and I aren't standing in the room anymore, but in the hallway.

"Holy shit," he utters. "That was not me."

"So it was me?" I squeak. "Why? Because I was..."

"Scared," he fills in when I trail off.

But I'm busy thinking through all the other times. "I think it always happens when I'm scared."

The more scared—for me, for him, for my friends—the more I can do. Is that the trick? It kind of sucks if it is. I can picture it now, him having to scare the wits out of me every time he loses it so I can help him get control.

Reven swings the door open and sticks his head inside. "Sorry about that. We're out here."

"The sound," I say. "What was that?"

"The signal," Vos answers.

Reven drops his forehead to my temple. "We have to leave the palace."

The Rites of  
Xathena

“Why do we have to leave the palace, exactly?”

The others start putting on their masks, and Vos hands me mine. “The place is cleared of everyone but the king from the hours of sunset to midnight. And that includes us.”

“Again...why?”

“For King Panqui,” Reven says as he adjusts his own mask. “As far as we can tell, he’s locked away the entire week of the Rites, but at night when his power is released, they empty and lock down the palace for added protection.”

Once everyone is ready, with Tabra propped up between Cain and Horus, we make our way out of the building, through the gardened courtyard, and into the streets outside the main gate. The music has gotten louder since we were out here before, driving through my body in thumping bursts. Wilder. Fiercer.

I’ve never seen anything like this.

Aryd has celebrations, but this is unique. There’s an excitement driving the people—jubilation, revelry. But also, an odd sense of expectation that hangs heavy in the air.

Tropikis is lucky to have a king who wields such a precious power. I picture Aryd with its dwindling water supplies and lack of food and what a power like his might do for my own people. Then to know all the sick and injured will be healed...goddess. If it helps Vos and especially Tabra...

Meanwhile, all I can do is make sandcastles and glass flowers. The portals are handy, at least.

Suddenly, the metal gate *clangs* down behind us with a rattle of the thick metal chains, closing off the entrance to the palace. That’s followed swiftly by similar *clangs* circling the entire palace. As though every window and every entrance is being barricaded.

Whoa. They take protecting the king seriously around here. That should be a good thing. So why does it have such an ominous ring? My muscles tighten

with each metal barrier dropping into place.

*“I should not be here for this,”* Bene announces abruptly in my head. Before I can ask him why not, he takes off running through the streets. I quickly lose sight of him.

What was that about?

“The people celebrating get more frenzied as the night goes on,” Horus warns me.

Pella chimes in. “Never go off by yourself.”

“I won’t.” I get a round of doubtful, searching, untrusting stares. Looks and doubts I’ve earned. I hold up a hand. “I promise.”

“Yeah,” Pella mutters. “We’ve heard that before.”

Cain shoots a warning glance at his sister that’s impossible to miss. “Leave her alone, Pella.”

She narrows her eyes at him. “All is forgiven already, hmmm?”

He ignores that, looking at Vos. “Back to the pub?”

*Pub?*

We make our way to a strip of shop buildings across from the guard gatehouse and right into a run-down-looking establishment. All woods and brick walls made of some rough red stone, it boasts mismatched wooden tables and chairs of all sizes, a long bar along one wall, and a small, raised platform where musicians bring the music from outside into the space. It’s packed.

Underneath wafts of roasted meat and foods I’ve never had before, the place smells of perfume and sweat and revelry. The heavy scents are overwhelming when bodies are pressed this close, much worse than outside in the open air.

By some miracle, we manage to commandeer a table big enough for all of us tucked into a back corner, and I find myself stuffed into the shadows of it. Reven sits opposite me, but I don’t mind this time. Not while I can sense him still.

A middle-aged barmaid wearing a revealing, skin-tight dress with a bodice that presses her impressive breasts up appears, and we place our orders. Not that there’s much to choose from.

“Don’t take your mask off,” Vos, who is sitting beside me, warns when my hand strays to the silken ties that hold it in place.

I drop my hands back into my lap. “So what happens now?” I ask no one in particular.

“Now the king does his magic,” Vos says on a wheeze. The short journey here has visibly taxed him. This close, I can see the fine sheen of sweat across his upper lip.

“When does it happen?”

Horus puts a finger to his lips a second before the barmaid appears and plunks an amber-colored drink with a frothy top to it on the table in front of me. Right. The “no strangers allowed” thing, especially while we have to be out here in the open, is proving tricky.

She smiles. Beautifully tall and slender with those lush breasts and breathtakingly smooth walnut skin set off by the copper of her mask carved with...goddess, her mask is two people coming together in a way that is impossible to unsee. Or unfeel. My body, despite my crossing my legs, responds to the suggestive image. That kiss earlier, still fresh, doesn't help.

Her grin turns lascivious, though the way her head is angled I'm pretty sure she's eyeing *Reven* through that mask of hers. She puts her hands on the table, leaning in unmistakably toward him, and my jaw drops as I realize that her top is nearly sheer, to the point that it's easy to make out the dusky tips of her breasts. “Can I get you anything else, love?”

I sit forward abruptly, shoving my face between her and *Reven*. “Nope.”

The barmaid straightens slowly, lips drawing into an uncaring smirk before she saunters away, hips swaying. If she knows what's good for her, she won't saunter back this way again. Send someone else.

“Jealousy,” Vos *tsks*. “Fun to watch, not so fun to live.” There's a waver in his voice that sounds like laughter, and I swing a glare at him, only to get a lazy grin from under his mask.

*Reven* picks up my glass and takes a sip before setting it closer to me, and I look at him with raised eyebrows.

Cain, sitting on my other side, leans back and eyes *Reven*. “You seriously expect them to poison her here?”

Hard to tell behind his mask, but *Reven*'s expression doesn't alter even a little. Which means that's exactly what he was doing.

Cain stretches one arm across the back of my chair and tips closer to me with a conspiratorial grin. “That's taking that protective thing a bit far, don't you think, Mer?”

The shadows in our booth flicker.

Cain's smile widens as he turns to face me alone. “What did you think of the Sacred Tree of Aryd?”

Now he's just trying to get himself shadowed somewhere deadly.

He glances around the group, though I know he's aiming this at Reven. "We always said we would see the six sacred trees together. Meren's been fascinated since she was a little girl. I want to—"

"But we didn't get to do that," I rush to cut off what I think he was about to say.

Something about wanting us to marry there is my guess. Goddess grant me patience. I think it's time for a change of subject.

Is it safe to discuss here? Because of the way we're tucked into the corner, no one should be able to overhear as long as we're careful.

I clear my throat. "I got the answer we needed from the burning lands."

What the  
Dead Told Me

The announcement hangs heavy around us. Everyone turns serious, leaning forward in their seats, except Omma and Tabra. They already know. Well, that and Tabra's practically asleep with her head on the table. I run a finger over the flat head of my signet ring.

Horus glances over his shoulder, taking in the room like I did. "Keep your voices low."

I nod. "I spoke with a...spirit." The who is important, but I don't want his message lost first. "I know how to get the other three amulets."

"Holy hells," Horus says.

Tziah rapidly signs something along the lines of how I should have told them that first thing.

"There was a lot to cover," Omma points out in a dry voice. Standing up for me for once?

Pella taps her drink on the table. "So what did this spirit say?"

"Two amulets are together—"

"Together is good." Vos takes a long swig of his drink.

"—at the bottom of the Whirlpool."

He sets the glass down hard enough that it sloshes over the rim. "Well, isn't that a river of fool's gold."

My friends all pucker like a bitter-tasting brew was slipped into their drinks. Pella's string of swear words is a little more explicit. Beside me, Cain sighs. "Figures."

Pretty much my reaction when I was told. The Whirlpool sits at the mouth to Mariana's inner bay, protecting it from the Devourers. Mariana is the only dominion that's been able to remain seafaring because at its center is a massive bay with the dominion made up of a relatively narrow stretch of land circling it. The problem with the Whirlpool isn't only the violence of the waters—it's the Devourer who incessantly lurks at the edges of the swirling death trap.

The Reverie.

Thanks to Bene, I now know she's the Goddess Mariana's consort. The Reverie—once called Andromeda—is said to take different shapes to lure fools who come too close into the Whirlpool.

"It's obvious who goes this time." Cain leans in. "Vos and Tabra need to stay here for the Rites. Tziah and Omma can stay with them. We shouldn't risk Meren, as she's the only acting sovereign of Aryd. Reven's too unstable. That leaves me, Horus, and Pella. Bene, too, if he'll leave Meren."

Pella snorts. "I just knew you were going to say me."

"I'm not leaving Meren," Horus butts in.

"Why you?" Vos is the one to ask.

Cain offers a cocky smile, but I'm close enough to see the harder look in his eyes. Determination. "Think about it," he says. "If anyone could survive that particular Devourer, it's a water Hylorae."

"The Reverie has lured other water Hylorae into the Whirlpool, and they've never come out," Omma points out. She and I went over this already, and we still don't agree.

Frustration ripples over Cain's features as fast as relief ripples over Pella's. But it's not going to matter. "Um...the thing is... The spirit told me what to do. I was allowed only one question, so I asked *how* to get the amulets, not where they were."

It was the only question I could come up with in the moment that got me more than one answer in a roundabout way.

"And?" Tziah prompts with a sharp wave of her hand.

Reven is going to hate this. "Cain and I have to go together."

"What?" Pella shakes her head hard enough for strands of hair to come loose from the plait she has it braided into. "No."

"We don't go *into* the Whirlpool," I assure her. "We use sand and water together. Push the walls of water at the center of the whirlpool wider straight down to the bottom of the ocean to expose the floor, and then lift the sand, and everything in it, up to the top."

"Assuming you don't fall victim to the Reverie," Horus points out.

Omma waves at him like, "I told you so."

The feel of Reven's shadows inside me takes on an edge. "What spirit did you speak with?" he asks.

I don't look at him. I can't. "I was told that we needed me and Cain together," I say to the group. He's really going to hate this next part. "...and that Reven can't be there."

This time, the whole room dims, and everyone else in the pub looks around as if trying to figure out why, since all the fires and lamps are still lit.

“Watch it,” someone—Horus, maybe—mutters.

I reach under the table and nudge Reven with my foot, all I can reach him with. Immediately, the room brightens again. I only relax, though, when I sense him relax.

“Why not me?” Reven’s voice is low.

“It didn’t say why not, but given what just happened...”

I’m pretty sure we’d all agree Reven doesn’t exactly react well when I’m in danger, and I’ll be too busy to try to practice this curse thing on him. That’s assuming I can do anything to help him keep control. With my luck, we’d get to the Whirlpool and find out that’s not what’s happening at all. And who knows what he’d do there?

Reven nods impatiently. “Could it have been deceiving you? The spirit?”

“Maybe.” Given who the messenger actually was.

He thinks about that a minute, but I know he’s going to reach the same conclusion I did. “Okay.”

“Okay?” Horus swings his gaze between us. “You’re okay with this?”

“It’s what she has to do.”

I bite down on a dawning smile. This is supposed to be serious business, and that was a serious answer, but Reven’s response sends courage coursing through my blood. Courage because he believes I can do this, because he’s not going to stop me even though it’s dangerous and I have to leave him behind.

“I’ve encountered the Reverie,” Reven says. “You should know some things.”

“And...?” Cain prompts.

This close, I can see the way Reven’s eyes turn haunted. I’m guessing it’s not a pleasant memory. “She looked like...Meren.”

I gasp as shock ripples through everyone around the table, joining a crawling sensation over my skin. Why would he have seen me before we met?

“I thought it was Tabra,” he reveals. Then, to me alone, “It happened after I saw you in your glass garden, so I knew what you looked like. This beautiful girl on the shore called my name, and there you were. Only when I got close enough, you fell into the Whirlpool. Or I thought you did. I almost went in after you, but the Shadows wouldn’t let me.”



“Why would you see that?” I whisper. “See me?”

Omma huffs an unamused laugh. “Did you remember nothing I taught you? The Reverie doesn’t only show people their deepest desire—it may also show their fate.”

My heart flutters as I stare across the table. He stares right back. Did he know? Are we fated to be together?

A thread of darkness twists through my mind. Fate determines a lot of things, and not all of them happy endings, including how and why we die. He knows this, and he’s still letting me go off to face the Devourer?

Or will I be the cause of Reven’s death?

“We should leave the amulets down there,” Horus says. Which doesn’t sound like him at all.

Tziah nods.

“They’re impossible for anyone to get out without dying,” he continues. “Leave them there.”

“I have to say, I agree with my eastern Wanderer brother on this one,” Cain says slowly. Which is bad, since Cain is critical to the plan. “It’s safer if those things stay where no one can get to them.”

“You forget what Eidolon—” Reven cuts himself off. “If Meren could find this out, so can he. And, given Vida’s role, I doubt Meren’s planned trip to talk to the dead will remain secret, if it ever was. All he needs is to find another water Hylorae and sand Hylorae to help him.”

And we’re not as rare as other types of Imperium.

A heaviness that is getting annoyingly familiar blankets our group. So many things are stacked against us. I’m asking my friends to risk their lives, but that’s assuming Eidolon will be worse with the goddesses released and on his side than he already has been as an Enfernae king.

One who is no longer immortal. We could wait him out.

Selfishly, that means I’ll be on the run my entire life. Tabra, too. Same for Reven.

“I won’t make this choice alone.” I’ve already done that too many times. “It has to be all of us.”

“Okay, then,” Cain finally says. “Meren and I leave in the morning.”

Given the way Reven stiffens, I know he doesn’t like it. He also doesn’t argue. At least the shadows don’t move.

“I’ll go with you,” Horus volunteers. “I can try to keep the Reverie off you.”

“Bene should come, too.” I’m not splitting him up from his goddess.

“Cheer up, Pell-mell,” Cain says to his sister, who makes that lemon-sucking face again. “Bringing one Devourer to deal with another Devourer isn’t a bad idea.”

She looks far from convinced.

Still, the others all relax a bit, thanks to his breaking the tension.

The dead spirit version of Eidolon didn’t say we needed anyone else. But other than Reven, he didn’t say *not* to bring anyone. “So...tomorrow, Cain, Horus, Bene, and I will go. All agree?”

One by one, every person around the table—all except Tabra, who still has her head on her arms—nods agreement.

Outside, a sudden shout of celebration goes up so loud that it’s impossible to miss. The revelers in the room with us echo it.

“Brace yourself,” Reven warns me.

Sizzling that reminds me of being near Hakan when he looses his lightning bolts is all the warning I get before a buzzing jolt passes through me and the room lights up brilliantly, almost blindingly.

The king’s power being released.

“Seven hells.” I bolt to my feet, my chair scraping back, then sit back down just as fast, blinking owlshly. We’re supposed to be from here and know what this feels like. No need to give myself away.

The sensation—like waking up—leaves every part of me almost painfully *alive*. A dance and sing kind of alive. Rejoice in the feel of my skin alive. Get Reven in a room alone alive.

And that one was only to renew the water life. Good goddesses in Allusian, what’s the one for humans going to feel like?

Speaking of, how is Reven holding on to his control in the wake of something like that? I glance at the corners of the room, almost expecting the shadows to come crawling closer. But they don’t. I glance his way to find him watching me. With wanting. Unadulterated, unhidden, on display for me and all to see.

Like I said...holy hells.

## Separate Ways

Tziah tugs on Cain's shirt to get his attention, hands flying through a series of gestures he obviously understands, because he nods. "I promised Tzi I'd show her a stall where they make fairy bread."

My jaw drops as they stand to leave. Really? After that, they're going to go off and shop for whatever fairy bread is? A grinning Tziah grabs Horus by the hand, tugging him up, too. When he looks at me for permission to go, I wave him off. Together, they hurry out after Cain.

"Don't worry." Oddly, Vos is the one who addresses Pella, who looks as though she might follow her brother out. "Tziah will make sure he doesn't go off by himself. She feels like she owes him for finding her in the jungle the other night. And Horus will take care of them both."

"My brother doesn't need babysitters," is all she says.

Vos slides a glance toward me and Reven. "He's getting away from the two of you, you know."

I figured that much out for myself.

"I could cut the tension with a dull knife," Pella says. "Just sleep together already and get it out of your system."

Heat floods my face all over again, this time spreading down my neck and over my chest.

What am I supposed to say to that?

"We better get this one back to a bed." Vos gets up and gives Tabra's shoulder a gentle shake. She has trouble lifting her head to blink sleepily at us.

Vos and Reven help her up. Luckily, drunkenness is all around us—whether it's on spirits or the king's power. But it means her wobbly state won't attract undue attention.

Vos looks at the rest of us. "We need to split up."

"Why?" I ask.

"The way we get back in while the palace is locked down." Pella pauses at my confused frown, then speaks slower like I'm a child. "We don't want any attention. So we go a few at a time."

“Thank you.” I draw my own words out slowly in return.

Whatever we’re about to do sounds a lot like how I used to sneak out of the hovel Omma and I lived in, and even more so the palace in Aryd. Someday I’d really like to go in and out of the place I’m staying using only the door to the street like a normal person.

Omma’s shoulders go back. “I’m not leaving Tabra.”

“Oh my goddess,” Pella mutters. Then she grabs me by the wrist and tugs me up from the table. “Meren and I can go first.”

I wave at the others. “They should go before us.”

Her grip tightens on my wrist. “Nope. I can’t watch you watch him without getting sick. Besides, I have something I want to show you.”

Another tug, and before I know it, we’re outside in the teeming streets and she takes off into the night. I only hesitate a moment. She barely acknowledges when I catch up. At a corner crossing, she pulls up sharply when a train of parading people dances by. In the same instant, she makes a frustrated sound in her throat. Then raises her voice. “You didn’t need to come, too.”

Which is when I notice Hakan standing nearby. I had no idea he’d tagged along.

She shoots me an accusing look. “I’m guessing your boyfriend sent him.”

I clear my throat. “I’m pretty sure it’s not me Hakan is worried about.”

Her shoulders stiffen, which makes me grin, which makes her chin rise.

“He seems like a good guy,” I comment casually. “Why not give him a chance?”

“*You* give him a chance,” she mutters.

I snort. “What kind of weak response is that?”

Her lips flatten. “Whatever.”

The street clears a bit, and we’re off through the crowds again, Hakan in close proximity, careful not to let anyone touch him even accidentally. Our silent, sort of twitchy protector.

When we get to the palace, Pella doesn’t go to the gate but skirts the wall. Around the corner and halfway down, she ducks into a small alcove in the wall itself and grabs onto a rope dangling conveniently off the top. Of course we would have a way in and out. And of course it involves ropes and sheer drops.

Without a word, she starts to climb.

Hands on my hips, I stare at her. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

She stops, dangling a little way up, to look over her shoulder at me. “It’s the only way past the guards.” She waves one hand at the teeming streets not far away. “Stay here if you want. Hakan can be your minder.”

“How are Reven and Vos going to get Tabra inside?”

Another shrug. “They can tie the rope around her waist and haul her up. They’ll figure it out.”

She continues with her climb.

I still don’t move. If this is the way in, I’d rather wait for midnight, which I assume is when the gates open back up. I tip my head back, trying to mentally compare the height of this wall to the roof of the hovel. This is taller. You’d think after flying with Bene so much I’d be numb to this fear by now, but the bubble of panic expanding in my chest is as bad as it ever has been.

“Do you want to see what I have to show you or not?” Pella calls down.

“I won’t let you fall,” Hakan offers. He manages to say it in his usual quiet way and yet still be heard over the ruckus in the streets.

Sweet of him to tell me. It doesn’t help. “I know you won’t, but heights and I have this agreement. I don’t go near them, and they don’t kill me.”

His lips twitch, a little bit like Reven at his moodiest, when he doesn’t want to laugh but finds me funny anyway.

“What’s the plan, then?”

“You go with Pella, Hakan,” Reven says from out of nowhere, suddenly appearing behind us, though I don’t think he shadowed. “I’ll take Meren up.”

I lean around him. “Where’s Tabra?”

“With Vos and Omma. They’re waiting, so let’s make it quick.”

After a miniscule hesitation, Hakan steps around me, grabs the rope, and starts climbing. He leaves me with Reven, who wraps both hands around my waist, and the feel of his touch does things to me.

“Did you feel me panic?” I ask, looking for any hint of amusement in his face.

“I didn’t need to.”

That’s an explanation? Oh wait. Because he knew I’d have to use this way in.

His mouth crooks. Can he feel what being this near to him is doing to me? In a whisper of shadow, we’re standing on the top of the wall beside Pella just as Hakan climbs over.

I have no idea what to say or do. What I want to do is out of the question,

at least for now. Which really stinks. “Thank you.”

He says nothing, but his hands curl into the flesh at my waist like he’s trying to make himself let go. Slowly—agonizingly slowly—he draws me closer, his gaze dropping to my lips.

But this time I’m too aware of Pella and Hakan standing right here. “Doesn’t Vos need you?”

Reven’s gaze changes, filled with regret, maybe, or determination. “Stay with Pella. I’ll see you in a bit.” Then he’s gone.

Pella arches a brow at me. “That was...”

“Awkward?” I supply, grumpy all of a sudden.

“That’s one word for it.”

I can’t help myself. Even risking vertigo, I lean over the edge of the wall to look. Given how he was earlier, I’m sure he shouldn’t use his power to go far. Sure enough, he’s in the alley walking away. Alone. As he goes, a woman in the crowd tries to dance up to him. I scowl. Only whatever he says or does with his face makes her dance away just as quickly.

Nobody should be alone. “Um...” I glance over my shoulder at Hakan. “Maybe you can...”

He slides a reluctant glance in Pella’s direction. “Yeah.” Then he’s over the edge of the wall, climbing back down the rope.

## Pella's Surprises

Pella stalks off to wherever we're going, following the broad, flat wall-walk that runs the top of the walls behind the battlements.

"At least I got rid of Hakan for you," I say as I catch up to her.

