

K D F R A S E R

BOUND  
BY  
CHANCE

THE FATE BOUND SAGA  
BOOK I

*For my Forever and Always. You kept me sane through  
this whole process. Both literally and figuratively.*

*For Mandi for being my biggest cheerleader*

*And for my sugar and my spice.*

*I love you guys.*

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# *INTRODUCTION*

If you're reading this, you've found yourself in possession of a dark fantasy why choose romance novel. I hope that's what you wanted. If not, you can turn back now.

If you have any triggers, I suggest you read the page immediately after this one. If you don't want to see a list of TWs, skip over it.

While this book isn't pitch black, it does have some fairly dark themes, so please read responsibly.

Disclaimer: This is a work of fiction. The opinions of the characters are not the opinions of the author.

# *PRONUNCIATION GUIDE*

Arden: Are-den

Zorvan: Zor-ven

Jarrah: Jar-uh

Livarius: Liv-air-ee-us

Tavin: Tay-vin

Lysander: Lie-san-der

Emyth: Em-ith

Iona: Eye-own-uh

Sangaris: Sang-are-iss

Solardin: Sol-are-din

Kildara: Kill-darr-uh

Cyndair: Sin-dare

Othorion: Oh-thor-ee-on

Nuvian: New-vee-en

Osania: Oh-sawn-ya

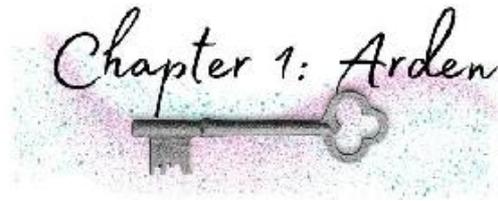
Naevys: Nay-viss

# *TRIGGER WARNINGS*

This book contains the following elements. Please check over this list if there's anything that could send you into a spiral. Reading should be fun. Not traumatizing.

Noncon, Dubcon, Parental death, Grandparent death, Body Betrayal, Attempted Murder, Murder, Violence, Toxic Relationships, Aggression between the FMC and the MMCs, Disordered Eating, Body Image Issues, Discussions About Pregnancy (including forced pregnancy), Cheating, Lying Boyfriends, Mention of Maternal Demise (while pregnant and during labor), Mention of a History of Drug Use, Kidnapping, Stalking, Mention of Child Death, Mention of Sex Trafficking/Slavery, Knife Play, Breath Play, AND OTHERS.

## Chapter 1: Arden



### CHAPTER 1: ARDEN

**E**arly June is my favorite time of year. For most of the afternoon I've been perched on a park bench, reading an epic fantasy romance novel. My e-reader is housed in a protective case sporting vibrant sunflowers; my favorite flowers.

Where I live in the northeastern part of the United States, it's sunny and warm. Which, in my opinion, is the perfect temperature for shorts and a t-shirt—my favorite attire when I'm not meeting with clients.

I take a sip of my iced coffee and allow myself to savor the sweetness of the caramel. I close my eyes and release a contented sigh before returning to my book. I am just getting to an intense fight scene in my romance novel that has been building for a couple of chapters. The fae in a neighboring kingdom has challenged the hero for his mate. I scan the pages ahead to see how long it'll take for the current chapter to conclude. There are a number of tasks I need to accomplish at home, and if I start the scene, I'll get invested.

While I am considering my options, a tennis ball flies by on the lawn ahead of me with a sweet golden retriever in pursuit. My fiancé, Todd, and I have been discussing getting a puppy soon, but it never seems like the right time. He's always on work trips, or has to help his parents with a project. Every time I bring it up, he comes up with another excuse about why we shouldn't.

He's on a work trip now, and won't be home until tomorrow afternoon. With so little time left before we leave for vacation, it makes the most sense for me to go home and finish packing. I tuck my e-reader away in my backpack. I'll just save the climax of the book for our drive to the beach.

I'm staring at my phone, checking my emails, when I collide with a wall of solid muscle. A small squeak escapes me as I drink in the tall man with bright blue eyes and dark hair who is now staring down at me with a cheshire grin. I inhale sharply at his striking features. The scent of bergamot and cinnamon assaults my senses.

His hair falls in that way that looks messy, but odds are he spent way too much time making it look that way. He's wearing workout clothes; black pants and a once white shirt that's covered in my—now smashed—iced coffee.

“Oh! I didn't see you there. I am so sorry!” I pull a napkin from my pocket and try in vain to clean the stain from his very strong abs. *Stop it, Arden.* I mentally scold myself as a blush creeps into my cheeks.

He firmly grabs my hand which sends an unusual pulse of energy through me, causing my heart to stutter when I realize how close he's standing, “It's fine. It's just a jogging shirt. I shouldn't have sneaked up on you like that. I just saw you sitting here while I was on my run, and wanted to know if you would like to have a drink with me tonight.”

He is a gorgeous man, and his smile is disarming. His sharp features all fit together just right. Towering over my five foot ten frame, he has to be at least six foot seven. Even if he hadn't said so, he has ‘runner’ written all over his body.

My face feels flushed under his intense stare and I realize that he's waiting for an answer to his proposition. “Oh, I, uh...I appreciate the offer, but I'm actually engaged. I was just on my way home to do some laundry because we-me and my fiancé that is-are going to the beach this weekend, and I just, uh...I'm rambling.”

“Oh, that's too bad. Though I should have known.” He pouts for a second. “You're a stunning woman.”