Her lips flatten, but she says nothing to that.

Halfway down this stretch, the wall-walk runs into the building where we are housed. "No bars on this door?"

Hard to miss when every other window and door I can see is barricaded.

She points, and sure enough, there's something stuck in the track that the gate would slide down, preventing that. I huff a surprised laugh—even though I shouldn't be all that surprised.

"You?" I ask.

She shrugs.

"Any other spots?"

"The door at the other end of this walk." She points back the way we came. "A basement window in this building, on the courtyard side right at ground level. And two more that I'm about to show you."

Once we're inside, she doesn't take me downstairs to the rooms they were in earlier like I expect. Instead, she cuts through on the floor we're on, then back outside through another stoppered gate to continue along the top of the wall until we get to the turret at the end. The door to the turret is closed, but from where Pella positions us, we can see part of what is beyond the palace walls.

She points. "I thought you should see *this*."

Doing my best to ignore the darn drop, I lean over to see what she's pointing at. What greets me could be comforting or concerning, depending on how paranoid I want to be. On the back side of this wall is another massive walled-in structure that backs right in under the cliffs. Separate. Not part of the palace grounds.

Barracks. Large enough to house a very large army.

The yard below us is full of soldiers, all training one-on-one despite it being nighttime and the revelry going on in the city. Omma taught me some

basic principles about the five styles of hand-to-hand combat Tropikan warriors are trained in, and I appreciate this unintentionally private demonstration. They're incredible. Speed. Strength. Agility. But the intensity, the seriousness they're training with...there's an air of an impending fight.

My grip on the battlement I'm leaning over tightens as I watch.

"Every blasted soldier in Tropikis seems to be gathered here," Pella says. "Why?"

She has a point. We don't keep the entire army of Aryd stationed in the capital, only part of it. "Maybe they come for the Rites? More protection for the king?"

"Maybe," she murmurs. But her frown says she's not entirely convinced. I'm not, either.

Because they let us in. Why would they bring an army here to protect the king and their secret Rites, then let a band of strangers in—royalty or not? "We're King Panqui's guests?"

"So his majordomo tells us."

I sigh. It's tempting to ask her to try to find out more, but I get the sense our welcome here is already balanced on a cliff's edge. "Until something says we're not honored guests, we have to assume that's what we are."

"I guess."

"But tell the others and keep a sharp eye." I'm pretty sure we'll both be wary of this until we leave here.

"Come on."

We go back the way we came to our building, then make our way down the stairs to the third floor, where our rooms are housed. The building is eerily vacant. Not even a few guards stationed here and there. They really empty the place out.

"You seem to know your way around," I comment.

I get a side-eyed glance. "When no one notices if you are there or not, it's easy to take time to...explore."

Which is more than I was expecting her to tell me. More, I think, than she intended to reveal, too, because she immediately gets all sullen.

How am I supposed to respond to something like that?

"I'm pretty sure *I* would notice if you weren't around," I finally say. "It becomes so pleasantly quiet."

Pella makes a sound through her teeth, like a click and a hiss at the same time, which is Wanderer for *whatever*.



Our footsteps echo off the walls all the way down the hall to our rooms.

“You can use Cain’s pallet,” she says as she unfolds her own and flops down. “It’s his night to stand watch first anyway.”

Which means my friends felt the need to have someone standing watch despite being “safe” here. Smart.

She points out the roll tucked in a corner, and I get settled. Cain’s pallet smells like him—like desert and sand and sun. When I used to sneak out and spend time with him, I’d lay wherever he told me, with him at my back keeping me safe, and inhale. That scent, to me, is escape, freedom. But it’s not home anymore. Reven is home. I lay on my side, my back to the wall, and watch the candlelight dance over the room.

“You should’ve gone easier on him, you know.”

I glance Pella’s way to find her staring at the ceiling, arms folded behind her head. “On who? Cain? I’ve been trying to.”

“No.” She shakes her head. Then turns on her side to face me. “On Reven.”

What’s this now? She’s worried about Reven?

I think about my first night in the zariphate after we escaped Eidolon, when we were all eating in Cainis’s rooms and Pella almost made Reven smile, touched him.

“Are you two...?” I don’t even know what I’m asking.

She gives a hiss of frustration. “You don’t know him at all if you’d ask that.”

“I was going to say friends.”

“Sure you were.”

There’s no point in arguing when she gets this way, so I roll to my back.

After a second, she huffs. “Yes. We’re friends. He needed help when he first came to us.”

So I’ve figured out.

“His body wasn’t healing because he was fighting those demons inside him.”

Demons. Good goddess, she thinks he’s filled with demons? Only, she’s not far from the truth. The difference is the source, really.

“Have you never wondered what kind of Imperium I am?”

I have to sit up at that, crossing my legs to face her. “You’re an empath, right? I asked Cain once, but he said that any more information was for you to share, and we haven’t exactly been friendly.”

“True.” She thinks for a moment. “Cain inherited a version of his mother’s power over water. Our father married his first heartmate for her power, you know. Water is needed in the desert.”

“I wondered. The zariph is very devoted to your mother, though.”

“I...” She actually smiles. “I am my father’s daughter.”

Is she talking about inheriting her father’s *Enfernae* ability? Every *Imperium*, *Enfernae* and *Hylorae*, have a specific nuance to their power. Maybe she’s some kind of truth-sensing empath? Is that why she’s hated me all this time? I know what she said about my taking her place in Cain’s heart, but could she sense something in me worthy of hatred? “What exactly can you do?”

“I’m an emotional empath.”

My eyes go wide. I can’t help it. Even if it gives Pella a bit of an advantage. And it does. I know it when she smiles again. Pella isn’t a smiler unless she thinks she has the upper hand.

My spine goes ramrod straight. “Have you ever used this on me?”

“No.” And she’s sad about that, based on her tone of voice. “I have to touch for it to work. And really, I’m better at projecting emotions than sensing them.”

I blow out a breath and don’t care that she sees. Pella and I may be in a better place than we were, but the thought of her doing anything with my emotions makes me want to curl up and hide from her.

“So what did you do to help Reven?” I ask slowly.

“I helped calm the demons inside him to sleep so he could rest.” She grimaces. “One at a time as they surfaced, so it took a lot of time and patience.”

Knowing Mr. Self-Sacrifice, he would have hated having to take that help, especially if patience was involved.

“There’s a lot of anger in there, Meren. Malice. Fury.” She bends a look on me. “And a driven kind of purpose. Like an obsession, though my ability can’t show me why.”

She lets out a long breath, shifting on her pallet to tuck her knees up, like she’s feeling his emotions all over again. “He was in bad shape when you were with the king. Not because he wasn’t healed but because you were in danger. But when you went to seek the burning lands... He lost it.”

And now I’m about to leave him again to go somewhere dangerous. I’m going to make him suffer. Guilt piles up like rocks in my gut. I hate that even

more than I hate him hiding his struggles from me. He has enough without me adding to his burden. I fiddle with the linen sheet that serves as a blanket here.

“I don’t have to touch you to see that hurts you,” she says with so much more compassion than I used to think she was capable of.

“Was it hard for you? Learning your power?”

Her pause, followed by a simple nod, tells me a lot.

“I’m sorry.” I mean it. I know what it’s like to have an important aspect of your life forced on you, and Pella...emotions aren’t her strong suit. I imagine having to deal with others’ is even worse. Maybe her bitchy side was all in reaction to what she was dealing with.

“I had my father to help me.”

I snort a laugh. “I can see him being a *wonderful* help with all things emotions.”

A statement that actually draws a chuckle from her. “There is that.” Then she sobers. “At least I was allowed to use my power, unlike you. Learn it. Practice it. I didn’t have to keep it secret.”

I’m not sure who told her about that, but after a beat, I nod. A sort of silent thanks that she’d acknowledge that I didn’t exactly have it easy, either.

“You’re important to him. Special.” Her words drop between us softly.

She’s talking about Reven. I don’t even have to ask. “I know that.”

“You *should* know it.”

“I do. This situation we’re in...” I roll to my side, tucking my hands up under my cheek, and sigh. “It’s impossible.”

“But maybe...” She scrunches up her face as she appears to think through her words. “Maybe it’s more impossible if you’re both fighting your feelings and the world at the same time.”

I stare at her long enough that her cheeks flare with color. On what might actually be an embarrassed huff, she flips over so her back is to me. “It’s up to you to figure it out.”

I wasn’t the one keeping us apart in the first place. “We will.”

“Good for you.”

For some reason, her snappy return makes me grin. “Still don’t like me?”

“Nope.”

But there’s an answering grin in her voice, so I chuckle. “Yeah. Me neither.”

The Maw of  
Death

Cain, Horus, Bene and I are dead tired despite the fact that our journey thus far has been uneventful. It's just been...a lot. Too bad we couldn't have shadowed or portaled all the way there. That would have been so much faster.

Instead, we traveled via portal to Sentium, the capital city of Mariana.

The place is snowed over. Tyndra's creeping winter has definitely done a number on this dominion. All of the land is covered in deep drifts of snow, and chunks of ice float in the waters. I know because Bene flew us across the entire breadth of the dominion, over the massive Bay of Intellect. For a place that is supposed to be balmy, it's a shocking sight.

All because the Goddess Tyndra isn't here to control the protective weather she set up around her dominion to keep her people safe from her consort Devourer in the sea.

Maybe we *should* release the goddesses.

But that's a debate for another day. First, we have to get all the amulets.

We didn't want to alert the Reverie to our presence, and another Devourer flying overhead would do that, which is why we flew to the small town of Bilen nearby. There, Horus procured us this ride along the coast to the closest anyone from Mariana gets to the Whirlpool.

Cain, Horus, and I sit at the front of the boat. Bene lays in the bottom, shrunk down to his dog-size form and getting lots of wary looks from the boatman. The wind takes our vessel swiftly across the top corner of the bay. The way this boat is designed, riding high on the water as though barely skimming across the top, allows it to move at incredible speeds. Sure, I'm getting bounced around and have to shout to be heard, and freezing cold sea water, salty and stinging, is spraying up into my face, stealing my breath and coating me in a fine layer of frost. I was already cold from the flying, by the way.

But we'll make it to the Whirlpool by twilight.

I can thaw again after we're done with this.

"Come here." Cain suddenly tugs me closer and wraps his arms around

me.

“I’m f-f-fine,” I mutter into his chest. My chattering teeth make a liar out of me, though.

“Yeah? Well maybe *I* need the body heat,” he grumbles into the top of my hair. I can hear the grin in his voice.

“P-p-poor little Wanderer. I don’t think we’re in the desert anymore.”

“That’s for damn certain.”

I grin to myself. I also don’t move. He’s blocking some of the cold spray, and he’s right. I’m not shivering quite so hard.

The strait we’re headed toward is hardly wide enough for a Devourer to pass through—even Bene when he’s full size. It cuts a swath through the circle of land that makes up the dominion, the gap spanned by a flat bridge not high off the water. We are almost to the bridge, where our boatman will drop us off. I can see it in the distance, built from stone and not very wide.

I frown. Bene could have gotten in here. He flies, and based on what he’s said, only Aryd and Wildernyss were off-limits to him. And the Reverie can apparently walk on shore in human form. Why can’t she attack the people of Mariana in the bay?

My frown deepens. This isn’t a very well protected dominion.

I stiffen, checking the water all around us, almost expecting a long tentacle of the Hollow or the ramming head of the Gorecutter to be coming for us.

“Hey, Bene.” I try to keep the question quiet from the boatman. “Do the other Devourers get in here?”

He raises his head from his paws. “*The others are water bound and can’t make it over the land or past the Whirlpool. Andromeda comes on shore. Not very far, because in her natural form she breathes water, so she can’t be out of it long. But she does wander the beaches near the Whirlpool. Not always as a person, and never as anything that’s a recognizable threat.*”

Terrific.

A sentiment Horus and Cain basically both echo when I tell them.

“*Something keeps her there. She never leaves. I think, now, perhaps she can sense her goddess at the bottom.*”

Well, that’s...awful.

And now I’m dealing with sympathy for a Devourer we might face. I shouldn’t have asked.

Finally, the boat anchors to a dock at the edge of the bridge. “I won’t wait here,” the boatman warns us, glancing around and wringing his hands.

Horus stiffens. “That’s not the deal we made.”

“I will return for you.”

We look at each other. The man is visibly frightened. He knows what lurks around this area even though, according to Bene, the Reverie can’t get this far. Only an impressive amount of coins—I have no idea where Horus came up with it, and I didn’t ask—convinced him to bring us here in the first place. No way is he coming back here alone.

“I’ll go with him, domina, and bring him back later,” Horus says slowly, brows drawing tightly together until his eyes are squinty.

I don’t need to ask...he doesn’t want to leave me.

We shouldn’t have to go far to the Whirlpool from here. I glance to the sky where the sun hangs over the horizon like it might sink into the waters, dousing its light forever. It took much longer to make this journey than I’d expected. I have no idea how much time this will take us or if we’ll even survive. We have no choice. Timing Horus’s return is near impossible.

“No. We’ll find our own way home.” Bene can fly us, or I can make a portal. We’ll figure it out after we get the amulet.

The boatman glances between us like we’ve lost our wits. I’m not sure we haven’t. Desperation, I’m starting to learn the hard way, is the biggest motivator out there. That and death.

In agreement, we get out of the boat and make our way past the bridge. Almost as soon as we can no longer see the bay behind us, blocked by the rocky, rolling shoreline, a roar—constant, steady, and monstrous—rises on the winds.

What starts as a snow-covered beach gradually changes to what should be snake-ridden hills, except I’m pretty sure the snakes couldn’t survive this weather. Meanwhile, loose shale under the snow has us slipping and sliding as we go. It’s not mountainous here, but the deceptively flat land rises slightly and continuously. Enough that I’m breathing hard and at the same time grateful for the pants and tunic and warm cloak Horus obtained when we got to Sentium.

As we walk, the roar of the Whirlpool grows louder. The sun has long since set, all three half-formed moons lighting our path now. I top a rise and yelp at the sharp drop-off that came without even a hint we were close. Maybe fifty feet below us is the Whirlpool itself.

Scrambling back, I stumble straight into Cain, who bobbles before he wraps his arms around me, turning me away from the sight.

Hands on my arms, he looks me in the eyes, right in my face, sincere and concerned. I stare back, my eyes narrowing when his lips quirk. “Still don’t like tall things, hmm?”

Understatement. I straighten, subtly tugging from his hold. “I’m fine.” No one warned me that cliffs would be involved.

“As fine as you were earlier? Invincible should be your middle name.” He winks.

I glare.

Which only makes him grin.

A second later, Horus appears over the rise, Bene right behind him, still in dog form. His full-size form would attract the Reverie, he says. Both Cain and Horus walk right to the edge to peer down, and my stomach does flips at their nearness to a deadly plummet.

Cain whistles. “If that isn’t the gateway to the seventh hell, I don’t know what is.”

My thoughts exactly. And he didn’t see the Land of Eternal Death, which is serene by comparison.

The sound is monstrous, like pigs being slaughtered combined with Bene’s roar. Wind whips and tears at my clothes, trying to strip me bare. But what sends icy fingers of fear through me is the utter violence of the waters. It took only a single glance at the frothing, spinning maelstrom to know that nothing could survive if sucked in. A single slip of the foot and I’d be caught in the current and dragged down to a brutal watery grave.

Add violent drowning to heights and spiders on my growing list of bone-deep fears.

“Ready?” Cain yells.

I startle because I was too focused on icy cliffs and plummeting drops and whirling death at the bottom.

The Reverie hasn’t shown her face, but that doesn’t mean she won’t. Better to work fast and get out of here fast. Forcing my feet to move, I scoot toward the precipice until I can see the angry eye at the center of the Whirlpool. There, I stop, my own fear refusing to let me move even a pinkie toe closer. Cain moves back to stand beside me. Together, we lift our hands, our combined yellow lights glowing all around us.

Hopefully the Devourer around here doesn’t see it. Daylight would have been better to try this.

Cain has to start. At first, nothing happens, but I know he’s trying because

his hands and arms are so tense, like he's lifting a great weight.

"Cain?"

He shakes his head, sweat popping out over his upper lip, so I leave him alone and watch and wait. After a low grunt from him, I finally see a change. The swirling pit at the center of the water widens. Barely at first, then more and more until it reminds me of the large, deep well in the courtyard of the Oaesys palace, a hollow tube leading down.

Cain was right. Gateway to the seventh hell.

"Go!" he grinds out.

My turn. Rather than watch, I close my eyes and feel for the sand that lies at the bottom of that tunnel of water he's carved out for me. I can't feel the amulets, but I can feel the sand. Despite the freezing air and punishing winds, I'm already starting to sweat with the effort.

"Faster," Cain calls.

I'd better pull the right hunk of sand up. Doing this more than once might be impossible for both of us.

With no warning, for the first time in a long while, my amulet warms against my skin, and the glow of my hands brightens.

*Thank you, Aryd.* Better late than never.

Hoping I'm doing this right, I lift. It's heavy. I knew it would be, given it's wet sand. I just didn't expect to *feel* it so much, for my own muscles to strain. My arms are shuddering, like I'm actually holding the sand.

"Meren!" a familiar velvet-and-iron voice calls out sharply.

I jerk my hands away, dropping the sand as I open my eyes to find Reven standing right in front of me.

"Meren?" I am only vaguely aware that Cain is calling my name. "Meren? Where are you?"

Reven is teetering at the edge of the drop. Only I know it's not Reven.



## Maelstrom

Reven's face isn't right. His eyes. They aren't usually that shade. I dream of his eyes. I *know* his eyes, his face, as if I've known him all my life. These eyes are...duller. Lifeless.

This isn't Reven...this is the Reverie.

On a yelp, I leap back, but I hesitated too long, and she was too close.

The false Reven's fingers wrap around my wrist, and his expression changes to raw poison as he clamps down so hard on me, I cry out. I don't have time to struggle before he jumps and wrenches me over the edge. My mind can't keep up, oddly latching on to the way the cliff face blurs in the moonlight as I plummet past it.

Together, we fall into the rapids spinning into the Whirlpool.

I hit the icy water hard, knocking the breath I'm trying to hold from my body. Instantly, a current drags me under and keeps dragging me deeper. Or maybe upward? In this black, tumbling world, I'm losing which way is up.

A strong hand catches me by the arm and drags at me until my head breaks through the surface. I try to gasp in air only to swallow a gut full of a wave, sending me into fits of coughing. Then I swim or try to. But which way? My stinging, saltwater-filled eyes have gone blurry, and it's dark. I could be swimming to the center for all I know. Plus my body is already starting to go numb from the cold.

Where's Bene? I wave to the skies, hoping like hells he can see me.

Then out of nowhere, the Reverie wraps herself around me—arms and legs pinning me still.

"What are you doing?" I shout. She's doomed us both. My head goes underwater on a gurgle, and I come up spluttering, but still he doesn't let go.

She's letting our bodies go with the current. We are tossed and thrown, dragged under to bob back to the top. Screams want to crawl out of my throat, but I'm fighting to breathe too much to let them. The rush of sound all around me rises to a cacophony, and we crest a wave, giving me my first glimpse of the center.

It's right there.

Which is when panic slices through everything and hijacks my entire system. Kicking, scratching, biting, I fight like the harpies of the hells are after me. And all the while, the eye of the Whirlpool loops closer and closer.

And my attacker never lets go.

“No!” I scream as we tumble over that spinning edge.

Cain must still be holding it wide with his power because we slide down and down and down a wall of water, in a swirl that makes me nauseous.

We land with such force that it’s all I can do to lay there stunned and not pass out.

*Get up.*

I’m trying to suck in air, to control my breathing, which is wheezing harshly in and out. Did I snap my neck?

*Get up.*

She’s going to kill me as I lie here. I know it. I know it, but I can’t make my body work.

*Damn it, Meren. Get up and fight.*

Sensation comes back to my limbs in a stinging blitz, but I finally manage to struggle to my feet to face the Reverie, who still looks like Reven.

“What do you want?” I yell, but the pounding of water all around us steals the sound from my lips before it reaches even my own ears.

Even so, she offers me a smile that turns my still-rolling stomach sour. Then she bends over and digs a single finger through the sand. Something gold glitters at me, and then the Reverie version of Reven straightens. Dangling from her finger, winking at me as though we’re old friends, are two lightning glass amulets like mine and Trysolde’s and Eidolon’s. One is made of deep green glass, the other a blood red.

The Goddesses Tropikis and Mariana.

The Reverie cocks her head, taunting me, and realization strikes like an arrow to the heart. We gave this Devourer exactly what she wanted. A way to get down here and get the amulets without dying.

Could she hear them? Hear the goddesses, one of them her lover, who were so close and yet unattainable? With another sly smile, she looks up as though she’s expecting something.

Because, like me, she needs a way out. But how?

Almost as though she summoned him to her, Cain drops between us with an *oomph* and a groan. He’s dry, all except the bottoms of his pants. Like he rode the water down. It takes him a stunned moment before he pushes to all

fours, then to his feet.

I grab his arm. “Get us out of here!”

But he acts as though he doesn’t hear me or feel me, staring instead at the Reverie. I look warily between them. Who or what does he see?

“Meren...you’re unharmed,” Cain says to her. I can hardly hear him over the roar of the water, but I can read his lips.

Which means...

Cain sees *me*. I mean, the Reverie as me.

My heart cracks like someone took a hammer and chisel to it. I saw the difference. I *saw* it.

Why can’t Cain?

“What happened?” he yells at her.

I tug harder on his arm. “Cain! I’m right here. That’s not me.”

No reaction. I might as well be tugging on a dead branch. Under my touch, his arms—hands still glowing yellow—are straining. His entire body is tensed. The struggle of holding back the water has to be taking its toll.

“Cain!” I shake him, then again harder—nothing. It’s like I’m not even here.