My face turns an even brighter shade of red as I mutter “thank you.” I wait for him to move out of my way so I can leave.

He doesn't move.

I clear my throat. "Well, I guess I'll just..." I trail off as I skirt around him.

He reaches out and grabs my hand again, "Let me give you my number, in case you find yourself single any time soon."

There it is, the audacity you find in most attractive cisgendered men. "No thank you," I say firmly as I try to pull my hand away from his, "I really need to go."

His grip tightens to the point of being painful, "I feel like you might regret that choice." His voice is cold and he smirks at me with a rage in his eyes.

Fear flutters through my chest. I glance around the park to see if anyone is watching. The guy with the dog has left. There is no one else in sight.

"Let go," I demand. My voice is not as strong as I would like. When he doesn't relent, I say it again more assertively, "Let go, or I'll scream."

He releases me and holds both hands up in surrender. "No need to be dramatic, Princess. We were just having a conversation."

"Psycho," I mutter as I briskly walk away.

"You have no idea," he retorts with a dark smile as he watches me walk away.

It's only a quarter mile from the park to the house I share with Todd. I walk with purpose following my encounter with the dark-haired stranger. Despite him walking in the opposite direction from me, I can't shake the feeling that someone is watching me.

When I get home, I lock the door behind me and set the alarm. Then glance out the windows before pulling all of the curtains closed. I toss my bag and keys onto the kitchen counter, and I send a text to Todd.

**June 10 4:06 PM**

**Arden: I had a weird encounter at the park today. Tell you about it later. For now I'm keeping the security alarm on.**

I grab our luggage from the guest room in the finished basement, drag it upstairs, and begin packing. Todd and I have been together since freshman year of undergrad, and I know him well enough to pack for him. Our relationship isn't terribly exciting, but after ten years, it is comfortable. He is a decent man who makes a good living as an architect. Unfortunately, that means he has to travel a lot. There isn't a huge demand for his kind of work in the suburbs.

By the time I finish packing it's around dinner time. We don't have much food in the house since we'll be gone for over a week. I go downstairs to get my wallet so that I can order some take out. When I reach the kitchen counter, I discover my backpack is missing.

I shake my head and search around the kitchen and the foyer of the house. I am a creature of habit and there is no way I put my bag anywhere except for the kitchen counter, or by the coat rack in the front hall. Just in case I had been too shaken up from the park to think clearly, I check downstairs in the guest bedroom. It's not there either. I head back up to our bedroom to look for it.

When I turn on the light, my heart leaps in my chest. Laying on my side of the bed is a single sunflower. And my backpack.

I stare at my bed in disbelief. Even if I *had* left my backpack there, I didn't bring a flower into the bedroom. While I'm trying to figure out what happened, a floorboard creaks in the hallway. I whip around and chuck the only projectile within reach at the doorway—my phone.

“Arden, what the fuck?” Todd's frantic voice cuts through the air as my phone narrowly misses his face and hits the wall with a *thud*.

“Todd? Jesus Christ, what are you doing back already?” I half shout, placing my hand over my wildly beating heart.

“What do you mean? It’s Friday.”

“What? No it’s not. It’s Thursday. I...” I look at my smart watch.

### **Friday, June 11th, 7 p.m.**

That isn’t possible. I had a ten a.m. client scheduled for this morning that I wouldn’t have missed. I walk past Todd and grab my phone off the hallway floor. Thankfully, even though the glass screen protector is shattered, the screen itself is fine. I pull up my text message log.

The last text I had sent was the one about the alarm that I had sent to Todd. It was sent at 4:06 p.m. on Thursday. After that I had several incoming texts from Todd.

**June 10 5:07 PM**

**Todd: I’ll call after this meeting and u can tell me about it.**

**June 10 6:23 PM**

**Todd: Why didn’t u pick up ur phone?**

**June 10 8:14 PM**

**Todd: I’m guessing you fell asleep. Call me tomorrow.**

**June 11 12:01 PM**

**Todd: Y aren’t u answering?**

**Todd: Please pick up**

**June 11 5:17 PM**

**Todd: Plane just landed. Be home in a couple hours.**

Then I check my missed calls. I have several from Todd, two from Becca, and a few from the client I missed this morning.

Becca had recommended that client to me since they're a law client of hers. *She's going to kill me.*

I shove past Todd into the bedroom. It's exactly how it looked twenty minutes ago before the search for my backpack. The suitcases are packed at the foot of the made bed. The closet door is still open. The only thing out of place is the sunflower and my backpack.

Todd gives me a curious look, "What is going on with you? Why haven't you texted or called me back since yesterday afternoon?"

"I don't understand," I say quietly as I sit down on the bed in a confused daze.

"What happened to your wrist?"

I spare a glance at my wrist in confusion. There is a bruise circling it, and a fairly large cut. It's in the same spot that the man in the park had grabbed me. I start to feel sick. I had felt like someone was watching me the entire way home, but after I got inside everything felt normal.

"Arden? Will you please talk to me? Where did that sunflower come from?"

"It's not from you?" I ask. "Once I realized you were home, I assumed you left it there."

"I didn't put it there," he says.

"I feel like I'm going insane," I say absently while I replay the last few hours in my head trying to figure out where the missing twenty-four hours went.

"If you're sleeping with someone else, I need to know."

My anger snaps me out of my confused haze, "What the fuck, Todd. Of course I'm not."