I slap him hard enough that his head snaps to the side, but he stays entirely focused on her, as if that didn’t happen.

The Reverie smiles and holds up the amulets.

Cain’s eyes widen, and his lips crook in that familiar grin. “Good job. Let’s get out of here.”

The cracks in my heart threaten to shatter, spreading outward, weakening me. He loves me. How can he not see the difference? The malevolence in her?

I shove my wrist with his cuff in his face. “I’m the real Meren.”

The Reverie smiles and lifts her hand. In a swirl of mist, an identical cuff forms around her own wrist.

The way his chest expands, a cocky smile slipping into place is like a horse kick to the gut.

He closes the distance between them, bumping me aside like I’m not there, then slides his hands into her hair and kisses her. Just a soft brush before he pulls back to smile into her eyes.

“I knew it,” he whispers.

My jaw drops, and for a shocked second all I can do is gape as he kisses her again. I mean *really* kisses her. Exactly how I used to secretly dream he’d

kiss me when I was thirteen summer solstices old and had started to notice him in a different way. The way he touches her is all Cain—gentle and commanding and somehow reverent all at the same time.

A touch meant for the girl he loves with all his heart.

I snap out of it. “Cain,” I holler, not that he hears me. “Cain!” I try to shake him free, but he doesn’t react. “It’s a trick! It’s not me!”

Pulling away from their kiss, he wraps an arm around the Reverie’s waist. A bubble of water forms under their feet and lifts them up the open column of the Whirlpool. I try to hold on, clinging to his arm until I’m dangling. But the Reverie gives me a solid kick in the chest and knocks me off.

I land on my hands and knees, lurching right into the wall of ocean that slams my head into the ground. Backing out, coughing and sputtering, I jump up, searching overhead.

I ignite my own power, calling on the sands to lift me up the way the water is lifting them. Only once Cain and the Reverie get about fifty feet above me, the water held back by his power lets loose, collapsing in and crashing down on top of me.

On a scream, I jerk my hands over my head in some misguided attempt to pull a glass bubble around myself. Instead, shock rams through my panic as shadows come from every direction—from the night sky above and from the depths of the surrounding ocean. They curl around me. In an instant, they obliterate the light, and everything goes abruptly quiet.

Shaking, I slowly lower my arms. Either I’m dead or...I’m in shadows.

“Reven?” I try tentatively, my throat raw from screaming and coughing and sea water.

Silence.

This doesn’t make any sense. I don’t feel him close. My scars are still stretched thin. I reach out in the darkness, trying to feel for...anything...and swear that a hand squeezes mine. Warmth, rather than cold fear, steals through me, and my muscles ease their shaking.

And then the darkness clears.

I’m no longer standing on the bottom of the ocean, or in a bubble holding back the water, or even on the cliff overlooking the Whirlpool. I’m in the palace in Tropikis, staring straight into the turquoise eyes of the Shadowraith I gave my heart to.

The real one.

The Call of  
the Reverie

“What the hells?” Reven is up and stalking across the room in a heartbeat. So menacing, I swear the shadows still fading from me creep back almost protectively.

Shock has made me numb, though.

“Meren?” Reven is in front of me. I can see his lips moving. He frames my face with his hands. “Meren? Talk to me.”

*The Reverie has them.* My mouth doesn't want to form the words.

She has Cain and the amulets, and I'm in Tropikis, where I can't help. Horus is back there, but he's Vex with no powers. At least Bene is with them. But will they be able to see Cain? After all, she made it so he couldn't see or hear or even feel me.

My hands fly up to cover my mouth, and I'm shaking so hard my eyes might fall out of my head, but I don't give a shit. I finally manage to find my voice. “Cain—”

“What about my brother?” Pella's harsh voice demands from behind me.

“The Reverie has him under her spell. He thought she was me, and he pulled her out of the Whirlpool and left me there.” Realization strikes hard. If the Reverie needed a way in and out, then once they're out...

“She's going to kill him as soon as they reach land.” We have to do something. Anything. “Reven—”

He's already ignited his hands, the purple glow filling the room. “Let's go,” he says with a wave. While the others run to us, Omma remains by Tabra, holding my sister's hand. She never held my hand when I was sick. Not ever.

Grim-faced, Reven takes my hand and waits for Hakan, Vos, Tziah, and Pella to touch him. Then we go.

There's a longer bout of darkness than what brought me here—long enough that I tighten my grip on him just to feel grounded. Then, in a burst of moonlight and thundering sound, I find myself back on the cliffs above the Whirlpool, the pummeling water even louder after the quiet. Reven sits,

shoving his head between his knees and breathing hard.

Horus is at the edge peering over and startles when we appear. “Meren. Thank goddess!” He takes my hand in his, dropping to one knee before me, his relief palpable.

Over his head, I see the way the water starts to ripple at the center. Ripple, then bubble like a natural spring, boiling up from the ocean itself.

Cain and the Reverie are coming.

“There!” I point. Only, how do we get to them? Reven can’t. He needs to save anything he has left to fight her.

I look over my shoulder for Hakan. “Can you zap her?”

“I can’t use my power while they’re both in water. I’ll kill him.”

Cain appears within the opening to the vortex, and then they are both rising together. After a lifetime of seeing my face on another woman, it’s not all that strange to see myself down there. But to see me next to Cain, who is looking down at false-me like Reven does sometimes—like he breathes better when I’m near. That hurts.

A shadow passes overhead, and we all duck only to find Bene soaring above us, shooting straight for them, full size.

“Bene!” I shout. “She was your...” His what? His friend? His relation, as they were both heartmates of sisters? “You can’t!”

*“Never trusted her. Never will.”*

With a self-satisfied smile, the Reverie scans the shore. I know the second she sets eyes on Bene because that smile slips to a scowl. She goes up on tiptoe and puts her lips to Cain’s ear. Can he even hear her?

But he nods and starts them moving across the water toward the shore. How they’re being held up by the bubbling, frothing water at their feet, I have no idea, but it slowly crawls across the torrent, unaffected by the currents, the opposite direction from us.

Waving my hand as if wielding a whip—I am *not* great with whips—a long, supple line of sand rises from the spit of beach closer to them than me. I snap it out toward the two of them, trying to snag it around Cain’s waist, but miss. Not even close. Gritting my teeth, I go again, but no luck.

Reven shoves to his feet, swaying, but jaw tight with determination. “Don’t—”

In a dive worthy of a bird of prey, Bene scoops them both up in eagle’s talons, but a wave of water rises out of the ocean and threatens to take them all under. Cain.

Vos's hands go up, and the giant wave freezes even as it's curling over itself. Once it's solid, he drops to his knees, eyes rolling in the back of his head. But he bought Bene seconds. The Devourer manages to rip the two apart so that Cain is in one talon and the Reverie in the other. Cain's wall of water drops away with a mighty splash that shatters Vos's crest of ice in a series of crackling bursts.

Bene throws Cain, with not much care, onto the hill behind us. Sand rises in a plume of dust from the impact. Then he lifts into the air with the Reverie, who still looks like me.

"Meren!" Cain's bellow from where he landed is all fury and pain, his voice piercing the thunder of the Whirlpool, even this far from him.

Horus, Reven, and I scramble up the hill, skirting rocks, to get to him. He's visible on the other side, where the land levels out more. Cain lifts his hands, yellow light gleaming, no doubt to throw more water at Bene. I lash out with another sand whip and manage to wrap it around him, pinning his arms to his sides.

"Meren!" He's still yelling, charging after them. Still under the Reverie's spell.

I yank my whip, tripping him so that he falls to the ground. Then I'm on my knees in front of him. "I'm here."

But he doesn't see me. He still doesn't see me.

Horus pushes me aside to get in his face, but he doesn't seem to see him, either.

Reven throws up a swirl of shadows in front of Cain, blocking the Reverie from view. Horus rears back and slaps him. Harder even than I did before. Then takes him by the shoulders, shaking him. "Cain! Wake up."

My own cry of protest cuts off in my throat as Cain stops fighting and blinks once, slowly. Then again. Then frowns. "Horus?" His mouth only forms the name.

The screeching roar of a monster splits the noise around us. Reven drops the shadows, and we all jerk around to find Bene overhead. The Reverie is growing and twisting and writhing in his grasp, the glamour of pretending to be me falling away to be replaced by *something* else...to reveal the true monster underneath.

She's entirely white. Or maybe translucent is a better description, except I can't see through her skin. It just doesn't appear solid. She has a long, humanoid body with lanky limbs. Her arms must scrape the ground when she

walks, and her fingers are nubs. There are no distinguishable body parts, as if she's a tube with no definition. And no face. A round head atop her neck, but no face at all. Just...blank.

A shudder racks through me that has nothing to do with being wet and cold. I'll never unsee that.

*"Release me!"* I hear a woman's voice in my head.

Bene flies over us. *"Release the amulets and I will not kill you."*

*"Kill me?"* she laughs. Then suddenly the shapeless, faceless creature transforms, and Bene is holding a woman of astounding beauty with a face and body only a goddess could claim.

Aryd. She's taking the shape of Bene's lover, his heartmate. *"You would kill your own goddess, Benedornan?"*

For a brief second, I hold my breath, because it looks like Bene's going to succumb. Like he's going to fly away with her and let her go.

Then Bene draws his lips back over terrible boar's tusks and razor-sharp teeth in a sneer. *"Your glamour does not affect me."*

I'm not sure what he does to her—maybe squeezes her harder—but the Reverie changes shape. Over and over, she cycles between different faces and bodies. Never long enough for me to see who or what she becomes.

*"I can kill you and take them,"* Bene tells her, voice as uncompromising as his grip. *"Or you can give them to me and live."*

*"Why are you doing this?"* the Reverie asks. Begs, even. *"You want to free them. To see our soulbound mates again. I know you do."*

Bene remains silent.

*"Please do not take her from me."* The Reverie is truly begging now, raw agony in her words.

I believe her, too, because I know what she's asking. Obviously, she knew those two amulets were down there, and for whatever reason she couldn't get to them. Is that why she never leaves the Whirlpool? Not just because she needs water to breathe—the oceans are wide and large, so she could go anywhere—but because her heartmate was down there?

*"I must."*

Bene squeezes harder, his talons visibly curling inward.

With a cry that would rend any heart, the Reverie opens her hand, and two glittering items fall through the air, sparkling in the starlight. They land not far from us, and Horus and Hakan run off to retrieve them.

Bene whirls around and flies out over the ocean with the Reverie still



clutched in his talons. Flies until he's swallowed by the horizon and we can no longer see him. Hopefully he's planning to give her quite a swim back.

"Meren?" Cain's broken voice draws my attention to where he's gotten to his knees in front of me. I only hear him because I'm so close.

He stares at me, visibly confused, fear and horror rippling over his features as realization sets in. "Mother goddess," he whispers. "What did I do?"

I'm Not Alone  
in Hoping

The Rites are for humans tonight.

From where I stand on the top of the palace wall in Tropikis, looking out over the city, I can see the celebrations in the streets. Vaguely, I'm aware of Horus standing nearby, keeping watch over me.

We're expecting the horns to blast any second now.

The difference in the streets below is enough to know something important is about to happen. There's a frenzy to the excitement now—a sour, underlying hope that drags at me. The music has changed, an odd, mournful wail lingering beneath the beat. Even the scents on the air are different, more pungent, less of the sweet. Or maybe that's the effect on me?

More than that, though, people who need to be rejuvenated are everywhere. Elderly have been helped outside by their families. Those who are too sick or debilitated have been carried on pallets and laid under the stars, many of them at the palace walls as close to the king as they can get. Seven years they've been waiting, in some cases. A long time.

An older man leans over a woman who looks too weak to get off the cot they used to carry her into the street. Salt-and-pepper hair is braided down her back, and he lifts it from behind her to smooth it over one shoulder, settling her more comfortably.

I can't help my smile. It's tempting to join them. We have a lot to celebrate, too.

Like all of us getting back without dying.

Horus, Cain, Bene, and I returned via the portals. Reven had to shadow the rest of the others back. We agreed that it was worth the risk because they couldn't go through the portals. How would we justify to those guards who saw only three of us and a raven leave that we're coming back with more?

It's taking him a while, transporting Pella, Hakan, Tziah, and Vos one at a time. I couldn't stand the waiting and worrying that he'd run down his power or lose control, so I changed back into my Rites clothing and came up here.

A whisper of a touch feathers over one arm.

Reven.

He made it. I didn't hear or see him arrive. He must've shadowed up here. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Horus leave us, Tziah now at his side.

As if that first touch was a test, his shoulders ease, and he pulls me closer, an arm banded around my waist, my back to his front, so we can both look out over the city.

"Shadows all quiet?" I ask.

Reven nuzzles my neck. "So far so good."

I sink into him even as part of me notes that something is different. As much as my heart is fluttering, worry tugs at me, though. "You shouldn't have shadowed up here."

Reven props his chin on my shoulder. "I had to get Tziah back either way, so I came here instead of the room."

"What if someone had seen you appear out of nothing?"

"I was careful." He's grumbling now. Which is kind of adorable.

I try to stop worrying. We have four of the six amulets, and none of us died getting them. All we are missing is the one Eidolon has, and Savanah's—and I already know how to get that one. Unfortunately, it's more dangerous than the Whirlpool and the Reverie. Though after that near disaster, I'm rethinking listening to the ghost of Eidolon's advice.

Still...by all accounts, today was a huge win.

One I should take a moment to enjoy. "We did it."

Reven's arms tighten around me a smidge. "The shadows *saved* you today."

I wondered when we'd get to this. I've been standing up here going over and over what happened. "You thought so, too?"

He unwinds his arms, takes me by the shoulders, and turns me to face him. "The shadows saved you and brought you to *me*." He lifts a hand to curl a lock of my hair around his finger.

I swallow at the tender action, but I'm still working on what he's saying. "So that definitely wasn't you or even...Eidolon? Or a ghost, maybe?"

"I was too far away, and I'm pretty sure the king would have shown his face as soon as the amulets were out in the open."

True. And all of this I logically knew. "So...do we think that was the nymph's curse?"

He hesitates, searching my gaze, then leans down so we're eye to eye. I would only have to tip forward slightly to be able to press my lips to his.

“Curse? More like a blessing.” He lets me hear the fine thread of urgent surety in his voice. “This proves you have some kind of control of Eidolon’s power. *My* power.”

I know that shadows saved me, but there’s a huge, glaring issue... “But I didn’t *do* anything.”

“Not consciously. But the instinct for survival did it for you. Otherwise, how did you not drown at the bottom of that Whirlpool?”

I frown, tossing the thought over in my head.

My own power over sand started the same way. It manifested very young—a fact that caused Grandmother and Omma a great deal of angst, given that we had to hide it. At first, I didn’t know I was doing anything. No glow. No feel of the power at work. Sand would just...do things around me.

Now, shadow is doing the same. Reven said he wasn’t who shadowed us out of the palace the night he and Cain came for me. Was that the curse? And telling the darkness in the Shadowwood to leave him alone and it seeming to listen... Nothing else explains how I shadowed all the way to Tropikis.

Am I using powers that aren’t mine to do it? Or do I want this to be true so badly that I’m seeing truth that isn’t there? Because if this is, in fact, how the curse works, it means a lot of things can change. With Reven. With Eidolon. What if I could stop the king with a mere thought? It could solve so many of my problems.

“Eidolon’s Shadows tried to kill me when we rescued Tabra in Oaesys. Hells, even yours tried. I had to almost kill you myself to get you back.” I shudder, the burn and horror as I crushed him beneath the glass still fresh, like a knife tip piercing my heart. I kept my eyes closed when I did it. I couldn’t watch.

He nods. “That was before the curse snapped into place when Eidolon laid eyes on you the first time.”

It feels right, but it also feels off. Like we’re missing something. Why didn’t anything happen the last night in the palace when the king threatened Achlys? I was terrified. And furious. I wasn’t directly under threat, but could I have saved Ushi? And what about Wildernyss? Reven, not me, threw up that shadow wall in Trysolde’s throne room. Or did he? Maybe, like my power over sand, it will ebb and flow until I get the hang of it? To me, that makes the most sense.

He grips my shoulders tighter. “What if that means I can’t harm you? That the king’s Shadows can’t, either? Because you won’t let them?”

My heart kicks against my ribs, a small fissure of answering anticipation cracking through the worry that's hardened around my heart. If this is true... But what if my gut is right, and there's something else at play here?

I look out over the revelers. I'm already in my costume, prepared to leave the palace. Ready for a celebration.

Maybe I should. Celebrate, I mean. I tip my head. "What do we do now? Train me in the ways of the shadow or something?"

That's when I feel it. Inside me. Warmth that has nothing to do with the balmy night air. The hope isn't coming from me this time. It's from him.

From Reven.

I've never felt anything like this from him before.

"We will. But first..." He swallows. "If I can't hurt you, maybe we can try..." He stops, shakes his head. "I'm doing this all wrong."

A rhythmic pounding fills my head, and maybe it's the drums in the streets below, but I think it's more likely my heart. Because *now* I see where he's going.

I might burst with it, the anticipation bubbling out of me in a smile. "Yes, you are."

On a huff of a laugh, Reven lowers his forehead to mine, eyes closed, and we just breathe. Slowly, he slides one hand into my hair.

"So, what does this look like?" he asks after a second. "What do *you* want it to look like?"

"Well..." Do I dare? Omma would caution me. So would Tabra. So, for that matter, would all our friends.

I never was one to listen to cautions, and I have no idea what our futures hold. Waiting out of prudence—such a boring word—would be a waste when the time we have could be cut short so easily.

My heart is pounding so hard, I could dance to the rhythm at this point. Like the revelers in the streets below.

I reach up, brushing his hair back from his forehead. "What I want is for us to do this together. I know we're not certain, but not trying is worse than not knowing at all. So...really together. Like soulbound mates—"

At those words, he goes rigid against me.

Oh no. Did I scare him off? Was that too much? Did I get it wrong?

He stares at me so hard I squirm. I go to pull away, heat climbing into my cheeks, but he tightens his hold on me. "You're mine, Mereneith Evangeline. Written in the stars to be mine."

Turns out relief and sheer happiness can feel the same. Like a *whoosh* through the chest, warming the heart and...everything else. I wasn't wrong. I didn't go too far.

He feels the same.

I want to shout it to the world.

We're in this together. Entirely together. No one, not Omma or Tabra, not even Cain, has given me that gift.

I burrow closer into him, body to body, heart to heart. "Goes both ways. You're mine, too."

Reven smooths a lock of my hair back from my face. "Then I have something important to ask you."

"What?" I'd give him the world if I could.

His hand trembles against me, and I lift my head to stare at him. Is he... Heavens help me, he's nervous. Nervous and...somber? It darkens his eyes and reaches through my scars to wrap around my heart.

"This life..." He shakes his head. "We could both be not long for it."

I search his gaze.

Reven closes his eyes. "Goddess, can I even ask for this?"

"Ask," I whisper. More of that desperate kind of hope unfurls in me.

His eyes open, and he pins me with that intense look he does sometimes when he's super serious...or unsure of me. "It's not something fair to you. That's why I—"

"What?" I offer a teasing smile. "Are you finally considering the heartmate thing?"

He doesn't smile. "I'm asking for something much bigger than that."

Are We  
Doing This?

Bondmate.

The word hardly dares to whisper through me. There's only one thing bigger than heartmates, and that's... "Are you asking what I think you are?"

"I want you to bind—"

"Yes." The word bursts from me, cutting him off.

Darkness swirls around us, inside me, but Reven holds so still, doubts crowd in to snarl through me. "You will?" he rumbles. Shock is rigid in his voice. "You'll be my bondmate?"

Then he smiles. The real one he rarely offers. I've missed that smile. The beauty of it, the way it reaches every part of his usually serious face, sends an answering glow through me. Like sunlight in the desert, chasing away every hint of night from the lands.

On a laugh that is outright joy I can't contain, I throw my arms around his neck. "Yes, Reven Shadowraith. If I lose you in this life—heavens forbid, but let's be honest, the odds are against us—I want to know that I will find you in the next, wherever and whenever that may be."

He squeezes me so tightly I can't breathe, but I don't care.

Only then he's pushing me back, hands at my shoulders, face a study of concern. "Are you sure? What if—" He can't say it, but I know what he's thinking. There are so many reasons to not do this.

But this is more than simple lust or the way he makes me flutter. Reven sees me.

Me.

Meren, not the princess, not the waif, not Tabra's sister or Eidolon's puppet or Omma's niece or the stand-in queen.

Me.

And it's so empowering.

Cain, even in loving me, tries to hold me back. Omma tries to hold me back. But Reven—everything I've asked for, he's tried to give me. Pissed others off to give me. Even in the moments when it made it hard for him—

like when I faced Bene, when I wanted to go to the Shadowwood, when I went to the Whirlpool—he backed me. Even going to the burning lands, he never said no.

His belief in me is like nothing I’ve ever known. It’s the only thing making me keep going some days.

And I trust him completely. Utterly. Not the Shadows...Reven.

I would follow him into the hells and back.

We *are* stronger together. Because we both need each other for the kind of faith in ourselves that we can’t find anywhere else.

I’m sure.

The amulet around my neck warms suddenly. Just a spark—there, then gone. But it’s like Aryd is telling me to follow my heart in this moment.

“This is what I want.”

He must see in my eyes that nothing will change my mind. The same steadiness, behind a lot of worry, looks back at me through eyes I’ll dream about for all my lives to come.

“Okay,” he says.

Okay? I laugh again, my relief-edged excitement an effervescent force running through me that has everything to do with this man. I could build mountains right now, I think.

Is this really happening? Is it possible to die from happiness?

Sure, there’s a nugget of apprehension poking at me, saying that this can’t last. That any happiness the world gives me is an illusion that will be stolen away before I can even grasp it. But maybe that ache of worry underlying the bliss is the bitter that comes with the sweet.

If we’re soulbound, Reven can’t be stolen from me. Not ever.

If I’ve learned anything, it’s that if I don’t reach out for the good life blesses me with, just because I fear the bad or the loss, then I’ll only end up with a pile of bad in the end. And let’s face it—this may still end badly...but what if it doesn’t?

“I don’t want to wait,” I whisper. There’s too much that could go wrong.

He doesn’t hesitate even a beat. “The priestesses might be busy tonight.”

Because of the Rites?

It has to be tonight. We have the amulets and no longer need to see King Panqui. The only reason we’re still here is for Tabra. For the Rites of Xathena. Where we go next...we may not happen across a priestess for some time. This is our chance, and I won’t lose it.



“I’ll make it happen tonight,” he promises.

I am tossed back to the night he kidnapped me—the unshakable confidence he acted with then is how he is right now. “No kidnapping or holding priestesses at shadow-point.”

He smirks. “It worked to get me you.”

“I thought that was my mouth.”

He laughs. “That, too.”

Reven lets me go only to reach for the mask that I set on the wall earlier, ready to leave the palace when the horns blow.

When I take it, he stays my hand, then plucks Cain’s cuff off my wrist. He’s never acknowledged it. Not once. “He’s important to you, and I’ll never ask you to not wear this,” Reven says in a low rumble. Then meets my eyes. “But not tonight. Not while I make you mine.”

I lick my lips and give a slow nod. I get it.

“I’ll keep it safe for you.” In a heartbeat, he slips it into the pocket of shadow that is his hiding place. “Stay here.”

He disappears through the building door. After a wait that feels like forever, he returns, changed and masked. He takes my hand and presses a kiss to my palm, which I feel all the way to my toes, and clasps our hands together.

Darkness rises. Darkness falls.

Instantly, we’re standing in that alley near the temple where Cain took us to change clothes our first night here.

Without warning, the familiar blast of horns sounds, making me jump.

It’s not as loud here, farther away from the palace. Our friends will worry where we are as they get out of the palace, but without saying a word, I know we’re both in agreement. We’ll tell them after.

Reven leads me out of the alley, his urgency sort of adorable as he hustles me through the crowds, up the steps, and into the temple. I pull him to a stop the second my eyes adjust to the lighting. I expected to see lines of people waiting for blessings or to experience the night of healing in the Goddess Mariana’s temple, but except for a few people in the pews praying, the place is empty.

Strange.

“I don’t like this,” Reven murmurs next to me. “It’s too quiet.”

A priestess with no mask and dressed in green silks, the hems of which are decorated with copper thread that shimmers in the light, approaches us. “The

temple is open for all who need..."

She trails off, probably thanks to Reven's frown, intimidating even behind his mask. "Why are there not more people in here?" he asks.

Her expression flickers in confusion, because clearly guests are not allowed into the dominion during the Rites, and anyone who lives here should know the reasons. But she answers anyway. "The Rites of Xathena and the power that drives the celebrations all come from our ruler, not from this temple. The Goddess Tropikis gifted his long dynasty with this ability to heal. We have had many kings and queens...all with the exact same ability."

Wow. *That* is rare. Usually Imperium powers change slightly with each new generation.

She pauses, then... "As you know."

"This is our first time in the city," I slip in, because his face says he's not interested in appeasing her.

"I see." She glances between us.

"We would like you to perform the soul-binding ritual for us," Reven says without preamble, as if this isn't a huge deal. But his hand tightens around mine like he's getting ready to fight this woman if she doesn't say yes.

The priestess's hand flutters up to cover her mouth. "That is a grave undertaking," she says. "Are you certain?"

She's looking at him, but I'm pretty sure she is asking me.

"We're sure." I twine my fingers with his. "*I'm* sure."

After a beat of studying us, she dips her head in a regal nod. "You are in luck that our order isn't otherwise engaged. Follow me."

She leads us through the main sanctuary and into a side room opposite the one where the glass portal stands. I've never been inside a room of rituals. I've never had any reason to.

I'm not sure what I was expecting, but something more opulent than a simple wooden table in the center. There are no adornments, runes, paintings, carvings, or any other decoration on the walls. If it didn't smell slightly of sandalwood, probably from incense, I wouldn't even know it was a ritual room.

The only embellishment is an inlaid design on the stone floor depicting the same type of strange bird that greeted me when I arrived in Tropikis. Tiny and green, with a deep red at its throat, and a long, slender beak that reminds me of a sewing needle. It hovers over a brilliant red flower that is elegant and regal, an explosion of petals sitting atop a long stalk with spindly leaves of

green sprouting from the base.

“Um...this is nice,” I say, glancing around. Disappointing is what it is.

Reven cocks a brow at me, and I shrug.

In the distance, even fainter than the horns now that we're inside the temple, I hear the distinct *clang, clang, clang* of the gates falling over the doors and windows of the palace.

Reven leans over. “We'll go to your sister as soon as the king's power goes out.”

Assuming we're done here. Are the priestesses ever asked to hurry a binding? I'm guessing not. I wish we had more time to really appreciate this moment.

I lean into him to whisper, “What matters is Tabra and Vos are both healed.”

He squeezes my hand.

“Wait here,” the priestess instructs. “I shall bring the member of my order who performs this particular ritual and gather the things we need.”

You would think the extra time would give either one of us the chance for second thoughts to creep in, to back out. It's not like we've been together that long, and much of that has been with us at odds or cross purposes in one way or another. But I've never been surer of anything in my entire life.

Surety is a rare thing, I'm starting to realize. So I don't question this choice. Simply enjoy the anticipation. The way my body, my heart, everything about me is humming with the rightness of what we're about to do. The part of Reven inside me thrums in tune, with the same utter rightness.

After months apart, and then the time since forcing a distance that was logical but felt all kinds of wrong, that thrumming is beautiful.

He takes both my hands in his and holds them against his chest, forehead to mine again. And we just stand that way together.

Two priestesses walk into the room then. The new one dressed in purple silk looks us up and down. She is carrying a simple box made of wood with no carvings. The one who left us here is carrying a book. I've never seen a soul-binding ritual performed. No one has, other than the couple and the priestesses who perform it. This should be interesting.

I lift my head to Reven, smile already curling my lips. I can't seem to stop doing that. “Ready?”

He frames my face with his hands. “I don't deserve you.” If I had any doubts left, which I don't, the quietly uttered words would have banished

them. My Shadowraith is so serious. Then he grins, expression taking on a wickedly teasing glint. The true Reven. “But who am I to question the wisdom of the goddesses?”

My amulet warms against my skin again like before, a spark as if she’s in agreement.

I laugh.

Reven sobers again, fingers tightening in my hair. “Are you sure you don’t want to tell the others first? I’m pretty sure they’re not going to like it.”

Understatement. And exactly why we should tell them afterward. “Do you remember the first thing I ever said to you? In person, I mean.”

He cocks his head and thinks. “You said, *I am no one.*”

He really does remember me from that very first time he cornered me in Enora. He’d heard my whispered plea to escape my life and had come to save another stranger calling out for him. That was before he discovered the girl in Enora was the princess he kidnapped.

“The second thing, then.”

His shoulders shake with a silent chuckle. “You said that you do as you please.”

I lift up on tiptoe and drop a kiss on his chin. “Yes, I do.”

When it comes to this, to us, it’s not up for debate by committee. It’s not for my friends or family to weigh in on. It’s mine. He’s mine.

What the Goddesses  
Join Together

The priestesses work hand in hand, laying the box and the book on the table and opening each. The one with the book nods at the other, and she beckons to us with a smile.

“This ritual is...” She purses her lips. “Let’s just say it’s specific.”

Sounds concerning.

“Meaning what?” Reven demands.

She flicks him a wary glance before focusing on me. “Once we start, we cannot stop. If we do...well, horrible things have happened to those who stopped early.”

“We won’t want to,” I assure her.

She nods. “You must do and say everything I tell you in unison,” she warns. “If you don’t, then one of you will pass to the grave far sooner than the other. It can take time to find each other in the next life, if that happens.”

Reven stiffens, and I glance at him, only he brushes his thumb over my knuckles.

Got it. Don’t stop. Everything together. I don’t bother to explain that the likelihood of either of us making it more than another year—months, even—is slim to none.

Her sister priestess finishes murmuring over the box, and the one before us smiles. “Good. Are we ready?”

I’m starting to get tired of that question.

“Take each other’s hands and face each other,” she says. “Look into each other’s eyes.”

We do. Anticipation wants to send me bouncing on my toes, but I manage to remain solemn.

“Don’t look away until this ritual is complete.”

The sound of flint being struck is followed by the heavy, cloying scent of incense swirling around us. The priestess touches the end of it first to Reven’s forehead and then mine, with a small sting of the heat and leaving an ashly imprint I suspect on us both, purifying us for the ritual.

It reminds me of the Shadow Rite Reven performed to heal me. He did the same thing then.

She doesn't wait, murmuring in a hushed voice a chant of words that blend together so that I can't pick them out. Until I catch "Aryd," followed later by "Tropikis," and I realize she is invoking the powers and blessings of each of the six goddesses. Also similar to the way Reven did that night that feels so long ago now.

She moves closer, as does the other priestess. A pause. Then a gossamer-light touch whispers over my skin.

"Goddesses," the priestess says, clear and true. "We bind these souls with golden thread of the Fleece of Blessings made from the mother goddess Nova's own gown."

I'm dying to look down and see this, but I heed the priestesses' warning and focus only on Reven. On the steadiness in his gaze. The need. The kind of joy I'm not sure he's ever allowed himself to feel.

"Do *not* move," she says to us. "If you break the thread, you break the bond, and it's delicate as spider silk."

Damn, this ritual comes with a whole lot of warnings.

She moves to our other side and does the same to those hands, using the same words. Then... "In unison, repeat after me." She takes a breath.

*With this golden thread  
I entwine  
Your hands, your heart, your soul  
To mine.*

The words flow from us like water from a pitcher, easy, and in unison. The shadows inside me warm.

"Now we go on a little walk around the altar," she says.

Altar? Is she talking about the table?

"Step when I say. And...right. Left. Right. Left."

Keeping my gaze on Reven's, I try not to tangle up in his legs, because I am walking backward while he moves forward, and the way she has us moving is awkward to say the least. I relax only after we make a full circle.

"Excellent," she says. "And now the other way, to show the goddesses that even when your feet aren't aligned and one of you is walking blind, you walk together."

Sounds like what we've been doing since the day we met.

We complete the second circle successfully. No broken thread, no looking away, and our bodies in lockstep.

“Hold your heads steady.”

Again comes that feathering touch, around my forehead now, but this time, when she draws it to encircle Reven’s head like a crown, I glimpse the gossamer-fine thread she uses. So fine that I can only see glimmers of it as it catches candlelight. Like our love. Connecting us and yet such a simple thing to cut.

“In unison, repeat after me,” she says again, then takes another breath.

Only this time, before she starts the words, a deep violet glow rises up from underneath us. The priestess invoking her power. Then, she places her glowing hands over each of our hearts and starts to speak.

*Only with you am I able to breathe;  
Without, I stumble, I hurt, I perish.  
My soul to you, only you, I bequeath  
and pray with every heartbeat you cherish  
my gift so deeply that nothing—not time  
nor distance, nor the heavens, nor the hells—  
can touch love beyond reason. This sublime  
love which may never break or be felled.  
Once joined together, in this troth we make,  
let me become the star by which you guide  
all your thoughts, your paths, your steps, and forsake  
life without your soulbound mate by your side.  
These true promises I give you by rite.  
In each hereafter, let us reunite.*

With every word, every syllable, her power brightens, warmth passing into me, through me, and the shadows inside me turn incandescent with heat and sensation, the magic almost blinding in its beauty.

“Bless these lovers, oh goddesses, oh six daughters of Nova,” she calls out in a ringing voice.

A wave of power seeps into my body from her touch. Her warmth shifts into heat, a sharp burn that sears through blood and bones and into my core, taking up a thrumming inside me.

I grit my teeth and try not to move, to squirm with this delicious intensity. This *need*.

New lights join the priestess's. Both golden and purple. But these lights come from...us.

"Oh," the priestess helping off to the side exclaims. "You are Imperium?"

"Yes," Reven and I say. Together.

"Oh my," is all she says to that. Though her tone doesn't indicate that's a bad thing. "Be prepared for your powers to react oddly for some time to come."

I manage to keep a snort inside me. My powers acting oddly is nothing new for me. Reven, either, for that matter.

The heat is still spreading, still building, and the throbbing through my veins, through the shadows that already connect us, draws in and melds together, focused and pulsing between my thighs.

Then both the priestesses suddenly hiss, and this doesn't sound good.

"Impossible," the one whose hands are still over our hearts murmurs.

Vaguely, I'm aware that she leans in close, like she's studying us.

"Finish the rite." Reven says the words, but somehow the same words tumble out of my lips at the same time.

The priestess jerks to standing. "Without breaking the lines, kiss your soulbound mate," she says in a voice gone shocked or hard or maybe both.

Reven and I are too wrapped up in each other, in the throbbing of our bodies, our souls, to care, and we share a simple smile as we carefully lean closer until our lips brush, lift, then press again.

The heat inside me bursts outward, fizzing through my insides to come out of my skin where that light thread touches, and the burn is almost unbearable. I manage to swallow my whimpers, until, with no warning, the pain subsides, leaving only a sense of completeness. Wholeness.

"It is finished," the priestess says, her voice sounding weary, like she's completed some great feat. Which, I supposed, she has.

On a shared breath, Reven and I both look down, and I gasp at the sight of sparkling golden lines marking our skin where the thread touched. Letting go of one of Reven's hands, I feather a touch over a spot to find it not raised or different. Just there. The glimmer of it slowly fading.

Then I see it.

With a frown, I peer closer. Near the glittering golden line newly etched into my skin is another, similar line. I jerk my gaze to Reven to find him studying a similar mark, except his is much brighter. We both look at the priestess, who has gone as pale as a ghost worm's cocoon.



“What does this mean?” Reven demands.

She shares a glance with the other priestess. “It means...” A pause to swallow. “I’ve never seen this before.”

“What. Does. It. Mean?” He’s snarling now.

The priestess bows her head. “It means you were already soulbound...in a previous life.”

*What?*

His hand squeezes mine so tightly it hurts. But the priestess isn’t done.

“In *your* previous life,” she says to me. “But in *this* life for him.”

## Make It Real

“Wait.” How is that possible? Has this thing between us been because he’s been my soulbound mate all this time? “We’ve been bound before?”

“Not now,” Reven says. “Later.”

He hustles us out of there fast. So fast I’m sure the two women are still staring at the place where we stood, baffled. He’s right. Not now. We have plenty of time to deal with questions. Now is for us.

As soon as he gets us to a small private alcove, he shadows us back inside the now empty palace, into the smaller room that he’s been using to rest and bolster his powers.

*A private room.*

The drums outside match the tempo of need, the connection, pulsing through me. Recently soulbound mates tend to be all over each other. That much I am aware of. From what little I’ve been told, no one really knows why this happens. Theories abound. Some speculate that the mates have to make up for past lives where they didn’t find each other. Others say it’s part of the bonding process, that the magic of the ritual is tying them together physically the same way their hearts and souls are now intertwined.

All I know is that this ache for him that was already in me, never quite gone even when we both tried not to feel anything, is so much...more. Like if I don’t touch him, I’ll die. Turn to ash from the fire. I know he feels it, too. He hasn’t let go of me once.

We’ve pretended to be bonded mates once before, when we were caged by Tyndran soldiers. Even then, it didn’t take much imagination to slip into the role. But now that it’s real, it’s like a veil has been lifted. Like I didn’t know my vision was blurry until everything came into focus with sharp edges and colors.

Now I’m in his arms, his fingers in my hair. Reven stares down at me, the heat and urgency filling me reflected in his gaze.

“You’re mine,” he whispers.

Such an alpha thing to say, but it’s part of him and only makes me smile. “And you are *mine*.”

His smile steals my breath.

The tension inside me rises like a sandstorm growing overhead. I know it does in him, too, because his fingers tighten in my hair and eyes that were softly teasing turn ravenous. All the harsh beauty of his face becomes something dark. Sinfully, deliciously dark.

Then shadow rises up around us and I find myself in that pocket, that hiding place he's created. Darkness that warms. That caresses. That surrounds.

He must catch the question in my eyes. "This is between you and me only, and the king's Shadows inside me can't see in here."

Then his hands are sliding over my body. Slow hands, teasing in soft, silky caresses down my neck, the sensitive outer swell of my breast, the dip of my waist, come to rest at my hips.

This was what I want. To be in his arms always. To see the way he looks at me, unguarded, wholly focused, the same way I am with him. I want time. Time to know every part of him, every part of the man he is. The man he's become.

And yet he's always been *mine*. Yeah, we're definitely going to have to talk about that.

"Kiss me," Reven demands in a voice gone harsh.

Smiling sweetly, truly just for him, I rise on my tiptoes and brush my lips against his. Not pressing but teasing. Tormenting. I know his kisses now, but I want more. I want to know what makes him groan. What makes him shudder.

Reven groans low in his throat and takes over. He kisses me the way he did in the water garden. Gentler and somehow more urgent.

And yet, his touches are slow. As if, like me, he's relishing every sensation, every intimacy. But what he's *not* doing is holding back.

He's pressing and nipping, and I'm reveling in the way he's all around me. The scent of him—familiar, fresh like the creosus willows that manage to thrive in the deserts—surrounds me, the warmth of his skin, his hands on my body so tender. The shadows inside me, part of me, swirl and eddy and only add to the fire building inside. Even the shadows in which we hide are part of him, encompassing me in everything that is him.

I slide the tip of my tongue along his lower lip, tasting him.

He growls against me, and his kisses change, turning more desperate, more out of control. And I give in, give him everything.

Who needs air to breathe anyway?

“I need to see you,” he whispers against my mouth.

With an audacity I had no idea I possessed, I back up slowly, gaze on his, smiling as his hands reach for me convulsively. I shake my head and slowly, very slowly, start to undress. My boldness strains against what I do next, against the vulnerability I’m showing him. Gifting him. Because I unwrap the clothing from my body until I am standing before him in nothing but the breastband and underclothes covering the most intimate parts of me.

Nerves stay my hands there, though. I don’t know why. I’ve given him my body before. He’s seen me. But after the separation and then the enforced distance, this feels like we’re starting all over.

With a swallow, I flick my hand, dropping the breastband to the ground. The way he stares, all of the intensity inside him focused on me in an almost untamable way, tightens my stomach.

When I look at myself, I see a torso too short, curves too full, and each and every blemish on my skin. But Reven... I love the way he stares. Like I’m perfect. Even when I know I’m not.

“Keep looking at me like that and I might fall—”

With an fierce, guttural groan, he surrounds me, and we’re floating in the shadow. Vaguely, I know my world tips, but his lips are on mine and the heat of his body is everywhere. When the shadows disappear this time, not only are we lying down with the darkness cushioning us from the ground, his clothes and the rest of mine are gone.

That might be my favorite trick of his.

I’d tell him so, but I’m too caught up in the weight of him over me, in the utter and complete surrender of my body.

I’ve thought of that night we came together a thousand times. But if anything, my memory was being stingy.

I had no damn clue it could be like this with the right person.

No idea that the touch of him, the scent of him, weight of him would sear through me. Would send liquid heat flowing outward from my heart to every single nerve ending, every part of me.

Then those strong, capable fingers trail lower.

I don’t know what to do with my hands, so I wrap them around his arms. Not to stop him. Just to hold on. The corded muscles tense under my grip.

Sensation trails between my thighs, soft as a whisper, but it’s not just his fingers.

At the sound of my gasp, Reven lifts his head to pin me with a grin that is both playful and carnal. And that single look steals my heart all over again. Below that sculpted face so full of wicked intent, shadow, like a skein of silk, runs between my legs, teasing that point of pure sensation throbbing between my thighs.

“The darkness in here is all me. Only me.”

The silken touch moves back and forth slowly, torturously, and it’s him. It’s him touching me, and I might... *Goddess*.

I swallow. “It feels...” Like I’m being possessed, and I want that. I don’t even question if I should want that. He’s my soulbound mate. We gave each other everything. “Wonderful.”

I hold on as that silky torment continues to brush against me. Back and forth. Back and forth. But he’s there, too...those questing, almost cruel fingers unerringly tease and torture me until I’m panting. Until I’m a mass of nerves quivering under his touch. I hold on as his lips follow, drawing more and more pleasure through me until my body trembles at the edge of pain.

Hells, I didn’t know a man could do that with his tongue.

I hold on as that wicked touch tips me over into a starburst of pleasure so powerful I have to clamp a hand over my mouth to muffle my cries in case someone is checking the building.

As I’m coming down from those heights, Reven pins me with a gaze sparkling with humor and heat. “No one can hear you in here, Meren.”

“Oh.”

Right. That exhilaration hasn’t dissipated, and I grin back at him. How is this possible? This pure, wild happiness.

We both sober suddenly, the heat rushing back in over the happiness.

At the same time that he moves, I reach for him, pulling him up my body to cover me, to press into me, to move over me, pinning me down, pushing my legs wider, filling me and building those sensations back up faster than I thought possible.

Eye to eye, heart to heart, soul to soul, we move. Even though we’ve shared this before, it’s still awkward and new. But none of that matters because it’s also real and right and overwhelming in the best way.

I gasp as sensations bombard me from...everywhere. The shattering satisfaction in his eyes...I want more. Letting go of my inhibitions, my inexperience, I focus only on this moment. Only on him. On us.

A moan tumbles from my lips, and I’m moving my hips, chasing his touch,

and the shadow is sliding, sliding, sliding against me, even as his body claims mine in the most primal way.

The fires inside me burn brighter until they become white-hot.