"You have a weird bruise on your wrist that looks like a handprint, there's a flower on the bed that you claim you

didn't put there, you haven't returned my texts or calls for over twenty-four hours. You're acting *really* weird."

"I don't know what's going on. I must have fallen and hit my head or something. I came home and packed our suitcases for Satur—I mean tomorrow, and the last thing I remember is looking for my backpack so I could order dinner." I feel around the back of my head for a lump or anything that would explain what happened. There's nothing there.

I glance at Todd.

He is eyeing me suspiciously. "Why did you need to set the security alarm?"

I take a deep breath and explain the situation at the park, leaving out some details, like how handsome the man was or that he essentially threatened me when I rejected him.

"Why didn't you call me? I would have had Keith come over and keep you company until I was able to get home! Or if you were that worried, why didn't you call the cops?" Todd says as he searches around the house as if he would find the man from the park lurking under our bed.

"Like they would do anything," I scoff, "Women are stalked every day and they do nothing. One incident doesn't scream danger." I consider everything that's happened then curse under my breath. "I don't remember if I took my meds either."

"You know what happens if you don't take them!" he says in exasperation.

"I know, but it's not like I could exactly take them while I was unconscious...or whatever." I reach for the pill bottle by the bed and swallow one down. I have been on medication ever since I was little. If I miss more than a couple of doses of my medication I have seizures. It's been several years since I have had one, though. My mom and my grandmother both had the same condition.

Todd considers me as if he wants to pry further. Instead he says, "Look, I'm tired. Let's order a pizza and call it a night

so we can hit the road early tomorrow.”

I grab the sunflower from the bed and toss it in the trash as I follow him downstairs to the kitchen to wait for our pizza to be delivered.

## Chapter 2: Arden



### CHAPTER 2: ARDEN

**T**he sound of my alarm jolts me from sleep at four in the morning which is a ridiculous hour to get out of bed. Todd is used to it. He doesn't sleep much, and he is always up as early as possible to 'make the most of his day'. A night owl by nature, I am perfectly content to make the most of my nights and sleep in.

We pack up the car and check the house one last time. We have all of our luggage, everything is turned off, and the house alarm is set. We're ready to hit the road. Todd hasn't brought up my missing time or the flower again since before dinner last night. My brain on the other hand won't let it go. I barely slept and it's showing.

"Stop for coffee?" I ask after ten minutes.

"Of course," Todd says and diverts from our route to go to the closest 24-hour coffee shop.

We pull up to the drive through window and I reach for my backpack. It's not at my feet, so I check the back seat. We pull into a parking spot at the coffee shop and I check the trunk. It's not in the car. I groan loudly, "I could have sworn it was in the car."

"We went through the checklist. How did you forget it?" Todd asks.

"I don't know. I guess I just assumed it was already in the car since I didn't see it in the house."

"We'll have to go back to get it. I'm not driving the whole time because you forgot your license," Todd grumbles before going inside to pay for the coffee.

When we get home, Todd stays in the car to check his email while I run in to grab my bag. I disable the alarm and

rush upstairs to the bedroom. I flick the light on and let out a startled scream. There on our bed holding my backpack is the stranger from the park.

“Is that anyway to greet a lover, Arden?” The way he says my name sends a shiver down my spine. I can’t tell if it’s a good shiver or a bad one.

“What the fuck are you talking about? What are you doing in my house?” I reach for my phone to call the police. It’s still in the car.

“I was just waiting for you to come back for this,” he says as he holds out my backpack.

“How did you even get that?”

“I took it out of the car while you two were finishing up in here; checking your useless security system. The alarm doesn’t work for my kind, by the way.”

“What do you mean ‘your kind’?”

He crosses the room to where I’m standing. He’s so close that if I breathed too deeply my chest would brush against his. The same spicy cinnamon and sweet bergamot scent that I noticed in the park floods my senses, making my mouth water.

“At some point you’ll get answers to some of your questions, but right now we’ve got that pesky fiancé to deal with.”

“What do you want with Todd?” *Who is this psychopath?*

“Just a little revenge. He murdered someone dear to me, so now it’s time for him to suffer the same.”

He’s angry, but I can sense a sadness in him as well. He believes that Todd killed someone important to him, but that isn’t possible. Todd is an architect. If he were a color, he’d be beige. He wears polo shirts and khakis. He always drives the speed limit. He thinks garlic is spicy.

“You’ve got the wrong person. This is some sort of bizarre misunderstanding.”

“I’m afraid not, Artie,” Todd’s voice comes from behind me causing me to jump. He has a dagger at his side. He glares at the stranger who returns Todd’s stare with a devious grin.

I move from between the two men and my gaze darts between them. I start backing slowly toward the master bathroom. If I can get to the hallway from the bathroom I can run and call for help. *Of all the times for me to forget my phone.*

Before I can make it to the door my back collides with something solid. A pair of strong arms wind themselves around my chest. The scent of leather and amber envelops me, and a velvety voice says in my ear, “I can’t let you leave, Little Dove. At least not on your own.”

My gaze snaps to the mirror above my dresser. The man holding me is much more muscular than the man from the park, and he has darker features. He has a rich sepia skin tone, and black hair that’s tied into a man bun. His facial hair is trimmed in a neatly kept beard. Everywhere his skin touches mine I feel that same buzz that I did when Park Guy grabbed my wrist.

“Let her go. Arden has nothing to do with any of this.” Todd’s voice spits with a venom that’s new to me. Underneath that venom, though, I swear I detect a note of fear.