I cling to him while his hands and his shadows and his stare brand me as his even more than those gossamer-fine lines that bind our souls or the shadows that are part of us both.

I cling to him, trying to show him how much I love him with my gaze. I cling as I whisper words, my soul speaking to his.

I didn't even know this kind of harmony was possible. My body gathers in on itself, coiling so tightly I almost worry I might break.

Our groans of pure pleasure entwine as I follow him into bliss and we both come undone.

## The King's Power

The rush slows, and we hold each other, sweat-slicked skin, heaving breaths, and all.

I'm not used to being content, and yet it settles so deeply inside me, every part of me relaxes into it. Like melting. Like coming home. I've never felt anything like it. Never.

We just hold each other. That is, until restless energy takes me over. Not because I'm nervous or uncomfortable in his arms. Hells, Reven and I fit together like a lock and a key. It's more like that fizzy excitement is building again.

A sparkling, nervous need to do something—but in a good way.

A lot of wishes for the future bubble up. Ones that are probably dangerous to be letting myself indulge in even though we are soulbound now. But that's why I don't stop myself.

*"She is mine. Mine."*

I tense against him. Did I really hear that?

*"I can't lose her."*

Reven's voice isn't only in my head—it's *everywhere*, inside me, around me. Like I'm hearing my own thoughts. Only his mouth didn't move.

My eyes widen as I stare at him and listen.

*"Forever. In this life and every life hereafter. I won't lose her, now. Even if I have to—"*

I bite my lip and think, *"I can hear you. Can you hear me?"*

His thoughts cut off as a wary surprise lights his eyes, and I know he did.

Bonding is a mysterious thing. The kind of connection we have now is every part of us—our minds, hearts, bodies, souls, and shadows. Not just the scars. Not just the wounds. The priestesses said nothing of it, but maybe they were being delicate. Or maybe everyone knows that's how it works. I don't really care, as long as it worked.

I reach up to twine a lock of his hair around my finger.

"Mate." The word whispers from Reven. Like a prayer.

I drop my hand and look him in the eyes. And it's like I can see right into

the pureness of his soul. *His* soul. No Shadows. A spark of fascination wraps around the contentment.

The same sense comes from him through our connection, warming the glittering lines of our binding. I trace those lines on his arm. "I'm glad you kidnapped me that night."

That surprises a laugh from him. Then he presses a kiss just under my ear. "Me too."

I smile, but he shakes his head.

"No," he insists. Then, with a finger under my chin, he draws my gaze to his. "I mean it. From the first moment, you've fought me, talked back to me, eventually kissed me, but you've never been afraid of me." He narrows his eyes. "Even when you should have been."

"Given that we just bonded, I think we should put that down to me having excellent instincts."

I expect him to laugh with me, but he doesn't. He brushes his thumb over the indent in my chin, then trails it to my lips. "I want to be the version of me that you see. Even when I'm at my worst."

Oh.

"You see a person I can't always see through my past, my origin. But in your eyes, I'm a better man."

I hate that he can't see it through his own eyes. He's already the better man. He chose to run from Eidolon and break a cycle of secrets and death centuries old. He saved hundreds from lives that would have broken and eventually killed them and created a community for those people in the Shadowwood. All while fighting the evil inside himself.

I put a hand to his cheek. "I fell in love with *you*, and that's all I need."

*"I don't deserve her."*

I pinch his arm, and he yelps. "What was that for?"

"For thinking stupid stuff."

His mouth pulls up on the crooked side a bit. "The hearing-thoughts thing will take some getting used to."

"No kidding." It's like he's part of me. Separate but the same. And it's weird even while it's natural. "What am I feeling right now?"

After a pause, he closes his eyes, his grip on me softening as he forces himself to relax. "Fear. Determination." He sucks in slowly, then opens eyes now a blazing blue. "Love. Goddess, Meren."

I smile. "What did you think it was? Only a girl in love would stick around



the way I have, with you being so difficult and grouchy all the time.”

I’m teasing, but I can feel his love, too, and it’s beyond anything I could have imagined. Almost impossible to grasp. If I sift through all the layers of reaction to our situation, it’s there, at his very core. Like the sun that disappears at night but is always in existence. Always. And if I get too close, I might burn up in it.

But what a glorious way to go.

A new kind of pulsing warmth hits at my core. After a second, I squirm, and I know he feels it, too...a new need coming over us swiftly. That fast. That soon.

They weren’t kidding about newly bound mates.

“I would love to try to use my power to bring you pleasure like you did for me.” Then I put a hand dramatically to my forehead. “But alas, sand and skin don’t mix well together.”

I’m pretty sure he’s had enough sand to last ten lifetimes already. “Better not,” he agrees. “We’ll find some other way.”

Grinning, I lean in, offering my lips for a kiss. “We better go tell the others. They’re probably wondering where we disappeared to.”

“Do we have to?”

I laugh at the face he makes. As much as I’d prefer to stay in our dark sanctuary together forever, this is a secret that shouldn’t keep.

“I want to be there with Tabra when the king’s power goes out.”

With reluctance, we both get up and help each other dress, which is awkward and yet intimate. Like we’re even more each other’s now that we can touch each other this way.

I fumble with the ties of my miniscule dress and the elaborate train, muttering to myself about complicated clothing when really what’s bothering me is the way my body is already keyed up again. It’s both exhilarating and uncomfortable. And we don’t have time.

Reven slides his arms around me from behind and pulls me into his chest, nuzzling my neck. “I thought I was the grumbler.” And his voice makes me quiver. “But really it’s you.”

“I don’t grumble.” I also sink into him, something that could become a lovely new habit. “I point out the obvious.”

“Adorably self-unaware, but okay.”

Temptation crooks a finger at me, urging me to forget everything we must do and stay here with him forever, but I can’t. We can’t. I give a little growl

in my throat that sounds like a kitten, and I can feel how Reven tries to hold in a chuckle. He doesn't succeed.

"What's so funny?"

"You're even starting to sound like me. Except you're the cute, cuddly version."

"Heavens forbid." I mock scowl. "I am *not* cute and cuddly."

He laughs. I love that I make him laugh.

I reach up and trace his mouth, and he turns his head to kiss the inside of my wrist. "Come on, princess. They're probably still at the pub."

I sigh. "Sandrats."

"My feelings exactly."

The roar of the crowds outside is our only warning before a sudden, familiar sizzling sensation makes the fine hairs on my arms stand up.

The king's power.

A heartbeat later, a blinding flare of incandescent light passes through the room in unison with a jolt of a buzz that moves right through my body.

"We need to get to—" The words cut off in my throat as pain bursts through me like my insides are being ripped out. It comes out as a grunt that dissolves into a hiss as I double over, grasping my side.

Agony. Like burning and stretching and falling apart and being put back together all at the same time.

An answering groan comes from Reven. Is he feeling my pain? Or his own?

"Meren?" He's right there with me, his face close to mine, and I force my eyes open to stare back at him through a fog of agony. "What's happening?" he asks.

"My side," I choke out, then fall to the ground. "My shadows."

He's on his knees, rolling me to my back and pulling my hands away from my stomach so he can look. My heart plummets at the way his face is now a mask of fear. "Mother goddess."

## Aftermath

At Reven's snarled curse, my heart rate jacks up, then up another notch when I look down. Curls of shadows are lifting out of me like mist being blown by the wind, all wispy. It's also clinging to me like it doesn't want to let go. But as it draws away from the outside, new skin appears, pink and puckered.

What the hells?

Reven puts his hands over the spot. "The king's power. It's trying to heal you."

No. I don't want to be healed. I don't want to lose the part of Reven that's inside me. Despite now being soulbound, that scar is my link to him.

"No," I groan. "Why?"

"My scars are made of me." He holds up a hand, and his wrists are untouched. "But yours aren't made of you. They're made of...me."

"No. No. No." The word takes up a chant in my head.

I strain to keep the pain from distracting me, but it's like the power manifested as razor-sharp talons shredding my insides, extracting the "sickness" with precision. Forcing myself not to double over, I reach for the shadows being forced out of me, trying to scoop them up and put them back inside.

Reven grabs my hands. "Don't, Meren. This is good—"

I jerk out of his grip and groan at the way the movement sends more shards of pain shooting through my stomach. "Don't let him take you out of me," I beg him. "Please."

His face spasms, expression tightening to something stricken, and I know he's battling with a thousand different reasons why he should just let me heal. So I grab his wrist hard enough that he winces. I know I must look wild-eyed right now. I know it makes no sense. But I also know I need this. Need him inside me. I *know* it.

"Please." My voice cracks on the word. I'm panting, trying to not let the pain take me over.

Reven's chest rises and falls once, twice, his gaze locked with mine.

I feel when he gives in, his reluctant acceptance feeding a surge of my own

panic-edged relief. “Okay,” he whispers back.

“Hurry.” I claw at his hands, trying to raise them for him.

The violet glow of his power fills the room, making it almost peaceful if I wasn’t in agony, and I watch as he tries to force the shadows back inside. But it’s not working. *It’s not working*, and the scar is shrinking.

“No!” I must mouth it, because no sound comes out. And I’m coming undone again, but not in a good way.

Reven is shaking with the effort. Forget our connection—I can see in his face that he doesn’t think this is going to work.

But I won’t give up. I *earned* this scar, damn it. And I won’t let him go. A well of resolve forms a core as strong as the metals forged in Mariana’s ironworks. “No!”

I take all that desperation and anger and fear and longing and close my eyes, picturing our bond. I picture it seared into my very skin and try to follow it. Follow the design of it. I picture Reven’s power being drawn to it. Then I picture the darkness. The curse. I picture the way it saved me in the Whirlpool.

I have his darkness inside me. I draw it in tighter and tighter. Like I’m drawing in the line we used to dry our laundry that hung between the hovel and one of the establishments next door. Hand over hand.

A choking noise from Reven has me snapping my eyes open to find him staring at me.

“Meren? Are you doing that?”

I look down, and the shadow in my scar is no longer dragging away. Instead, it’s pulling inward, creating a roiling cauldron of darkness in my skin. The scar now looks like a tiny version of the Whirlpool I escaped, and the force of that vortex is drawing more shadow from Reven, feathery wisps of darkness feeding this part of me.

Am I? Am I doing this? My amulet is cold and dull against my chest. This isn’t the goddess helping me, and I don’t think she could. This is *not* her power.

Is it the curse? Or the bond?

As abruptly as the Tropikan king’s energy passed through me, everything stops. Like a horse whose rider has reined it in from a headlong gallop. All the sensation disappears, and my body settles back to normal. My scar, as we both watch, returns to the way it has been.

I flop back on the bedding, chest heaving, waiting for another shard of pain

to pierce me, grate over me, but that's gone, too.

It's over.

Relief punches from me, and I cover my face with my hands. He's still part of me.

Reven crawls over to lean on one elbow beside me, pulling my hands away so I can look at him, his face a mask of terror.

I put a shaking hand to his cheek. "What?"

He swallows. "I think we made a mistake."

## The Healed

I shake my head hard, and I don't stop because he has to hear me. "Bonding was *not* a mistake. Don't say that."

He drops his head forward, not looking at me, and the bone-deep worry he's trying to hide from me but can't anymore because of our bond is like ice freezing the shadows inside me.

"*I did that just now,*" I insist. "*I kept your shadows inside me. Eidolon's pieces are still in you. None in here.*" I tap my chest.

His fear—pulsing at me not only in my scars but now through the fine lines on my arms, my forehead—doesn't ease even as he lifts his gaze, then threads his fingers into my hair, intent on me. "It's too late now."

That doesn't make me feel any better.

"We'll deal with whatever the repercussions are when they come." Resolve wraps around his fear, squeezing it out. Hard where fear was cold. "*I'll find out for sure.*"

He thinks that last bit.

I poke him in the chest with a single finger. "If you think you're going to go off and find the answers without me, think again."

His eyes widen a fraction before his brows snap down over his eyes. "Again, that will take some serious getting used to."

Pounding at our door has us both jerking, then looking at each other. No one knows we're in here.

"Who is it?" Reven calls.

Silence, followed by three knocks, a pause, then two knocks. Tziah. Her signal.

"Hold on."

Reven helps me up, then holds out an arm to keep me behind him as he opens the door. I roll my eyes while at the same time hiding a secret little warm glow—that he can probably feel anyway—because the gesture is kind of sweetly protective. Then he opens it wider to reveal that it really is our friend in the hallway. Alone.

Hands flying, signaling faster than I can keep up with, she clearly wants us

to follow. I catch her sign for Vos and then something about power.

The king's power.

Vos and Tabra.

Reven and I hit that realization about the time Tziah hurries away, clearly expecting us to follow.

I'm not sure if Reven is grim about how we got so wrapped up in me and then us that we forgot them, or I am. He was right, though. This bond thing is going to take some getting used to. Even loving him as much as I do, I'm not sure I want him in my head and emotions *all* the time.

We burst through the open doorway behind Tziah.

My heart lifts like a bird taking wing. "Whoa."

Vos is standing in the center of the room, healthy and strong in a way that is making me realize that he was worse than he let on. No more ashy skin. No more cough. Now he's practically glowing with good health.

"I must say." He grins. "Coming to this place was a ruby of an idea."

If the king's power could do this to Vos, then...

I look eagerly around for my sister, but other than us, no one else is in the room. "Where's Tabra?"

"We split up. Omma insisted that if all the other sick, injured, and dying were in the streets, Tabra should be, too. Tziah and I were at the pub and came back right away." Vos glances out the window. "They've been out there a while. I imagine they'll be back any second."

I hate waiting.

But still, seeing the change in Vos, knowing what the king's power tried to do to me, I buzz with the anticipation of finally seeing Tabra well. Tziah is grinning ear to ear, and I have to join her. This is something to celebrate.

"This is good," Reven says to Vos.

That's his version of celebration.

I can't help but chuckle, because behind that stoic countenance is a deep well of relief. I always suspected my Shadowraith was like the icebergs that surround Tyndra—only the summit showing, and an entire mountain hidden under still waters.

"That's *all* you're going to say?" I tease.

Vos holds out a hand, eye twinkling, and Reven grasps it forearm to forearm. They both draw each other in for a hug, slapping each other's backs. That's when Reven's lips finally tip up. Tziah bounces on her toes, hands clasped together, and Vos opens one arm to her so that she can burrow into

his side.

“Holy hells and—” Pella’s exclamation as she enters is cut off by Hakan’s, who is right behind her: “Crone’s eyes.”

Savanahan slang, I’m guessing, and I laugh out loud because the man hardly ever speaks. Color rises in his cheeks, all the way up into the shaved parts of his hair. “My apologies, domina.”

Omma comes in right behind them, slowing as she catches sight of Vos. But unlike the others, she doesn’t comment. Instead, she looks straight at me, and my stomach drops like a cannon ball.

Because I know.

This isn’t Omma being Omma. This is...

No. I swallow. “Where is she?”

The others fall quiet. A second later, Horus comes through the door, Tabra clutched in his arms, and my heart shrinks like a dried prune in the sun.

She looks *exactly* the same.

Vos was sick but mobile, and he looks like he could move mountains. But Tabra...why isn’t she healed? Hells, the Rites even tried to take my shadows from me, and I was perfectly fine otherwise.

But Tabra is still dying.

She doesn’t even lift her head from Horus’s shoulder as she looks at me. “Don’t worry, sissy.”

I have to put my grief somewhere, so I tuck my hand behind my back and worry at the signet ring, turning it round and round. “We’ll find another way.”

Vos drops his head forward like he can’t stand to look. Even Omma turns her back to Tabra, though I can see her face just fine. She looks the way I feel.

Like I’m dying inside along with my sister. Rotting with it.

“What’s going on in—” Cain’s scowl as he enters the room clears the instant he sets eyes on Vos. “What the hells happened to you, brother? You look terrible.” He can’t even hold it in for more than a beat before he grins. Then Horus turns and Cain catches sight of Tabra.

That familiar grin fades. “Ah hells, Meren.” His hands go to his hips, and he takes a big breath. He doesn’t take his pained gaze from my sister when he quietly says, “That makes what I have to share even worse.”

Cain steps out of the doorway, and Ledenon moves into view, eyeing us gravely.



Reven goes cold beside me, inside me. Everyone else goes as still as an oasis on a windless day, because they know the same thing I do.

No way would the Mighty Zariph Cainis send us his best warrior unless something went terribly wrong.

## Closing In

Eidolon's men found the zariphate. Not a regiment this time—an army. And we weren't there. Cain wasn't there. *I* wasn't there.

Reven and I were too focused on our relationship. And then on enjoying our new bond.

I blow out a slow breath. We haven't told anyone about the bonding. It wasn't the right time, and now I feel just plain guilty. Maybe after we get people safely settled.

I've been standing at the portal in the Tropikan temple with my power on, keeping it open, for long enough that I closed my eyes and have basically been sleeping standing up. Making sure to continue to keep the glass open so that more of our people—Wanderers and Vanished alike—can pass through from Enora isn't hard work, it's just slow.

I shift on my feet, which ache from having to stand in the boots that go with my celebration outfit. I've flipped the bodice open and changed the train so I'm all colorful. The unmasking happened while I was resting in the palace earlier, a shout going up around the city, so at least I haven't had to wear my mask anymore. Metal is not comfortable on the face.

"My turn." Cain's voice behind me makes me jump and blink more awake.

We've been holding the portal open in shifts with Tziah, Pella, Vos, and Hakan. Omma refuses to leave Tabra's side. Reven, just in case we need to save his power, has remained at the palace. I can still feel his irritation with our separation like a bur under a saddle.

They weren't kidding when they said newly bonded mates don't like to be apart. Even this small separation has been like bugs crawling over my skin. It's only slightly better since Reven went into a dark room to restore his strength. He can't cut me off completely anymore, I don't think, but the sensation has...eased. He's more like a tickle at the back of my mind. I've tried reaching out to talk to him through our minds, but he's been silent in return. Maybe shadow time is like a deep sleep. Not my favorite thing, but he's safe enough in the palace.

He's only been marginally okay with my doing this because Horus and

Bene have come and watched over me each time.

I can see them now—Horus standing in the doorway nearby, back to me, Bene perched on his shoulder.

With each face that comes through, another rock of guilt is added to the pile already built into a mountain inside me.

Eidolon's troops hit the zariphate hard. It's a miracle they got away, and I have the Wanderers' horses—born and bred for the deserts—to thank for that. Cainis and Ledenon's only guess about how an entire army could come down on them is that the king has a spy working for him from within *our* people. Among the Vanished, not the zariphate. Except Vida's dead, so...is there another? More than one?

If there are more hidden in our ranks, we will *never* be safe.

Tonight is the last night of the Rites—no more power going out, no more renewal, just celebration. It also means tomorrow is the soonest we can have an audience with the king to ask for a more prolonged asylum.

Cain hitches his chin at the guards. "Any new trouble?"

"Who, them?" I wave a careless hand. "Nah. They've been absolute lambs."

A statement that earns me a glare from both guards. I don't care. They weren't going to let us do this—or their fellow guards weren't, at least. Getting into an argument over letting our people into the dominion is why Cain now sports a swollen jaw turning all shades of purple. The other guy is in worse shape. I'm pretty sure my friend came close to drowning the guard with blessed water from the temple's font.

Nothing was going to stop him from helping his people or mine.

Eventually, a runner was sent to the palace and returned with permission. After Cain and I swap places so he can hold the portal open, the next person to come through is a Wanderer. He nods at Cain but sends me a narrow-eyed glare. Nothing new. I've gotten that look from every Wanderer who has come through.

They blame me.

Cain hitches his chin at me, and I move closer. "Ignore them," he says.

"Easy as that?" I murmur back, glancing over my shoulder.

His chuckle is expected, but it settles me all the same. This is an old joke between us. The Wanderers—many of them, at least—never did accept his "pet." He was always telling me to ignore the looks and whispers. Nice to know some things never change.

“Horus,” I call. “You and Bene head on back. I’ll wait for Cain.”

Cain stiffens “You don’t have to—”

“I want to.” Even with the way my entire being is straining to be back in sight and touching distance of Reven, this is my chance to clear the air with Cain.

“I’ll be with Wanderers to get back. I won’t be alone. You go ahead,” he says.

“I think we need to talk.”

His face goes entirely blank. “Oh. Okay.”

Not exactly encouraging. “Or we could later.”

His lips crook. Just a tiny bit, but it makes me feel a little better. “No, you’re right. We should talk.”

After a pause, during which I’m trying to figure out from his face if he really means that, I glance over my shoulder at Horus. “Go ahead.”

His gaze darts between me and Cain, then gives a nod and leaves, taking Bene with him.

“Oy,” one of the Tropikan guards calls to us. “How much longer?”

Cain stops the next Wanderer to come through the portal and asks.

The man flicks me a blame-filled glance before addressing him. “Three more groups, and that is the last of us, zariphson.”

Finally.

“Did you get that?” Cain asks the guard.

“Yeah.” He turns back to his fellow guards, and they proceed to have a muttered conversation that I can’t catch. Without a word, they leave.

All of them. Just like that.

Cain and I glance at each other.

“What in Nova?” I ask.

He looks as perplexed as I feel. “The celebrations stopped an hour or so ago. Pella asked one of the guards at the palace. They said something about spending the last few hours of this blessed day with loved ones.”

Seems strange to go so abruptly from parades and parties to quiet time with family and friends. Then again, every place has customs that probably seem strange to outsiders. In Aryd we have a festival that involves spilling a virgin man’s blood over the water of the Hyades River, so who am I to question things here? “With all the celebrating done, the Rites must be over. I guess that means the dominion is open again? No need to guard the portals?”

“That would make sense.”

Still, I'll feel better once we're all safely in the palace. All we can do is wait for these last few groups.

"Maybe we should talk when we get back to the palace," Cain says.

"Yeah."