“I’m afraid she does now.” Park Guy chuckles. “You’re in luck, though. I was going to kill her, but she’s so unbelievably delicious that I think I’ll keep her.”

His predatory gaze lands on me. I start to squirm against the man holding me as the blood drains from my face and my heart rate accelerates. He is so much larger and stronger than me. I curse myself for not doing more strength training. He groans softly in my ear and I can feel his arousal pressing into my back.

Realization hits me and I fall still.

He chuckles darkly and nibbles my ear, sending a mixed reaction through me. “You can keep doing that if you’d like. I’d love to have another go with you. Maybe Todd would like to watch this time.”

“What the fuck is he talking about?” Todd asks. The rage in his eyes now directed toward me.

“I don’t know,” I croak, my throat dry.

“Sure you do, Arden. Our little party the other night.” Park Guy advances toward me and strokes a finger down my cheek.

“I didn’t...I don’t know what you’re talking about. Todd, you have to believe me.”

The one holding me says, “check her phone. There’s some photos and videos on there that we took. It’ll clear things up.”

“Get your hands off of her,” Todd growls holding the dagger up like he plans to attack.

“Or what? You’ll kill me like you killed the others? I’m much more powerful than they were. You wouldn’t stand a chance.” Park Guy is speaking to Todd but not taking his eyes off of me. His voice is calm, but there’s a storm brewing inside of him that he’s barely containing.

Tears fall down my cheeks and I hate myself for showing any weakness.

“Now now, don’t cry darling,” he whispers as he grasps my jaw in his hands and runs his tongue up my cheek, licking my tears away.

He leans in to do the same to the other side. My reaction surprises even me as I pull back and spit in his face.

He laughs and wipes the spit from his face, “Naughty girl. I look forward to breaking you. Say goodbye to your

fiancé, Princess. We've got a bit of a deadline to meet. Can't waste any more time."

My eyes widen as he grabs my hand. The entire world fades away and we spin through pitch black.

## Chapter 3: Arden



### CHAPTER 3: ARDEN

**T**he nauseating spinning finally ends, and my stomach empties itself onto the ground. I fall to my hands and knees and let out a strangled sob while my brain tries in vain to catch up.

I was supposed to be on the road to the beach with my fiancé, but instead I'm in the woods, god knows where, with two strangers. If I stop and think about it for too long, shock will set in and I need to keep my wits about me. I glare at the two men who whisked me away from my life.

“Who the fuck are you?” I growl.

“I'm Jarrah,” the one with the man bun says, cheerfully. “The grumpy asshole is Zorvan.”

Zorvan looks down his nose at me. “When you're done down there, we've got some walking to do,” he says as he straightens his clothing.

I glare up at him through the strands of chestnut hair that have fallen in my face. “Fuck you,” I hiss at him.

“No thank you. Once was enough.” He chuckles and moves toward me. “Although, I would love to see Todd's face if we use your body for our pleasure and send you back to him with nothing left.” He grabs a handful of my hair and pulls me to my feet. He snaps his fingers and thorny vines wrap themselves around my wrists, digging into my flesh. “Now let's go, *Artie*,” he spits out my nickname as if it's something foul on his tongue, and shoves me toward Jarrah who is leading the way.

I occasionally hike the woods that surround our development, and this area looks familiar. Some trees and

mossy hills surround us. We're likely not far from the house. I wonder how easily I can make it back home.

I'm glancing around for an escape route, but I'm also trying to keep an eye on where I'm stepping to make sure that I don't trip and fall. My gaze drops to my feet for one second, and when I look ahead of me Jarrah is gone.

I stop. "What the f-"

Zorvan grabs my hands and pulls me forward and into a field that didn't exist a second ago. I spin in a circle and all the trees and the moss-covered hills are gone. In its place is tall grass that tickles my thighs. It's a deep luscious green color and soft to the touch. Scattered among the grass is the occasional tree or large rock. The rocks have an iridescent sheen to them that reminds me of fine glitter.

Zorvan and Jarrah are facing a large dark forest that expands over several hills. I scan my surroundings, looking for the doorway—or whatever—that brought us here, but I don't see anything. *Dammit*. Next, I glance around the area for some place to run and hide, but there's nothing.

As if he can read my thoughts, Jarrah says, "Don't even think about leaving our sides. This land is dangerous. Especially at night, and darkness will be falling in about a half an hour."

"It was just before six a.m. back at my house. What do you mean it'll be getting dark?"

"Does it look like we're still in New York?" Jarrah laughs.

"I guess not," I mutter as I follow just a couple steps behind him. The trees are nothing like any I have ever seen before. They are massive like redwoods with trunks that are lavender, and leaves that are deep blue. The sky is the most brilliant shades of purples and pinks that I've ever seen, and as the sun sinks over the horizon, two large moons take its place in the sky.

"Where are we?" I finally ask after taking it all in.

“Your new home. Well almost. We have some traveling to do first.”

At five foot ten I am not a short woman, but I still struggle to keep up with my captors’ lengthy strides. I’m not one for working out, and I quickly find myself out of breath.

Zorvan glances back at me. “Pick up the pace human, or one of us will carry you.”

I consider that as a viable option as my legs are already getting tired. But I don’t want to give them the satisfaction of humiliating me further, so I push myself to walk even faster. We’re walking in silence for about ten minutes before I decide I need to learn as much as I can about these men and this land if I have any hope of ever making it back home.

“So, you called me ‘human’. What does that make you?”

“Most of your people call us ‘fae’ or ‘fairy’. Specifically, we are Sangarians. That’s the realm we live in: Sangaris.” Jarrah answers.

“My Granna used to talk about the fae. My sister and I thought they were folktales to scare us.”

“I’m not surprised since you—” He starts, but Zorvan punches him in the arm, making his mouth snap shut.

“Enough talking. Your voice is irritating me.”

“First you kidnap me, then you tell me I’m not even allowed to talk to you?” I shoot back in annoyance.

Zorvan rounds on me and wraps a massive hand around my throat. He stares at me with such rage that I am sure my heart will stop beating just from the intensity. “You. Are. Our. Prisoner. If you don’t shut up willingly, I will make you. Do I make myself clear?”

I don’t test his resolve; I just return his glare. His grip tightens as if he’s willing me to try him.

“Zorvan, her lips are turning blue. Let her go.” Jarrah’s voice is bored, but he places a gentle hand on Zorvan’s forearm. His eyes flick to mine with a fleeting look of concern. Zorvan releases me so forcefully that I fall backward. Without access to my hands, I land flat on my back. It doesn’t seem to bother Zorvan at all as he trudges ahead once more.

Jarrah helps me to my feet. He gives me an apologetic look, but he doesn’t say a word. He just goes back to following his friend. He catches up to him and says, “should we warn the others?”

“No. She isn’t any concern of theirs.”

“Even though—”

“She is my concern and mine alone, Jarrah. She is *mine*.” Zorvan’s voice is a harsh growl.

“The last time we had a human visitor, he ended up dead. It might be wise to give a heads up.”

“Fine. If you’re so worried about it, then you can go ahead and warn them. I’ll walk with her.”

Jarrah hesitates, and his eyes settle on me. A wrinkle forms at his brow before he returns his gaze to Zorvan with an exasperated sigh.

Zorvan rolls his eyes and says, “I won’t hurt her. Now go. Tell them that the human is mine and she is not to be touched by anyone but me,” he commands.

He is clearly the one in charge, though I can’t quite figure out their dynamic. There’s something brotherly there, but they don’t look related. They also seem to have very different opinions about me. Where Zorvan looks like he wants to flay my skin from my body, Jarrah hovers between concerned and protective of me. *Maybe I can use that to my advantage.*

With one last fleeting glance, Jarrah strips off his clothes and tucks them into the bag that’s slung over his

shoulder. I catch myself practically drooling. His stature isn't the only large thing about him.

His eyes find mine and he gives me a wink. Then he puts the strap of the bag in his mouth, takes four long strides, and leaps into the air. I watch in awe as he transforms into a large black lion with enormous wings and takes to the sky. I stand dumbfounded. *Where the hell am I?*

“Keep up!” Zorvan startles me from my thoughts. “We'll have to walk all night, but we can make it before dawn. Stay close to me. There are dangers in these woods. It's nothing I can't handle, but I would rather not have to fight anything off.”

I'm not sure how I missed it before, but Zorvan has my bag on his shoulder as well as a small satchel and some side pockets. It's not the most pressing question I have, but I'm curious about why he would bother bringing my bag with him.

I speed up and weigh the risks of making any requests. Finally, I work up the courage to ask, “If I promise to not try anything, would you please take these vines off my wrists? It would make it easier to keep up with you.” I keep my voice as even as possible to make it seem like a sensible request.

Zorvan glances back at me, and I think he's going to do it.

“No.”

“Look, I don't have any weapons and between you and Jarrah, I'm convinced that I don't want to be in these woods alone. As much as I don't like you, you're my best chance of staying alive.”

He rounds on me and invades my space. “What did I say about talking?”

His mouthwatering, spicy scent is taking me hostage. “I also promise to shut up,” I smirk and bat my eyelashes.

He grabs my chin in a bruising grip and moves so close that his nose nearly touches mine. *Any excuse to touch me, it*

*seems*. I don't entirely mind, though. Something about him is intoxicating. There is a part—a teeny tiny part—of me that can't help but be attracted to him and how rough he is with me.

“You may be used to flirting your way out of trouble like the little slut that you are, but it won't work on me.”

My face is burning; not with embarrassment, with rage. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Jarrah and I were able to get you in bed within hours of meeting you. How many others have you been with?”

“First of all, that's none of your goddamn business. Second, what are you talking about? I have literally met you twice, once at the park and—” I narrow my eyes at him and shove him in the chest with my bound hands. He doesn't budge. “What the fuck did you do to me?”

“Nothing you didn't want. Don't be so dramatic.”

“I didn't—I wouldn't...I'm in love with Todd,” I eventually sputter out. “Was I even conscious?”

The accusation only pisses him off further. “Of course you were. You were just under the influence of a little fae wine. It only heightens your desires and lowers your inhibitions. It can't make you do anything you don't really want to do.”

“Bullshit. You raped me.”

The psychopath has the audacity to laugh a full belly laugh. He sounds completely unhinged. “If I wanted, I could have any fae in Sangaris. I wouldn't waste my time on a whore of a human like you.”

“Then why do it in the first place?” I scream. “If you are *that* disgusted by me, why fuck with my head and—” I stop talking again. I refuse to concede that we had consensual sex, but I am not going to risk pissing him off anymore by saying he assaulted me.