With each passing second, I search what I can see of the Enoran temple on the other side. There is a face I've been waiting for. She hasn't come through with any of the others, but I sent word that she needed to be here in Tropikis, not remain in Aryd. She'll have to be in this next group. Tabra needs her.

Ten minutes later, Achlys appears on the other side of the portal. She's dressed as a Wanderer, but her red hair, a little longer than when we first escaped the palace, is impossible to miss. She smiles, and my heart cracks around the edges at the sight of it because she doesn't know.

Which is probably why the first thing I do when she's through is hug her. Achlys jolts at the physical contact, then stills in my embrace, and when I lean back, I'm sure she can see it in my face.

Her lips tremble. "Tabra?"

It hurts to breathe every time I think of my sister. "She's not in good shape."

Achlys's face tightens, and she glances toward the door, her urgency visible. "Take me to her."

I wanted to be the one to take her, to be there for her when... But I can't make her wait. "Go with the others," I tell her. "I'll see you there."

She's off almost before I finish talking.

The final group takes another five minutes or so.

"I'm the last," the sentry on the Enoran side tells Cain as he steps over to our side.

We got them all through. I want to be relieved and take a breath. I'm learning the hard way not to do those things. We can't let our guards down while Eidolon is still a threat. More than that, many died in that attack before we got them here. I can't be relieved in the face of that.

"We need to tell the priestesses that we are done here," I say.

The last of our people go one direction while Cain and I head in the other to find a priestess, but there are none near the portal room. None of Tropikis's acolytes within the main sanctuary of the temple itself.

Empty.

That's...odd.

This isn't like before, when Reven and I came. The place is deserted, like a

tomb waiting for a body. There's not a single person worshipping or praying or giving an offering.

"What time is it?" I ask Cain.

"Near to midnight," he says, narrowed gaze scanning the area.

Neither of us says so, but something isn't right about this. We close the distance to the door in a hurry, but as soon as I'm outside, I pause on the large stone stairs leading down to the streets.

It's silent.

Inside the temple, I didn't notice as much because the walls muffled the noise, but outside, it's strange not hearing the beat of the drums after so many days with it. Is it odd that I sort of miss the sound?

The streets are also no longer crowded. No more revelers or dancers. Like Cain said, they've all packed up and gone home.

"It wasn't like this when I came in." Tension laces his words. "There were still people out here. This is..." He shakes his head.

I roll my shoulders. If Cain is wary, I should be, too. "Maybe they meant it, about the quiet time with loved ones."

He nods slowly. "We should get back to the palace. Now."

Good plan.

A creeping sense of wrongness notches higher with every building, every block we pass. We're about halfway through the city when a sound we're now familiar with clangs through the streets. The ring of a heavy metal palace gate dropping closed. Then another. And another. *Clang. Clang. Clang.* Cain and I both falter and look at each other.

"I thought the king was done sending his power out," I say. "Did we miss the horns?"

He shakes his head. "I don't think so."

We keep going, hurried as we cut a path through the city.

"This is wrong," Cain mutters under his breath. "There's something off."

"Yeah."

A ruckus reaches us before we round the corner that leads to the front gate of the palace. There, a handful of the last of the Wanderers and Vanished to come through the portal are gathered in a packed group, banging at the bars of the fortified gate. Achlys is with them, but not Horus or Bene.

"What happened?" Cain demands of one of his people.

"I don't know. The gates shut before we got here."

She hardly finishes speaking before a single bell tolls. The jarring sound

rings through the empty streets. Lonely, like a funeral bell.

Achlys gives a sudden pained gasp. “It can’t be.”

We swing around to look at her. I wouldn’t have thought it possible with her pale skin, but she’s gone even whiter, even her freckles go chalky. “The Rites,” she whispers. Then snaps her gaze to me. “What night of the Rites is it?”

I frown but then remember she’s from Tropikis. “The unmasking happened earlier, and now the quiet time with loved...” I trail off at her expression.

What could be so horrible about quiet time with loved ones that it makes her look like that?

The bell tolls a second time.

Achlys’s hand flies up over her heart. “Heavens help us. We need to get somewhere we can barricade inside. The healed are coming.”

What the seven hells is she saying?

“The healed?”

“They become—”

The bell tolls a third time, and the distinct sounds of doors and window shutters around us being shut and locked send shivers crawling over my skin like a thousand spiders. The shadows rear up within me, tensing for whatever is coming next.

“Achlys?”

“We need to get out of the streets. Now!”

Bring Balance  
to the Rite

Reven. He can come get us.

I close my eyes, focused on my connection to my bondmate. It's so new I'm not sure how it works.

"*Reven.*" I whisper the words aloud and think them at the same time. "*Find me.*"

I open my eyes to find Cain watching me. "Can he hear you?"

We haven't told them yet. "Sometimes."

I expect hurt to flicker over his features, but it's more like acceptance. He even gives a small nod. He doesn't see the half of it, but now's not the time to finish breaking my best friend's heart. Right now, we need to get everyone to safety.

"The rope." Cain and I say it at the same time.

We look the group over. There's probably twenty out here, including us.

"Follow us!" Cain calls.

That burgeoning sense of impending doom grows as we lead them around the side to where Pella's rope still dangles. Thank the heavens for Cain's pain-in-the-ass sister is all I have to say.

We start sending people up, one after the other, trying to put someone stronger after someone weaker. In short order, we're halfway through the group. Achlys keeps glancing over her shoulder, shuffling on her feet. I've never seen her so fidgety. Handmaidens are trained not to fidget.

"We need to move faster," she tells me as she steps up to take her turn.

I nod and send her up. Not that we discuss it, but on purpose Cain and I wait until last. I'm not leaving anyone behind.

"Ready?" he asks. He's well aware of my issue with heights.

I've been trying not to think about it.

I've also been trying to call Reven, but so far, no luck. In fact, no sense of him at all. Not like before when he would block me, though. This is more like he's there but quiet. What happened to our handy mind-reading thing? This is when that would be useful, damn it.



Which is what I tell myself so that I don't have a panic attack that something happened to him while I'm trying to get up this bloody wall.

I glare at the rope. No choice now. "Don't let me fall."

"Want me to shove you up from underneath?" he asks as I grab hold and set a foot to the wall. He thinks *now* is the time to start teasing me again?

"Hilarious." *You can do this. Don't be a wimp. Don't look down. One hand in front of the other. Easy peasy—*

The now familiar sizzling sensation that precedes the king's power lifts the hairs on the back of my neck. "C—"

I don't even get his name out before a blinding flare of light passes through me, and this time I can see what Pella and Omma meant by a bubble of light in the sky. It's glorious to watch expanding outward and upward like a dome. The light isn't white but opalescent, all colors of the rainbow swirling and alive within it.

Above the palace, the cliffs that surround the dominion, with their waterfalls misting and pouring, tower into the night sky, keeping the oceans on the other side out. The colorful display dissolves the second it reaches the border, like water hitting fire and turning to steam. Then a beat of hush, as though the entire dominion takes a readying breath.

"What did *that* do?" I whisper.

Beside me, Cain, still watching the skies, shakes his head.

A loud *thunk* has us both turning, heads cocked to listen. "What was—"

He waves me off as another sound comes from a different direction. This time a yelp or maybe a scream. A few more pierce the night. Definitely screams. As if those few set off a cascade, a thousand screams and shouts rise up, coming from...everywhere.

Then, nearby, a loud thump and rattle, as if something hard was thrown against a door or a wall.

Cain shoves me up the rope. "Climb."

He doesn't have to tell me twice. I'm already moving. Feet on the wall, hand over hand, I scramble.

With a crack of splintering wood, a door not more than three buildings down from us slams open, and a tiny old woman—one with a salt-and-pepper braid over her shoulder—who should have been too small to push a child on a swing, let alone a whole door, bursts out. There's something unnatural in the way she moves. She reminds me of an insect or a bird, maybe, the way she angles her head in sharp, jerking motions. Then she takes off at a sprint,

directly for us, mouth wide open, showing her teeth like a predator might.

Another door flings open with a bang, then another and another, the sound of cracking wood echoing all around us.

“Go, go, go!” Cain shouts as he wedges his shoulder under my thighs and propels me upward.

The rope gives a strange jerk in my grasp, and then I hang on for dear life as Cain and I are swung away from the wall only to knock back into it, sliding down a foot or two with the impact.

Cain curses as he drops out from under me.

My feet frantically scrambling for purchase, I look down...and lose my breath.

At least a dozen people are tugging the rope, their movements similar to the old woman's. Worse, a man who stands seven feet if he's an inch, towering over the others, has Cain by his booted foot. The man yanks hard, and, with a shout, Cain tumbles down into the mob. The last thing I see is his shocked face as he falls.

“Cain!” I desperately search for him on the ground, but the growing throng of bodies blocks my view. Except...they don't seem to notice Cain. No, every face remains tilted up, sights trained on me. Which is when I get a closer look at their faces. Their eyes are glassy, almost opaque, reminding me of Vida after she died. Several people are covered in blood, one all around his mouth.

*Merciful heavens.*

The big man jumps for me. Almost makes it, too, so I clamber higher. Not too much, though. I'm not leaving without Cain.

The rope above me starts to jiggle. I whip my head up. Tziah scales down the rope—shooting down it—controlled yet fast and nimble. She gets to me before I can blink, then jumps, landing on the giant who pulled Cain down.

With animallike snarls, all the feral people turn on her.

No Ally  
of Mine

“Tziah!”

A noise I’ve only heard once before creeps up toward me through the shouts and screams. A soft hissing at first, but I know what’s coming. Deliberately, I wrap my leg in the rope to hold my weight and hook one elbow around it so that I can try to cover my ears with my hands. A second later, the hissing grows louder, building pressure inside my head. I grit my teeth against the sensation.

Tziah’s power. Sound as a weapon. It’s paralyzing. Debilitating.

One by one, starting with those nearest where she fell, the glassy-eyed people put their hands over their own ears, ducking and cowering, peeling away until I can finally see Cain balled up on the ground, covering his head with his arms. He tries to sit up, but not all of those things seem to be affected by Tziah. With wild eyes and those jerking movements, they descend on her.

She opens her mouth wider, and the sound becomes unbearable even with my ears covered. Wetness leaks out of my nose, and I swipe my elbow under it only to come away with a smear of blood. Below me, I can see blood leaking from eyes and ears and noses, and everyone around her starts to scream in a different way, but she doesn’t stop. Not until the last one is crouched and cowering in agony.

Then she shuts her mouth and drags an equally bleeding and dazed Cain off the ground with more strength than I would have given her credit for, given how tiny she is. He’s stumbling, but she manages to get him to the rope, and they both climb. Which shakes me out of my stupor. I unwrap myself and keep going.

I’m almost halfway up when those things—I can’t think of them as people—below jump to their feet with shrieks of pure rage.

Heights are no longer my worst fear.

I hit the top of the wall and drag myself up and over with the help of one of the Wanderers. The others are gathered here, looking out over the city with horror-filled eyes. The entire place is crawling with those things.

The Wanderer who helped me leans over to grab Cain, who collapses on the ground, and then Tziah.

“What in the stars?” Cain moans overly loud. “What’s happening?”

We don’t have time for answers right now. “We need to get to our rooms. Barricade in there.”

Cain frowns at me, eyes focused on my lips, shaking his head. “What?” he yells.

Damnation. Tziah’s power. He was right beside her, and now he can’t hear. “Help him,” I tell the Wanderer.

Then, I grab Achlys by the arm. “What are those things?”

She’s holding herself so stiffly she might shatter. Fear has turned her eyes blank. Slowly, she focuses on me. “Flesh Reapers.” She shudders. “For one night, anyone healed by the king’s power the night before must sacrifice for receiving such a blessing.”

Dread hangs over me like a hangman’s noose. “What kind of sacrifice?”

“The healed are overtaken with a thirst for the blood of all those who remain sick or weak or unable to contribute, all those who were not able to be healed by the king.” She taps her nose. “They can smell them. Smell the *rot*.”

“They...kill them?” I ask slowly.

Achlys nods. “Some of the unhealed try to hide. Some try to tie up their healed loved ones before it happens, to try to stop them. But there’s no use. They gain the strength of ten men, and they will not stop their purge until the dawn.”

Purge.

*Merciful heavens...* Vos. He’s going to be like those things down there, trying to kill the unhealed.

Wait. Is that why the Flesh Reapers didn’t kill Cain? He was in their way, but he’s strong and healthy.

My insides go Tyndra cold, shivers cascading over my skin. Those possessed people were coming for *me*. Why? Because I rejected the blessing and I didn’t let the king’s power heal me? Another realization follows on its heels, and terror lances through me, white-hot and wild.

Tabra.

Vos is probably with her, and she wasn’t healed.

Dread steals my breath. Is that why Reven hasn’t come to find me? Is he protecting my sister? But that doesn’t explain why I can’t hear him. Feel him.

Something is wrong.

I take off running, only to immediately pull up short. The gate over the door into our building is down. Somebody removed Pella's block. Whirling around, I squint, trying to see the half mile or so all the way down to the building at the corner of this long wall.

I'm pretty sure that gate is down, too.

"Tziah!" I search for her in the group. "How did you get up here?"

Her hands fly, but I can't keep up. I shake my head, and she tries again. I still don't understand.

"You were already up here when the gates came down?" Cain yells.

Tziah flings her hands into the air on a nod.

The people up here are safe enough in that case, but I have to get to Tabra, to Reven. I spin back to the rope, dragging it up the outside in a frenzy of jerking pulls.

Cain appears at my side, helping me get it up. But as soon as it's up, I start untying it, and he frowns at me. "What are you doing?"

He practically shouts the words, and I wave him quieter. "Just help me." I make sure he can read my lips.

Cain nods. In minutes, we have it positioned on the other side, dropping down into the courtyard.

Basement window.

Pella told me she blocked a basement window in our building. Maybe whoever found her other blocked gates missed that one.

Fear beats inside my chest like a caged lion, but I throw a leg over the wall before I can talk myself out of it.

"What are you doing?" With a hand on my arm, Cain tries to stop me.

"Tabra." Pause, then... "Vos."

I guess he reads my lips, because his lips press into a thin line. "Go."

I'm up and over and climbing down, Cain right behind me. Achlys and Tziah behind him. A handful of Wanderers follow the son of their zariph. I hit solid ground and crouch there for a second before I start sneaking along the foundation of our building, checking every window at ground level. The others catch up with me, and we make it around two of the three sides with no luck.

I edge around the corner just as a voice calls out, "Stop in the name of the king!"

Soldiers run around the corner we just came from. At least twenty of them. We're outnumbered. As far as I can tell, not a glassy eye is to be seen among

them. That's something, at least.

I barely register that thought before they point their weapons directly at us. What? I know we're in here after the gates have been shut, but I'd rather break the rules and be with people who aren't possessed by bloodthirsty urges.

"We are the king's guests," I announce in my best royal voice. "I am Queen Tabra of Aryd. Lower your weapons immediately."

"We have orders," one of them, I guess he's leader, says.

That doesn't sound good. "What orders?"

He draws his lips back in a sneer. "Outsiders aren't allowed to witness Rites...on pain of death."

Cain and I exchange a grim glance.

They allowed us in for a reason. Why so long, though? Why not kill us the first night?

Unless...

Cain says what I'm thinking. "Our welcome here has been a trap all along."

## Betrayal

A trap. They wanted us to feel safe enough here to stick around. But for what? To be killed by their rabid healed? No, that would be too simple. Plus, they'd have no way of knowing if the queen of Aryd was ill or that she wouldn't be healed. Even if that's exactly the situation with Tabra.

Which means something worse is coming.

"I hope you brought more men than this," I tell the man in charge sweetly and watch the tension crawl up the shoulders of the soldiers behind him.

"We have more than enough men to handle you," he replies.

If the situation wasn't so dire, I'd laugh. Clearly the Tropikans think the Wanderers were stupid enough to give up all their weapons. They've seriously underestimated us. Even outnumbered, I'd put my money on the Wanderers every time. "You picked the wrong day to follow orders."

I look at Cain, who gives a piercing whistle, then jerks me out of the way.

"Scourge!" his people yell.

The clash is immediate and violent and chaotic. Cain corrals me and Tziah and Achlys against the wall of the building, letting his brethren charge around us. Sure enough, the Wanderers produce a plethora of weaponry—telescoping bows, staffs, spears, and urumi belts that they use as part whip, part razor-sharp blade. They fight like the possessed Flesh Reapers.

The metallic scent of blood fills the air. A soldier is felled in front of me, blood spraying over my legs, a throwing star sunken in his jugular.

I slip two of my knives from my hiding spots.

Cain stays my hand. "No. We'll take care of this. You need to build a portal."

One soldier backs a Wanderer up with a series of spinning kicks before slashing at him with a paddle-like weapon, the edges of which glint with wicked spikes. Shark's teeth, I vaguely recall from Omma's education. A badge of honor for only their best warriors, the outward sign of an ocean master. They're throwing their best at us.

The yelling around me blends with the screams of the carnage going on outside the walls. Another muffled roar of "Scourge" comes from inside our

building, and a door explodes outward, taking out the metal gate with it. More Wanderers run out into the flat courtyard around us, fierce and ready to defend their kin.

Cain's right. We need to get out of here.

We may be close to two hundred strong with the zariphate and Vanished who came here together, but we're divided and scattered. These aren't the only soldiers... I've seen how many they have, and we're seriously outnumbered. We need a way out, and me building a portal might be the only way, since we can't get through the city.

Which means I need sand. There's not enough here.

Where is Bene? He was a raven the last time I saw him. But even if he showed up in full form and shed all his spare sand, I can't build a portal until I know where the rest of our people are.

"Reven," I whisper.

The shadows inside me, the lines of connection binding us, are still eerily quiet. I grit my teeth so hard my jaw hurts.

Is he blocking me?

A new cry rises from the main palace building at the far end of the courtyard. The massive, metal gate over the wide arched front door cranks up, and Tropikan soldiers in their green armor pour out into the courtyard, sprinting in our direction.

Hells. We have to gather everyone up. Now. Before we lose too many.

"I need to get the others before I build the portal!" I yell at Cain and point.

He looks from me to the door and seems to figure out what I said. "Bring them here!" he yells. "I'll stay and fight." He runs off, Tziah on his heels.

I hand Achlys one of my knives. "Let's go!"

She stares at it like she has never even seen a knife before. But then she grips it tighter. "I'm right behind you."

Between groups of Wanderers who are still coming out, we dart inside the building, going against the flow and up the stairs only to be yanked to a stop by a hand on my arm that whips me around.

The zariph.

Behind him stands the zaripha, her hands covered in blood, clutching one of the Tropikan paddle-like weapons. Have they been fighting in here, too?

"Where do you think you're going?" Cainis demands.

Give me a break. I don't have time for this. "Cain is outside facing down an army. Go."



It's the right thing to say, because his expression, already intimidating, takes on a fierce cast. The face of war.

Cainis shouts something to the Wanderers, then rushes down the stairs, the zaripha on his heels—and the rest of his people yell their battle cry. I'm glad we're on the same side.

I turn only to plough into Horus and Omma. He and Bene must've got back before the gates came down. My knees almost go out from under me when I see he's holding Tabra, who is out cold, limp in his arms.

"Domina." He hoists my sister higher.

"Take Tabra, Achlys, and Omma with you and keep them safe. I need everyone together if we're going to try to get out of here."

He shakes his head. "I swore to guard you with my life. I've already been away too long."

Damn it. I don't have time for this, either. "I order you to protect my sister, your queen, until I can get us out of here."

His expression pinches, going stark, but he obeys. They go. I sprint the other way up to the third floor, where I find Pella and Hakan at the end of the corridor, standing outside the door to our rooms.

"Where's my brother?" Pella demands before I'm halfway to her.

"Out there fighting with Tziah and your people. Your parents are headed out to help him."

"What the hells is going on out there?" Hakan asks.

Pella is still and straight like a soldier at attention. "Vos lost his ever-loving mind and went after Tabra."

"What?" Why didn't Horus tell me? I should go back. Check her over more closely.

Pella grabs my arm before I can bolt and shakes me. "She's unharmed. But after Horus got her out of the room, Vos froze himself in ice—filled the whole room. Trapped Bene in there with him."

Which is when I finally notice that the doors they're standing in front of are crusted over. Vos stopped himself. My respect for him goes up a thousandfold. Can he survive like that? And how do we get him out with the rest of us?

I explain what's going on as quickly as I can, including how the entire city is no longer safe. "But that's not who we're fighting." Not yet, at least. "The Tropikan soldiers are under orders to kill us all."

Hakan and Pella look at each other, and the struggle in both of them is

palpable. Hakan doesn't want to leave Vos but can do the most good in battle. Pella wants to fight with and for her people.

"I'll stay here," she decides.

Hakan shakes his head. "I'm not leaving you."

She grabs him by a hunk of shirt, and I flinch, waiting for her to get shocked, but she must not have touched skin. She yanks him down to her level. "Save my people."

Hakan struggles for less than a second before, with a growl, he slams his mouth over hers in a harsh, swift kiss, then takes off down the hallway.

Pella watches him go.

"Well..." I say. "That was unexpected. Everyone saw it coming."

She shoots me a glare. "Now's not the time. Vos trapped Bene in there with him."

Hells. He's key to my ability to make a portal.

I need another way to gather enough sand, and I can think of only one option—drawing it from the oceans outside the cliffs and dragging it to me. I'm not sure it'll work, but I need to be back outside to try. "I'll send someone for you if we figure a way out of this."

Pella gives a single sharp nod.

I hate leaving her here alone, but I have no choice.

"Where's Reven?" I ask before I go.

"I don't know. He wasn't with us when Vos..." She shakes her head. "He's probably looking for you."

He should be able to feel me. I don't have time to explain that.

"If I can't get sand, he's our only way out of here." There are too many of us, though. Not everyone would make it.