“Because your precious fiancé ruined my life, and now I’m ruining his!” he roars.

“How?”

“Stars, you know nothing about him, do you? Must not have trusted you too much, but in his line of work there’s no such thing as too careful.”

“Of course I know him. We’ve been together for ten years.” But even I can hear the doubt in my voice. It’s becoming apparent that I don’t know anything about him. How could I have been so blind to this double life that he has been leading all these years.

“Yeah, and in the last ten years do you know how many fae your fiancé has killed?” When I don’t respond he scoffs and returns to our trek through the woods. “Dozens. He’s killed dozens; just like his father, and his father before him.”

My stomach won’t settle. It’s as if there’s a rock in my gut begging me to purge it. “I need to sit,” I whisper, and softly drop to my knees.

I think back over the years with Todd. There had been times that he had been working and been unreachable. He would tell me he had deadlines and that he couldn’t talk. Aside from that, there was never any evidence of an affair. His coworkers were all male. He was always in different cities. I booked his flights. I knew where he was going.

When I met his grandfather, I found out that he and my grandfather had been friends. They had met in the military when they served in Vietnam together. They had lost touch over the years, but Todd’s grandfather knew right away when he found out my mother’s maiden name was Scott. He said I was the spitting image of my grandmother at my age.

“We don’t have time for this, Arden. Stand up.” Zorvan commands as he lifts me by the elbow.

“Did he...Did he kill someone important to you?” I ask softly as I follow behind him.

“It’s none of your business.”

“You don’t have to tell me, but I am sorry. I know what it’s like to lose people.”

His shoulders tense, but he doesn’t stop or even look at me. “This conversation is over.”

I keep my mouth shut and follow him while I retrace every moment with Todd, trying to figure out how I had been so blind.

After fifteen minutes we’ve just crossed from the field into the forest. Just as Jarrah had said, the sun has nearly set. Under the cover of the trees in the evening air, I start to shiver. Back home it was warm enough for shorts and a tank top whereas Sangaris seems to be entering sweater weather. Despite practically running to keep up with Zorvan I can’t shake the chill in my bones.

Zorvan stops and pulls some bread out of the small pack on his hip. “Eat. You’ll need some energy to make it the rest of the way, and I know for a fact that all you’ve consumed today was iced coffee.”

“I also had a donut,” I mutter.

“Which you then vomited all over the grass when we landed.”

I eye it skeptically, but then take the food from his hands. Zorvan stays on alert, his eyes constantly scanning for dangers. He leans his back against a tree as he nibbles on his own food. Whatever this hunk of bread is, it’s one of the most delicious things I’ve ever tasted. I groan softly, and Zorvan’s eyes find mine. My face feels hot.

“Thank you,” I say quietly.

“For what?” He scoffs.

“This,” I say, holding up the bread, and for a fraction of a second his face softens.

He doesn't respond. Darkness has quickly consumed the space under the trees, and I can hardly see a thing. I close my eyes and shiver again but this time it's not due to the cold. I don't want to encounter anything that lurks in these woods.

Once I finish my food, Zorvan wordlessly starts our trek again. I can't see more than a few feet in front of me and I keep tripping over rocks and roots. A few times the laces of my sneakers snag on some branches, and I'm worried that they've come undone. Zorvan seems to have no issues maneuvering through the forest and will not slow down no matter how many times I curse under my breath.

We continue on that way for a while before my toe catches on a root and sends me flying face first into the ground scraping my knees and hands. From about thirty feet in front of me I hear Zorvan shout "keep up!" If he notices that I'm on the ground, he doesn't stop moving.

I'm pushing myself up to my knees and muttering about what a prick Zorvan is when a loud screech erupts behind me. I don't have time to react before I'm pushed flat once more. It feels like several blades are ripping through my shirt and piercing my back. The impact of the creature causes my head to hit the ground with a sickening *thud*. A scream tears from my throat, and I thrash under the creature. The ground thunders around me like an earthquake, smaller trees are knocked to the ground.

The claws are torn out of my skin as the weight is removed from my back. All around me are the sounds of snarling and screeching. I take the opportunity to haul myself to my feet and run in the direction I think that Zorvan went in. I don't know what attacked me or what saved me, but I know I don't want to find out.

My shoulders knock against tree trunks, and low hanging branches lash at my face as I sprint through the woods. I slow down and hold my hands out in front of me. They're still bound, but they'll help me avoid running into anything head on. When I feel like I'm a safe distance from

the scuffle, my adrenaline drops, and I can feel all of my injuries. My head is spinning from the hit to the head and what I'm assuming is a fair amount of blood loss.

I walk until I can't anymore, and sit down on the forest floor. My only hope is that Zorvan finds me before someone or something else does. I reach up and gingerly touch my forehead. There's a massive cut and a bump forming. The blood begins to make a trail down into my eye. There's so much of it that wiping it away with the back of my hand is futile.

Small tremors start and within seconds I'm shaking violently. If Zorvan doesn't find me, I'm probably going to die here alone in this strange place. Todd will be the only person that truly misses me. That's assuming he misses me at all. Our whole life together could have meant nothing to him.

Laughter bubbles out of me as I think about how ridiculous this whole situation is. I must have suffered a psychotic break. The only logical answer to how I got here is that I'm sitting in a state hospital somewhere on a cocktail of meds.

"It's not real," I say out loud to no one as I continue to laugh. "I'm having a break. Or this is a dream. Or I'm in a coma."