Leaving Pella with Vos, I race back down the hall and stairs and burst into the fray of the courtyard, where the fighting is still raging. As I hit the open ground, something explodes out of a window overhead. Chunks of ice rain down over me, and I duck, covering my head with my arms.

I look up in time to see Bene in raven form, shaking off a crust of ice midair. He must have broken free of the frozen room Vos trapped him in. He flies away over the trees, toward the ocean, getting smaller and smaller as he gets farther away.

An odd sound somewhere between crackling and snapping is familiar enough that I know what's coming.

It's the sound Vos's power makes when he's freezing something.

The green marbled stone around the third-story window Bene just busted out of frosts over, thick and sparkling white, creeping and crawling along the outside of the building.

Then...it stops.

What in the dominions is Vos doing in there? Is Pella hearing this from where she's keeping watch outside the door? Is he trying to get out?

With a blast of Tyndran air, snow erupts out of the room, and it doesn't stop, piling up on the ground below the window despite the warmth of the night out here. A second later, two bodies launch out the broken window.

Pella and Vos.

She must've tried to stop him getting out. They grapple even as they fall, until they land in the pile of snow below. Vos is up first, wild-eyed and hands aglow. He stands over Pella, who I can't see, still buried in the drift. Vos raises his hands, but a bolt of blue lightning knocks him a good twenty feet away.

Hakan. A second later, Pella emerges from the bank of snow. She's barely standing when Vos rises like a ghoul from the underworld, the center of his chest burned and still smoking. Sniffing the air, he moves in that jerky, birdlike way the other Flesh Reapers do, then zeroes in...on me.

He sprints across the ground between us, foggy-eyed, his face a contorted mask of death.

Ah, hells. "Don't make me do this," I mutter as I unsheathe my knives, ready to defend myself.

Before he can get to me, though, Tziah gets between us, her hands raised, a wickedly curved blade she must have gotten from a fallen fighter in one. What if she smells of sickness, too? When she landed on Cain outside the palace, those things went for her...

Vos stares at her, then sniffs and growls like a vicious animal, the low rumble sending goose bumps over my skin.

But Tziah must see something that I don't, because she moves not away but into Vos, wrapping her arms around his waist and laying her head on his chest.

"No!" Cain is across the field of the courtyard, but now he's running for Tziah.

Vos throws his head back on a yell so feral, so full of conflict, that an ache for him sets up in my own chest. He shoves Tziah back and, glowing hands pointed down, freezes himself again, starting at his feet and growing the ice

over his body, creating a clear block around him, reminding me of my glass tomb when I was trying to hold back the Shadows inside Reven the first time we faced down Eidolon.

Tziah falls to her knees beside him, head bowed, and places a hand on the ice. Reaching her side, Cain takes up a protective stance facing outward.

Before I can so much as move, a solid column of shadow erupts at the other end of the courtyard, obscuring the main palace building. Then the column morphs to black mist, dissipating to reveal a single man dressed in brilliant white.

Eidolon.

King Panqui didn't play us for his own ends. What were his orders? Distract us until Eidolon arrived? Or kill us and hand over the corpses?

The fighting jars to a halt, and Cain looks over at me, his expression that of a warrior who will fight to his last breath, made even more fearsome by the smears of blood and dirt on his face. "Get us out of here."

"Tabra!" someone screams.

I whirl, knife raised. Across what before this night was a beautiful courtyard garden but is now a battlefield, Achlys is slashing at shadow—what appears to be a solid arm of smoke—with the knife I gave her. Horus and Omma are fighting it with her. But the shadow blocks them all and wraps a tendril around Tabra's ankle.

"Meren!" Tabra's lips form my name as she scrabbles at the ground. The darkness drags her away.

## Scattered

As if my sister's cry was a signal, the fighting resumes, a clash of bodies and weapons and yells, even more frenzied now. I plunge into the tumult, running after Tabra, dodging and darting and trying not to be stopped.

Even from this far away, I can make Eidolon out. He stands, arms raised, the glow of his hands casting a purple light over everything. And to his right, not bound and not struggling, is...

I stumble over my own feet.

*Mother goddess.*

Reven.

Is that why I couldn't feel my bondmate? Because Eidolon already took him?

The rope of shadow that has Tabra drags her to the king's other side, standing her up and wrapping around her like a snake. Fear wraps around me the same way, threatening to crush me.

Eidolon has them both.

The clash of weapons and bodies and fighting blocks my way, but I keep going. Bindings made of shadow hold my sister upright, her arms now stretched outward from her sides, her head dropped back as though she can't keep it up, but her eyes are open. Reven, I realize, is in the same posture. Eidolon raises a glowing fist, and with a wrench of his hand, darkness streaks out of Reven's mouth, like the king is pulling his entrails up from inside, forming into a small cloud in front of him.

Failed. We just failed everything. He's got his Shadows back.

I stumble over a body on the ground and almost fall. I manage to keep my feet and keep going, even as I'm staring hard at what Eidolon is doing. That isn't many of his Shadows...it's *one*. Realization is a slap to the face. I think he drew out the ghost of the past, the one Reven sucked out of Tabra. Why? What does he need with—

Eidolon takes it and shoves it down my sister's throat.

Rage and terror collide inside me. "Take me to him!"

In a blink, I am across the courtyard, the shadows dissipating from me like

mist.

Holy hells. It worked.

I end up behind Eidolon, so close, standing in the alcove of a small doorway to the main palace. I don't think he felt or saw me. I don't think he knows I'm here.

Tabra's face...goddess help me, that's not her face. Not *my* face.

Eidolon's ghost is in her. Again? Or did Reven not get it out?

"I didn't tell you to *kill* her," Eidolon growls at the thing inside my sister. "We need her."

"And I needed to make sure you honor our deal," Tabra says in a voice that is also not hers. It oozes from her. Then she smiles, lips a sinister twist. "She dies without me in her."

The king's face flickers with frustration only a beat before his shoulders ease. "It no longer matters," Eidolon mutters to himself before eyeing Tabra, or the ghost of his previous incarnation inhabiting her body. "As long as, through you, I can control her power." Eidolon raises glowing hands again.

I lurch forward, but Reven's voice sounds in my head. "*Wait.*"

Our bond comes to brilliant life between us, and that alone makes me pause. Wait for what?

"I will only help if you keep your promise," the ghost inside Tabra says. "A body for me."

The king cocks his head. "You are still made of shadow, my old friend. You have no choice."

The parasite gives a mangled choking sound, and Tabra's body goes rigid. Then, impossibly, her hands rise, palms glowing a lavender hue.

Vos might as well have been here to freeze my blood solid all the way to my heart. She's been too weak to use her power. Treading death's waters. He can't—

Eidolon reaches inside his tunic and pulls his own amulet from around his neck to dangle it between them. My sister's light moves out from her hands like it's an extension of her, reaching toward the necklace until it surrounds the amulet.

"Release Tyndra from her prison," Eidolon commands.

Seven hells in a handbasket. We were right. That's what he needed my sister for. That's what all of this—every step he's taken, every shadow shed, every Arydian queen he's killed—has been about all along.

The darkness holding my sister upright squeezes her tighter, coiling and

writhing, and the sounds coming from her throat change to pained groans as her light glows brighter.

I have to help her.

“*Not yet.*” Reven’s voice stops me.

I jerk my gaze his direction to find him still bound but watching me. I give him what I know is a look of desperation. “*He’s killing her.*”

“*Wait.*” What does he see that I don’t?

I don’t ask. Because I trust him. My bondmate wouldn’t tell me to wait for no reason.

“Come on,” Eidolon mutters in a voice that now quakes. Is he straining with the effort he’s expending by trying to force two powers to operate in tandem?

The amulet remains whole.

Tabra’s mouth works as if she’s trying to get words out. But it’s the ghost’s voice that speaks...wheezes... “*She...can’t. It’s...not...working.*”

“*It has to work,*” Eidolon growls, sounding more like Reven than I’ve ever heard. He draws a deep breath, then commands, “*We’re almost out of time. Release my mother. Now.*”

Reven’s shock is like a thunderbolt inside me.

*Eidolon’s mother?* That’s what he said. Not only his goddess but his mother. Reven’s, too, in a weird way.

The glow around the amulet spikes as the darkness around my sister tightens, winding like a snake, and she tosses their head back and shouts—both my sister and the ghost inside her. A drawn-out, guttural cry as her light turns blinding.

Eidolon is going to kill her.

I lunge toward the king. “Let her go!”

Only strong arms wrap around me and hold me back. My yelp is cut off as those arms tighten painfully. I jerk my gaze to the side. Holy horrors. Reven is no longer dangling in the air, held by Eidolon’s shadows. He is the one holding me prisoner now. Forced to by Eidolon?

A dark, grating laugh echoes through my head. Like Reven, but not.

“Can’t have that, love.” Shadow nuzzles the side of my hair. “You thought you could control us with some curse? We were biding our time.”

“You truly are pathetic.” A harsher version of Reven’s voice echoes in my ears, in my head, through me.

Another one, silkier but nastier, sounds next. “Played right into our hands.”

Reven's arms convulse, his jaw tightening so hard I can hear his teeth grind. He's fighting the king's Shadows in control of his body. I can see it.

"No." Reven's voice is like a tear in the fabric of night.

But I felt it. Felt *him*. He was here with me for a heartbeat...and then gone.

Shadow chuckles. "All it took was a little song and dance to make you think we'll help you. That we listen to her."

Yet another of Shadow's voices, a guttural version this time, joins the fray. "Now she is ours. Soulbound."

"King Eidolon, you murdering bastard!" a new, harsh voice cries out.

Omma.

She prowls toward us through the melee, her fury-filled gaze pinned to the king. "You have many deaths of my kin to answer for."

What is she doing, going up against him like this?

She shoots me a glance that I'm sure the king doesn't catch, but I recognize it as Omma telling me to take advantage of the distraction she's creating.

"Another twin." Eidolon sneers.

And she's right—the king's focus is not on me. I close my eyes and, the way I do with sand, reach for the power I'm supposed to have over shadow, trying to ignore the doubts Shadow's words lodged in me.

"Let me go," I silently command.

Did his arms loosen? I'm not sure.

"Your desperation is showing, old king," Omma taunts.

I focus harder. Maybe the power isn't in me but in Eidolon. I'm just a tap into a well. I picture his light, the purple glow not in his hands but inside him, and reach for it with my mind.

"Let me go."

The arms around me definitely loosen. Almost there. Just another try.

"Release my grandnieces!" Omma commands the king with a power far greater than hers.

"This grows tiresome." Anger laces the king's words. "Pass on my regards to your ancestresses."

What?

My eyes flash open just in time to see him slash a hand through the air, and a scythe of shadow slices through Omma, severing her head from her body.

A hole of loss gouges me with so much pain, it's like being ripped apart.

Flashes of memories flood my mind. Memories I didn't even know I had



of Omma. Nice memories. Her laughing as she chased me along the banks of the Hyades River when I could have been no more than three summer solstices old. A small light of pride in her eyes as I was readied to take Tabra's place for the first time. The small honey cake she bought for my sixteenth name day—the day we enter the age of reason. And more. All tiny moments that by themselves, at the time I never thought amounted to anything.

I was wrong.

Over the images is the sound of her voice that night in the water garden telling me words she had never once spoken before—*I loved you every single day*.

Words I didn't believe then. Didn't believe until right now. When it's too late.

If Shadow wasn't holding me up, I don't think I'd still be upright.

Omma is...gone.

He killed her with hardly a thought, the parts of her strewn across the field of battle like discarded game pieces.

In the wake of the gaping hole of loss that leaves inside me, fear floods in.

I have to face this—the king and his Shadows and his ghosts—alone.

## Desperation

He killed Omma.

Reaction riots inside me—fear, shock, horror—but I don't have time to give in to any of them. Because Eidolon turns back to Tabra.

His body quakes hard. Not just with the effort of trying to force my sister's power to break his goddess mother out of her prison, but killing Omma like that might have tipped the scales. How is he still standing?

Yet, the amulet the king is holding remains whole. Unbroken.

Then suddenly my sister's eyes roll back in her head and both their lights douse. The darkness wrapped around Tabra lets her go, and her body flops to the ground.

"No!" Eidolon shouts.

"Tabra!" I screech. I'd run to her, but I can't move. Can barely get enough air into my lungs to yell. Everything we've gone through these months was for nothing. He killed her anyway.

Anger explodes through me, obliterating the fear and doubt, pain fueling the burn.

That asshole killed Tabra and Omma. I have no more family left. No one.

A stark laugh bubbles up and bursts from me. I may be doing this on my own, but the king doesn't hold *all* the cards. I hope that murdering bastard chokes on failure and dies.

The renewed glow from Eidolon's hands is so soft, at first I think it's coming from my sister. That she's woken up. She's fighting.

But it's not her. He lifts his hands as the darkness slowly lifts Tabra back up, her head lolling forward.

She's not dead. I can see her breathing.

"The deal was my mother would be released," Eidolon snarls. "You lied or failed. I don't care which."

Is he going to kill the ghost inside my sister? It'll kill her, too, and he's just going to—

"What about our deal?" the ghost inside Tabra demands.

"That was before you tried to kill the only person in five hundred years

born with enough power to do what we need.”

Eidolon makes that fist again to pull the spirit out of her the way he did with Reven, but this time his glow flickers, like he’s having trouble making it work. For a second, I think he won’t be able to, that he’s too drained. But then, like before with Reven, he drags the ghostly soul out of her in a long streamer until the last of it slithers out of her mouth. Face a mask of fury, Eidolon does something with both hands that looks like he’s breaking a stick, and the ghost of his past self shatters. Its howl cuts off as the pieces of him float away on the wind.

“Can’t have you dying before you’ve grown into your power,” Eidolon says to the rag doll that is my sister.

More darkness pours into her, but this time it’s coming from the night all around us. Before my very eyes, she transforms—her sallow skin taking on a pink hue, the bruises under her eyes disappearing, cheeks plumper. Is he... He’s healing the damage the ghost did?

I can’t help the relief that wells up inside me, even if resentment burns that the reason I’m feeling it is because of Eidolon. Tabra is going to live. That’s something.

But a new realization dawns on the heels of that one.

*This* is what a power looks like after you’ve had centuries to learn it and pass your knowledge onto the next in line. We’ll never defeat this bastard.

A white-blue glow illuminates the night in a brilliant flash, and Eidolon is blown through the air. My vision clears to find the king across the landing, on the stone stairs that lead into the palace, on his hands and knees, charred and smoking, the scents of burning air and flesh sharp in my nose.

I snap my gaze to Hakan, lightning dancing over his body in a bubble, scorching the grass under his feet and keeping everyone else away, hands raised to do it again.

I pick out Achlys’s face from the crowd. She’s running through the fighting, trying to get to Tabra. Over her shoulder, a Tropikan soldier comes at her with a spear in hand, deadly intent in his eyes.

Before I can open my mouth to yell at her, warn her, Tziah tackles him from the side. In a vicious series of rapid strikes, she sinks a wickedly carved knife into every soft spot not covered by armor that she can find. Kneeling over him like a predator over a kill, she wipes the blade on her blood-spattered clothes, and looks up. Not at Achlys but at me.

Which is when I see him.

Cain is right behind her, a gash across his forehead pouring blood into one eye. Our gazes clash across the field of fighting, and I realize what he's doing.

He's coming to help me.

Five soldiers come at Cain in unison. He spins to face them, but five are too many, even with his fighting skills.

A memory hits with such force I can see the colors, feel the sand, smell the crisp night air. A boy offering his hand and a smile to me as I lay against the base of a lone palm tree, lost in the desert.

My best friend, who has been my hero ever since.

Just as I think he's going to go down, his father and Horus reach his side, standing shoulder to shoulder with him. With a deftness and speed that is an art, they engage.

They aren't giving up. Neither will I.

A thundering blast of sound has the king jerking his gaze to the sky. Even in the dark, Bene's massive form casts a shadow as he dives for the king, but Eidolon raises a hand, and a wall of darkness—more like a dome—comes over the four of us. Bene hits it with bone-staggering impact, but nothing happens. The dome doesn't budge, blocking out not only Bene but everyone on the ground, too.

With a satisfied smile, Eidolon looks now to...me.

The Shadows controlling Reven drag me to Eidolon's side, but I'm not focused on them. Instead, I'm focused on my own shadows and light. On *my* bond. On my *mate*. We are stronger together. I have to believe that.

Hoping with everything I am that I'm doing this right, I send my shadows—the part of me that is Reven—searching. Sneaking inside his being through our bond, like threading a needle. I reach out a hand in the darkness, waiting for him to take it.

"Not all is lost," the Shadow controlling Reven says to his maker, voice a rumble in my ear.

The king huffs a bitter laugh. "Not even death has been able to stop us." He lifts his gaze and looks over my head, right at Reven. At Shadow. "We'll find another way."

"After five hundred years?" I sneer, even as I'm trying to reach my mate. I tip my head and offer a sarcastically concerned look. "Aren't you tired of that kind of failure?"

Eidolon's expression sours, lip curling.

Shadow's grip clamps tighter around me, digging into my flesh, and Reven still hasn't answered me. Not even a hint that he's there.

"She's right," the king murmurs. "We need more time."

Now he's looking at Reven, speculation in his narrowed gaze. I don't have to guess what he's thinking. It's written plainly across his familiar features. He wants his Shadows back.

*Find me, I will Reven. I'm here.*

"I'll take her now," he says to Shadow.

Reven's arms leave me as he walks away, only to be replaced by a rope of shadow that won't let me move any more than being held by him did. My blood pumps hard through me, because I already know what's coming.

My search for my mate in the darkness tumbles into sheer panic.

Again, Eidolon lifts his hands. In the light that comes from them, I can see the sweat dripping down his face, the clamminess to his skin. He can't have much left in him.

It starts slowly at first. A layer of black mist pulls away from Reven's features but remains in the shape of him at the same time. It lifts from his body, like the king is drawing it out, toward himself.

"Wait!" I cry out.

Eidolon raises his eyebrows, but the mist continues toward the king.

"Take your other Shadows and leave me Reven. He'll only fight you from within. You know it."

The process seems to still, the stretched-out misty forms hanging between them like parchment-thin dolls on a string. "Don't worry," one of the Shadows says. "We can control *him*."

*No. No. No.*

I frantically cast around for Reven, desperation rising like dunes blown against our palace walls in a storm, but he's still not there.

There's only one thing of value I have left to trade.

The king can't free the goddesses. Not yet. I know that much, so that makes what I'm about to try safer. I'm trying to convince myself that's true. Because for my soulbound mate, it turns out I would do anything.

"I found one of the amulets." The words tumble from my lips.

Eidolon's face loses that sneer, his features and eyes sharpening with visible interest. He's listening.

"I will give it to you." He takes a single menacing step forward, and I know that I have him. "But only if you leave me Reven."

We stare at each other, the king's Shadows suspended between us.

I'm still reaching for Reven, but he hasn't found me. This is our last chance. "Swear on your mother's soul."

Eidolon doesn't hesitate. "I swear it."

The king flicks a hand, and suddenly I can feel him again, returned to me in an instant. Reven is staring at me, his turquoise eyes brilliant and true, the Shadows no longer in control of his body.

"Don't do this," he says.

I want to reach for him, but I'm still bound. "I have to. I can't lose you." I look at Eidolon. "I need my hand."

The shadow holding me loosens enough to work one out. I slip the amulet over my head and offer it to the king.

Darkness lifts the amulet from my fingertips, but the second Eidolon has it within his grasp, Reven falls to the ground with a groan, convulsing.

Wait. This isn't right.

I struggle against my bindings. "What are you doing?" I yell. "You swore!"

Eidolon gives me a look as cold as Tyndra's icebergs. "I didn't say I'd leave him *alive*."

We've lost. I see the truth in Reven's eyes, the turquoise turning duller with each passing second. There's only one option left, and I gave up my amulet for nothing.

The air feels like razor blades carving a path down my throat to my heart, where they slice until I'm bleeding inside. An agony of heartbreak, of defeat, threatens to crush me. Pulverize me until there's nothing left.

"*I have to go with him.*" Reven's voice is so weak, fading in my head.

"No," I plead through our bond.

Through our connection, the swell of determination that comes from him as he stares at me is as strong as a storm. I *feel* the moment his decision is made, and yet, I think he'd already decided this. Because there's an acceptance in him that is just as strong. Like this was inevitable.

"*Did you know?*" I ask.

His expression changes to the same determined, immovable look he had the night he stole me from the palace, thinking I was Tabra.

"*Find me in the afterlife, princess.*"

Anguish flays my heart. He knew.

"Take me," Reven demands of the king. "I know where the other amulets

are. All of them. No one can reach them without me.”

He’s played the only card he has left, too.

Eidolon’s greed twists his face until I don’t even recognize Reven in his features anymore. “Done.”

Another flick of Eidolon’s wrist, and a dark mist rises off Reven, being drawn toward the king again. With a low groan, Reven forces himself to his hands and knees, then to his feet. He walks toward me, one laborious step at a time, like he’s struggling against the forces dragging at him, stretching out his shadow behind him.

Pinned by the king’s hold on me, all I can do is watch in horror as he fights. On a shout of twisted pain that I can feel echo throughout my own body, he finally reaches me.

Shaking with the effort, his hands wind into my hair. Goddess, he still *feels* whole. “I love you,” he says, then places his lips over mine, mouth to mouth, heart to heart.

But he starts to fade. He’s still kissing me as he goes, and every second is torture.

I can hardly feel him now, his touch a mere feather of sensation.

But what he does through that wispy touch...

My eyes go wide. He looks straight back at me, even as he kisses me. Vaguely, I’m aware of the purple glow brightening all around us.

Through our kiss, he forces his darkness into me.

“*You are strong enough to keep them,*” his voice whispers through our connection. “*I know it. I’ve seen it.*”

*No!* I want to scream it.

Behind Reven, Eidolon moans long and low, face pale and haggard with the effort, and I feel the tremble of his waning power as it hits Reven, too. The dome of shadow falls. I know because the cacophony of battle erupts all around us again and Bene gives another blast of challenge.

And I think maybe, for one ridiculous, hopeful moment, that *maybe* we have a chance to stop him now. The king used too much of his power trying to release his goddess mother.

“*Meren,*” Reven whispers in my mind.

The remnants of Reven I can feel disappear like a snuffed-out candle. Gone. Dead or buried, I don’t know which—sucked inside the king.

Eidolon falls to his knees, visibly drained, even sickly with it, his entire body shaking and covered in sweat. He stares at me for half a heartbeat

before he glances over my shoulder. I know my friends are coming for me. His face contorts with rage, and I know why.

*I have his Shadows now.*

“This isn’t over,” he says.

Then darkness consumes him, and he’s gone, taking Reven with him.



It All Goes  
Dark

There is a moment after terrible loss when everything goes quiet inside and around you. As if the entire world is taking a breath for what comes next. Bracing.

And it's into that hollow numbness that you say something like "what?" or "no" or "that's impossible." Not because you didn't hear it or see it, and not because you think this new reality is not true. You know it's true.

It's to cling onto that last moment of peace. Because when the quiet fades, what comes after is pain.

Except I don't get that moment. I don't get to brace.

Reven gave me Eidolon's Shadows. They are inside me now, clawing at my insides. Rioting within the new prison that is my body.

With Eidolon no longer here binding me with shadow, I drop to my knees beside Tabra's still form. I don't know why he didn't take her, too, but the chaotic pain of what just happened to Reven and now the Shadows within me flood my mind and body too much to do more than notice.

I curl in on myself, trying to contain the Shadows as they press outward, stretching my skin and twisting my insides. I clap my hands over my ears and my mouth like that could muffle the sound of them or keep me from vomiting the fury of them back up.

I squeeze my eyes shut and try to hold on to the last moment with Reven. He said I'm strong enough.

Only, I don't think he was right, because this...*this* is going to rip me to shreds. I don't hold power over shadow—just a curse that links me to Eidolon that I haven't figured out how to use. That's it. That's all. They're going to consume me before I can stop them.

I whimper and draw my knees tighter to my chest. I can't do this without him. Doesn't he know that he is the source of any strength I have? Maybe not. I never told him. There wasn't time. The one thing we never had was time. I can't do this. I can't...

*Heavens help me.*

The pain is coming.

Not from the king's Shadows but from me. He's gone. Reven's gone.

I rock, but it's not enough to hold back the anguish, and a keening wail rises from within until it bursts from my lips, drowning out the yells of the Shadows and the fighting still happening all around me.

And it keeps coming in one long shout. It pours out of me like sand out of a broken hourglass. I think maybe it will never stop. The pain is so much a part of me, even my skin hurts, my scalp, my eyes, my insides.

*He's gone.*

He said he always knew it would come to this. So all this time, he was planning to sacrifice himself?

So many moments pile up in my head. Little things he said. Was this part of why he tried to stay away from me? To save me the pain of this moment? *Oh goddess...our bonding.* He was so happy. Was that because he was ensuring that after he did this, he'd still be able to find me again in another life? Because of how hard I pushed him to stay with me?

Guilt spills over the wave of loss, slamming through me hard. *I can't do this. I can't. I can't...*

*"Meren,"* a voice whispers in my head. *"Meren, stop."*

It's jarring mostly because it's a single voice in the midst of the chaos of the Shadows inside me. I catch my breath at the sound, going still. That was *his* voice. Reven's. Velvet and iron.

But...not.

"Don't speak to me," I whisper. An order. I can't stand it.

The cruelest trick of all is to hear him when it's *not* him.

Eidolon's Shadows quiet. Did they actually listen?

I gather myself, putting the imperious command of my grandmother into every syllable I utter. "Do not move. Do not speak. I don't want to know you're there. *Ever.*"

Not a sound.

The loss is still there, hurting in every part of me so much I'm not sure I can move or breathe right, but at least I can grieve in silence.

Only, it's not silent.

Eidolon may be gone—hopefully too weak to return until I can get us to safety—but the battle rages on. A downdraft of wind is the only warning I get. Bene lands right on top of me, wings spread wide, protecting me like a bird of prey covers a kill.

In a small way, my mind acknowledges that, earlier, he must've flown to the ocean to get sand to grow with, but even that thought barely makes a dent in the hollowness that I am becoming. A fresh wave of guilt crashes over me.

I betrayed Bene.

He looks at me. If he's speaking... "I can't hear you anymore. I gave Aryd to Eidolon." Like a naive little girl.

He doesn't trample me to death immediately, and I kind of hoped he would. Instead, he leans down and noses at me gently. I think that might be way worse than if he tried to kill me while I lay here. "Don't you hate me?"

"Meren!" Cain skids to a stop in front of me. The sight of my friend's familiar face covered in blood, sweat, and grime, his dark eyes a well of concern for me, destroys all that's left of me.

Despair crashes through the numb and the pain. "He's gone," I choke out. "Reven...Eidolon... They rejoined. And the king has my amulet. It's over."

Cain's face falls, and he runs a hand over my hair once. That sympathy is there and gone in a heartbeat as he grabs me by the shoulders and hauls me up, jaw hard and stare dogged. He gives me a little shake and points at the fray. "We need you, Meren. We're *still* fighting."

This isn't over for us, but I can't seem to force myself to care.

"You can't save him if you're dead!"

Save him? Save Reven? Emotion rolls through me like thunder trampling through the sky. "Save him how? I don't even know where to start."

And Eidolon's Shadows are inside me. Reven left me here with pieces of evil in me. I told him to go. More guilt pounds away at me.

Cain's lips flatten, and I can tell he wants to shake me again, probably harder, but he doesn't. "You've never backed down from anything in your life. Not from Pella. Not from my father. Not in the Shadowwood with those barbarians. Not from a Devourer. Not from a goddess-damned Shadowraith. Don't you *dare* do it now."

"I—" I shake my head.

"Damn you. Help the rest of the people you care about who are still trying to get out of this alive. Get us the hells out of here so we can help you go after Reven."

## All Is Lost

“*Fight*,” Reven’s voice whispers in my head.

But it has to be the king’s Shadows, because Reven is in Eidolon.

“Shut up,” I mutter.

“*Be strong, Meren.*”

Goddess, it sounds so much like him.

My heart gives a terrifying thump of resolve.

I stare at Cain. Beyond him, Pella stands with her back to us, ready to tear into anything that comes close. Somewhere across the field is Vos, who has frozen himself twice now rather than hurt someone he loves. I think of Achlys fighting to get to Tabra. Of Hakan zapping Vos to keep Pella safe. Tziah throwing herself into a hoard of Flesh Reapers for Cain.

I have people I care about here. People I love.

And this isn’t over.

Cain must see the change in my face. “Good,” he says. “Now get us the fuck out of here.”

The Tropikan forces are on all sides of us now, encircling us, forcing us together. Just like in the Shadowwood. But there’s one huge difference—Reven isn’t here to buy me time to build a portal.

Seven hells. This isn’t going to work.

“Meren, drop!”

At Horus’s shout, I drop to my stomach and a spear clanks against the stone steps not a foot from me. I shoot back to my feet just in time to see Horus take the hilt of a sword to his temple. He goes limp, dropping to the ground.

I grit my teeth. “Pella!”

She takes off, slicing his attacker’s neck from behind, then standing guard over Horus’s body like a mother lioness.

Another shout. I whirl around in time to see the zariph take a sword to the leg. He shoves a dagger up under his assailant’s jaw and twists, but he falls with him, pinned under the soldier’s weight.

“Father!” Pella cries out.

The zaripha goes down with a cry, a soldier tackling her from behind. Her hand claws at the dirt as she tries to wriggle free, reaching for the zariph, who's a body length away. He groans her name and reaches back. But there are more soldiers there to drag them apart. So many more.

We're surrounded. We're going to lose.

A terrible idea bubbles up. One that might kill us all. One Reven gave me. Ironically, the reason he kidnapped me in the first place—the reason he originally thought Eidolon wanted the princess he knew had a power over sand.

Desperation leads to desperate acts. It's this or we're all dead. The hells with that.

Cain must read the decision on my face. "What do you need?"

There's a reason this man was my childhood hero.

"Get ready to direct water. A lot of it." I hope to every goddess and the heavens and every hell that we're both ready for what I'm about to try to do.

His frown is immediate. "What water?"

I raise my hands, already glowing golden. "Watch the cliffs."

Eyes closed, I picture the dominion. The lands are below sea level, and the only thing keeping the oceans out are the massive walls of stone that rise up around the borders.

How much sand do I have to move to collapse the portion of the wall directly behind the palace?

I feel for it, picture it in my head, the ground underneath this part of the dominion. My hands brighten, the glow visible even through my eyelids as I find what I'm looking for down a thousand leagues. More sand than my home dominion. I start moving it, pulling it into the surrounding ocean, out from under the mass of the dominion itself. And I pray Cain can do what I'm about to make him do.

"Meren?" Cain's voice is full of doubt and questions, because nothing is happening.

"Wait for it," I say through gritted teeth.

*Come on. I need to move more. Faster.*

A telltale whistle of sound shoots right by my face. An arrow.

"Keep them off her!" I hear Cain yell.

The vague sounds of people gathering around us barely penetrate my concentration. I picture the terravores of my homeland. Those massive shovels formed by the bony plate atop their heads, rearranging the entire

landscape at their whim. I create a huge one in my mind that burrows under this side of Tropikis, shoving the sand out from under this part of it. I only need to sink one part of the wall a little bit.

I know it's working, because it gets harder. So hard. I'm shaking and sweating with the effort.

*Faster. Faster.*

The ground trembles beneath me.

Not enough.

I imagine a hundred giant terravores shoveling together.

The tremble becomes a quake that slows the fighting. The din around me drops to a quiet rumble. I push my hundred terravores harder, and the quake becomes a violent shaking that knocks me to my knees.

"Watch the cliffs," I gasp to Cain. I'm not sure if I can keep this up.

One more shove and I drop to my hands and knees, panting hard, and look up.

"Holy hells!" Cain's exclamation is awe.

Water, so much water, rises like a white-tipped mountain over the top of the cliff. For a moment, I think I see the seven heads of the Devourer called the Revenant in the ocean beyond. Then the massive wave crashes down into Tropikis. Too much water to be reabsorbed by the cliffs. I can see the way the mighty trees fall in its wake, and I regret all the animals in its path.

"Aim it at the enemy!" I yell. "Try to keep it off the city!" I won't kill innocent people if I don't have to. Even the Flesh Reapers. Luckily, the palace is closest to the cliffs directly behind it. That will help.

Cain's hands are already brilliant, too bright to look at. But the water is coming in a massive wave, fast and hard. It barrels through the jungle that covers the sides of the cliffs with no control.

Cain yells as he wills the water higher. The wave rises up over the trees, but it's coming right at us. A massive moving wall of death that will decimate whatever it hits.

"As soon as you take out the soldiers, force it back to the ocean." I lift my own hands again, even though my arms feel like overcooked noodles. Dead weight.

"The water will just keep coming," Cain says.

"No," I grit out. "It won't."

Time to build the cliffs back up. Now my imaginary terravores are plowing that sand from the bottom of the ocean, driving it, wedging it back under the

dominion, packing it hard. *I'm* pushing them. Hundreds of them.

With no warning, I pitch forward and vomit from the effort.

Achlys is suddenly at my side. "Get up. It's not finished." With her help, I force myself shakily to my feet and keep going. I can't stop. The water is still coming. Arms back up with her help, I keep shoveling sand, hoping it's working.

The roar of the wave coming for us grows louder and louder, and I try not to let fear make me run away in terror. Because that's what instinct is gnawing at me to do.

"Hold on!" Cain shouts.

The water blocks out the moons for a single, ominous moment before it crests the palace walls with a roar to wake the dead, louder even than the Whirlpool. It hits the ground and fills up the palace courtyard, but Cain has it. The wave parts in the courtyard, circling around our people gathered at the center, like there's an invisible barrier protecting us, only to crash into itself on the other side, surrounding us in a torrent.

Those of our enemies mixed in among my people are the only ones safe from the torrent that takes out their fellow soldiers. They stand, gaping and damned lucky. No way could any of King Panqui's people struck by the waters have survived that.

The violence of it is too much.

But I'm not done. I take back up my own power that I lost hold of in the wake of Cain's wave. I keep pushing the dominion up, filling in the gaps in that cliff face as fast as I can. At the same time, Cain pushes the water back.

The thundering of the water grows fainter as we work in tandem. He pushes it back as I build up. Black spots dance in front of my eyes until I can hardly see. The last of the water finally goes over the cliff edge and disappears. But I keep working the land up. Building and building so that the ocean isn't a threat.

I don't stop until those black spots threaten to take my vision completely.

Until Achlys lets go. Until Cain is in front of me, his face in mine. "Stop," I think he says. I can't really hear him. "Meren, you can stop."

I can?

I pause, staring over his head at the cliffs illuminated in moonlight.

By Nova... It worked.

## Domina

My body goes wobbly, and I drop to the ground, or more like collapse. I manage to drape my arms over my updrawn legs, panting hard, stomach still heaving. I lay my cheek on my knee. Beside me, Cain flops to his back with a grunt.

“Let’s never do that again,” he groans.

“Agreed,” I manage between harsh breaths.

With a trumpet of sound, Bene lands in the courtyard, wings spread wide, standing between where I am and where the Tropikan soldiers who survived what Cain and I did are being gathered in a group with the wall at their back.

As if that call wakes her up, Achlys gives a small, helpless sound. “Tabra.” The way my head is angled, I can see how she drops to her knees and pulls my sister’s head into her lap.

“Is she...?” Cain can’t even finish the question.

“She’s alive,” Achlys says without lifting her gaze. “I think she’s...”

She doesn’t say healed, but that’s what she is. Because Eidolon fixed her insides. Eidolon still needs her. I can’t work up the will to tell them right now.

Pella arrives next, crouching beside Cain, Hakan standing right behind her. Crossing his arms like a watchful bodyguard, he gives me a single silent nod. Pella puts a flattened hand over her brother’s heart—a gesture among the Wanderers of the truest caring. I expect something like “What the hells were you thinking?” to come out of her mouth. Instead, she takes a shuddering breath. Is she...crying? “Are you okay?” she asks him softly.

Cain pats her hand. “I’ll need to rest for a month after that. But...yeah.”

Not moving away from him, she looks at me, deep brown eyes not hard but soft for once as she scans me from head to toe. Another breath punches from her like she’s actually relieved I’m in one piece. Then she ruins the moment. “You know, for a pampered princess, you have a certain gift for violence.”

“I’m not the one dripping in blood,” I point out. She glances down, eyebrows flying up likes she’s surprised that I’m right.

Zariph Cainis, held up between Ledenon and a now freed Magda, hobbles



over to stare down at us. “I’ve never seen anything like that.”

The way he’s looking around us, the satisfaction and pride on his face, makes me lift my head only to blanch at the sight of hundreds of bodies piled at the main gates of the palace, where the water must’ve pushed them.

“I killed them.” I don’t realize I said it out loud until Cain’s hand lands on my booted foot.

“No.” Cain’s voice is hard, full of conviction. “King Panqui sent them into battle for an ally he should never have trusted. It was us or them. You did what you had to.”

The thing is, I know he’s right. Knowing doesn’t lift the awful weight of guilt—more guilt. I have so many forms of it—trying to crush me to dust. I’m also horribly aware that under the guilt and horror, the pain of losing Reven and everything else hovers at my edges, waiting for the right moment to take my legs out from under me. To shatter me. Hells...the Shadows I now carry could bury my soul inside my own body and take control at any second.

Only, they’re still quiet.

So why do I hear screaming—not inside but outside—as if the battle is still raging? I frown, then realize what those gruesome sounds are. The Flesh Reapers are still tearing the city apart.

Which means...Vos.

I spin around and search for where I saw him last. Sure enough, he’s still frozen in a tomb of his own making, standing like a statue erected to Tyndra at the other end of the courtyard. Tziah is standing beside him, arms crossed. I don’t have to be close to tell she’s ready to fight anyone who even tries to come near him.

*Nova help us.* Tonight is like a nightmare that will never end.

I’m tired. So tired. I drop my chin to my knees, my head too heavy to keep up. I don’t want to do this anymore. Be this anymore. I close my eyes. Maybe someone else will make all the decisions and deal with this aftermath.

“Domina?” Horus’s voice is hushed, and I open my eyes to find him standing at my side. In a sweeping movement, he drops to one knee, a fist over his heart. “My queen.”

I open my mouth on a protest. I am *not* the queen. Tabra is.

Except...

The zariph suddenly shakily drops to one knee with the same gesture. “My queen.”

What is happening?

Magda and Ledenon drop next. Same gesture. Same words. Then Pella and Hakan.

The surviving Wanderers and Vanished surrounding us follow suit in a wave that ripples outward from where I still sit in a heap.

Cain pushes to his knees to do the same.

I glance past him to where Omma's body lies—Omma, of all people, who knew better than anyone in Nova what I am and what I'm not. What would she think of this?

Achlys watches all this until every last soul in this courtyard, except the few Tropikan soldiers who survived, is kneeling for me.

For *me*. For the wrong girl.

Achlys gives Tabra a long, sad look before her shoulders move up and down on a deep breath. Then she, too, gets to her knees, facing me, fist over her heart and gaze steady and unwavering. "My queen."

No. Absolutely not. I'm not staging a coup while my sister, the rightful queen, is unconscious. I'm not ruling. Ever. I'm a stopgap. That's it. A temporary bandage. A royal nobody.

Bene rears back on his massive hind legs, wings spread wide, and trumpets loudly for all to hear, then drops to all fours only to bend one foreleg under, going into a deep bow. I can't hear him because I don't have Aryd's amulet around my neck, but I don't have to.

A Devourer is bowing to me. The consort of my goddess who should hate me for sacrificing her is bowing to me.

Cain peeks up at me, eyes twinkling. We've known each other most of our lives. Of course he knows what I'm thinking. Feeling. When he winks, my chest expands with a painful inhalation. I'm definitely not ready for this. I don't want to do this. Especially not without Reven. But I'm not alone. Is that why he pushed me so hard to see it?

Cain sobers, the boy who used to tease me becoming the warrior he is now. "We can't stay here, my queen."

A spark of purpose ignites inside me, fed by the presence of my friends, my family, and the absolute certainty that Reven would want me to keep going. For them. For him. I don't know how I will, but I'll spend every last breath in this life and every life after this trying to free him.

But after. Right now, I don't get time to wallow or wait or even rest. That will have to come later. I need to get off my ass.

"We're not leaving without Vos."

I guess I am doing this.

Horus lifts his head, gaze steady—my guard, my advisor, and my friend. “We need to get far from here and hide. Fast. Before the entire dominion of Tropikis comes down on our heads for what happened here tonight. Somewhere Eidolon would never think to look.”

I hold out a hand to Horus, who helps me up, exhaustion dragging at me with every move. But I’m up. I look out over those still bowed, their heads now lifted, listening for my decision. For my order.

I have people to protect. I have a bondmate to save. I have a king to destroy.

Starting with getting us all to safety. But where? We can’t go to any of the other monarchs for help or sanctuary. Not after Eidolon found us in Wildernyss. Not after King Panqui’s deception. And we can’t go back to our desert lands, because we’ve already been found there.

So where do we go?

A voice whispers inside me. A voice that is not mine and is not my bondmate’s. A voice that is part of the evil now trapped within my body. Deep and velvety...and insidious. “*You can run, little girl. You can try to hide. But there’s nowhere you can go that Eidolon won’t find you.*”

The me before Reven would have quaked in my boots. But I’m done being frightened of shadows and ghosts. I have the upper hand because I have Eidolon’s Shadows. I have Tabra. I have a Devourer. I have more amulets than the king. I have a curse giving me control over *his* power—I just have to figure out how to use it.

More than that, I am the bondmate of the Shadowraith trapped inside him, fighting him.

And I am the fucking *queen*.

I smile even as I mentally snarl at the things inside me. “*I hope he damn well comes for me.*”

When he does, I’ll be ready.

# Acknowledgments

Dear Reader,

Meren's and Reven's story started with a single kernel of an idea. An obscure Hans Christian Anderson fairytale about a man who shed his shadow, and when the shadow turned real, he took over the man's life. I read that and knew I had both my hero and my villain. Of course, I needed to make the heroine equally interesting! Now, as I've continued their story, I've had so much fun on this journey with Meren and Reven, exploring the world, and getting to know all the other characters. I hope you have too!

If you have a free second, please think about leaving a review. Also, I love to connect with my readers, so I hope you'll drop by on any of my social media!

I thank God every single day for a life where I get to live my dream of being a writer, and I soak up every single step of this journey with joy and gratitude.

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Finally, to my own swoon-worthy hero, and to our beautiful kids: You are the lights of my life.

All the love,  
Abigail Owen

P.S. If you would like to follow me to make sure you don't miss out on announcements and all the fun I like to have with readers and friends online,

you can find links to all my social media on my website:  
[www.abigailowen.com](http://www.abigailowen.com)!

## About the Author

Multi-award-winning author Abigail Owen writes adult paranormal romance and upper YA/NA fantasy romance. She loves plots that move hot and fast, feisty heroines with sass, heroes with heart, a dash of snark, and oodles of HEAs! Other titles include wife, mother, Star Wars geek, ex-competitive skydiver, spreadsheet lover, eMBA, organizational guru, Texan, Aggie, and chocoholic. Abigail currently lives in Austin, Texas, with her own swoon-worthy hero and their happily-ever-after family.

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