Exhaustion slowly creeps into my bones. My back is so shredded that I can't lay on it. I curl up into the fetal position on the ground and close my eyes. The last thought to cross my mind before the darkness takes hold is that I hope I will wake up from this awful nightmare soon.

## Chapter 4: Zorvan



### CHAPTER 4: ZORVAN

“**K**ee up!” I yell to Arden as she stumbles yet again. She has got to be one of the clumsiest people I’ve ever met. I consider taking the vines off of her wrists, but I decide against it. She deserves to suffer a little. She’s been allowing that scumbag Todd to touch her for years. She’s been sleeping in the same bed as him. Kissing him. Fucking him.

I clench my fists at the thought of him putting his hands on her. I want to crush his skull into tiny pieces. I meant every word—she belongs to me. Now all I want is that brown hair wrapped around my fist, those blue eyes staring up at me from her knees while I punish her for letting another man lay his hands on her. I’ll make it so she never forgets who she belongs to.

My thoughts of her full pouty lips wrapped around my cock are interrupted by a loud screech and a scream cutting through the air. I waste no time stripping my clothes off and allowing my dragon to take over as I take off running in the direction of the sound. Once we catch her strawberry scent, it’s easy to find her. Fear seeps into me when I find her pinned to the ground under a talix. My dragon emits a murderous growl and tackles the evil creature off of her. We may share this body, but he’s in complete control right now.

The talix is fast with his eagle claw-like hands. Its charcoal eyes stare at me through tan fur as it swipes at my throat, but I dodge out of the way at the last second. Arden pushes herself to her feet and runs away, catching the attention of the talix and inciting its need to chase.

I use the distraction to my advantage and attempt to bite its throat, but he dodges my attack. Talix are slippery creatures. He again tries to chase after Arden. Or maybe it’s

trying to flee. I don't have time to figure that out. I need my dragon to kill it so we can find her before something else does.

Now that she's bleeding, she'll be easy for predators to track. My dragon launches at the monster. It shrieks out again and attempts to swipe at me with its claws which find purchase on my side. My dragon bites down on its head, going for the kill. It starts to scream as my jaws begin to crush its skull, thick blood filling my mouth. Finally, it falls silent. I don't even have time to catch my breath. My dragon's need to find Arden is too strong.

We can communicate with one another, but it's more through feelings than words. I can give him impressions of what we need and he can choose whether or not he follows them. I'm never so out of control that I can't shift back. Not until tonight, that is.

I urge the beast to find my clothes, and allow me to transform back into my fae form. He resists at first, desperate to find Arden, but eventually he relents. It would be easier to find Arden as a dragon, but I can't heal myself in that form.

He sniffs out my bag and allows me to shift back. I pull my pants back on as fast as I can and fasten them. I grab the medicinal salve from my thigh pouch and spread a small amount over the gashes in my ribs. I will be feeling that cut for several days, but the ointment will at least stop the bleeding. It can't completely reverse a wound, but it prevents infection, and seals it off until I can get to a healer.

I would normally use more, but the smell of Arden's blood is so potent in the air that I'm sure she needs it more than I do. I don't know what her healing abilities are like; if she even has any.

I shove the salve back in its pouch and pull my shirt and shoes on before I take off to find Arden. I break into a run in my desperation to find her. I hope that the talix attack will be enough to make her understand the dangers of Sangaris, but she is a stubborn woman. In this realm, that stubbornness could lead to her demise.

It doesn't take long for me to find her, following her scent. She made it further than I expected. She's curled up on her side, bleeding out. Her breathing is shallow. If I had taken any longer to find her, she may not have made it. I remove her shredded shirt and slowly apply the remainder of my salve to her wounds and hope that we don't need any more before we reach home. Using a cloth and the water from my canteen, I clean the blood out of her eyes. Then I take a spare shirt from my satchel and pull it over her head.

Once she is tended to and cleaned to the best of my ability, I scoop her up into my arms. The entire process is done with as much care as possible to avoid hurting her wounds. Since it's faster for me to carry her, I let her sleep the rest of the way to Feldorn castle.

We are about a half an hour away from the castle when Arden begins to stir. She groans and nuzzles into my neck. I allow myself to enjoy it until she sleepily mutters, "Todd?" and I almost drop her out of spite.

"I'm offended that you could even for a second think that fuckwit could not only save you from certain death, but carry you through the forest at night without batting an eye."

My voice startles her awake. She pushes off of me, nearly causing me to lose my grip on her, but I manage to set her gently to her feet. I don't want her wounds to open back up because of my carelessness.

She rubs her wrists where the thorns had been biting into her flesh. Once I took stock of how badly she was injured I removed them.

"Not scared I'll run anymore?" she asks, bitterly.

"You'd be a fool to go anywhere far from me while in Sangaris."

"No kidding," she says under her breath.

I tie a small length of rope to my belt and hand her the other end, "hold on to this. It'll help you stay close. Or I could carry you the rest of the way. It's not much farther."

“How long was I asleep?” she asks, rubbing her eyes.

“Oh, a few hours.”

Her eyes widen. “You must be exhausted. I’m not exactly a small person.”

I chuckle, “I don’t tire easily. Now let’s get going. I would like to make it back by breakfast.”

She nods and follows behind me. We walk in comfortable silence for several minutes before she finally speaks. “What was that thing that attacked me? I couldn’t see much of anything at that point.”

Guilt washes through me. I should have known that she couldn’t see. There are even some full-blooded fae that can’t see clearly in the dark. Her half-fae blood certainly wouldn’t guarantee that ability. If I’m correct about her lineage she isn’t one hundred percent a descendant of this region.

“That was a talix. A two-legged wolf beast with talon-like hands and feet.”

She reaches up and touches the cut on her forehead and winces in pain. “How did you get it to stop bleeding?”

“Are you just going to ask questions the whole way there?” Even though I could have carried her the rest of the way, I’m tired and growing weary of her questions. I haven’t slept much since going to the earth realm six days ago.

“Are you going to forbid me from speaking again?”

“If you don’t shut up I might have to.” I sigh and answer her original question, “a medicinal paste that we make in Feldorn. It’s made of cardimythium flowers which are exclusively grown in my private gardens. It stops bleeding and prevents infection.”

“Thank you,” she mutters, showing more of that bizarre politeness. Despite my rudeness and the fact that I kidnapped her she keeps thanking me almost like it’s a compulsion. I brought her here. Of course I was going to feed her and make sure she didn’t bleed out.

“Well, you wouldn’t be much of a prisoner if I let you die, would you?” My words are a bit harsher than I intend.

She scoffs in response but stays quiet.

We step out of the forest and begin the uphill trek to the castle. Halfway up the hill is where it becomes visible in the descending light of the moon. The sky behind it is fading to light pinks and purples. Arden lets out a small gasp and I smirk. Feldorn is beautiful. I shove all the anger and bitterness aside. My heart soars at being by her side the first time she gets to see the place she rightfully belongs.

As we approach the gate I gesture for my men to open it, “Welcome to Feldorn, Arden.”

## Chapter 5: Jarrah



### CHAPTER 5: JARRAH

**T**he thought of leaving Arden alone with Zorvan makes my skin crawl. He's a cruel fae when he wants to be, and he despises humans. Despite the pull he has toward Arden, he's furious with her. She never had any way of knowing who she really is, but the fact that she was with Todd is unacceptable.

I could have teleported, but after almost a week of not being able to stretch my wings, flying sounded better. If Zorvan's dragon didn't get so testy, we could have just carried her, but we didn't want to risk him torching her—or torching me for touching her.

As I fly into the grounds of the castle the guard at the gate gives me a nod. I transform back into my fae form right as I land, and pull my clothes back on. The guards at the castle doors open them for me.

Tavin's boisterous laughter can be heard from the sitting room. They must have decided to stay up and drink some before bed. I hang left, past the grand staircase in the foyer and stroll down to the sitting room. The others are all sitting in the overstuffed chairs and sofas around the fireplace.

"You're back!" Tavin exclaims, clapping me on the back as I plop down in a seat next to him.

"Where's Zorvan? Did he decide to stay and bathe in the human's blood before coming home?" Emyth chuckles darkly, his reaper magic flaring.

"I bet the old man was too tired to bother doing anything but go to bed," Lysander teases.

"None of the above," I say, taking the bottle of mead from Tavin's hand and taking a swig.

“He made it back okay, though?” Lysander asks, concern lacing his voice.

“Yeah. He made it back,” I say with a dismissive wave of my hand.

“What about the hunter? Is he taken care of?” Tavin asks.

“Not exactly,” I say with a sigh. I’m not sure how the others will react to the news. “He left Todd alive. There was a change of plans once we found him.”

Lysander slams his cup down on the table. “What the fuck, Jarrah? He’s been planning this for years. Why didn’t he go through with it?”

I understand his frustration. Zorvan has been obsessed with killing Todd for half a decade. We’ve had to put so much on hold while he sought revenge.

“He came up with a better plan, but I needed to prepare you all. Todd is engaged, or he was anyway. Zorvan decided to take his fiancée. So they’re working their way through the Beldar forest right now since he can’t magic her in through the wards. They should be back by sun up.”

“A human?” Emyth asks in disbelief.

“She’s part fae.” I consider telling them the rest of it. That she looks exactly like Millandra. But I’ll just let them see for themselves.

“No way. There’s no way Todd was shacking up with some fae bitch, willingly,” Tavin says. I clench my teeth at him calling Arden a bitch. Tavin has nearly zero respect for women. He’s slept his way through most of the female staff and half of the court. He never has had a serious relationship with any of them. Not since Aurelia died.

“She doesn’t know what she is, and for some reason Zorvan doesn’t want to tell her.”

“What is he gonna do with her?” Lysander asks.  
“Taking a prisoner isn’t usually his style.”

“Keep her,” I say simply.

Beyond taking her, Zorvan doesn't have much of a plan for Arden. At least not one that he's shared with me. I think he was taken so by surprise that he couldn't think further ahead than getting her back to Feldorn.

“But why? Why not kill her?” Emyth asks, his brow wrinkled in concern. Emyth killed the last human we had brought to the realm. It was an accident, but he has been anxious about being around them since then.

I'm well aware of why Zorvan hasn't killed Arden despite how angry he is with her. But that information isn't mine to share. I just shrug as I take another sip of the mead.

“So do we go to bed, or wait up for them?” Tavin asks.

“I'm exhausted, so I'm going to try to get a little sleep. I need to wash the stink of the earth realm off of me first.” The scent of exhaust fumes and desperation has been wafting off of me ever since we landed in the human realm, and I hate it. I can't stand the idea of going to bed without bathing first.

“I'm not sure when they'll arrive but we're supposed to have breakfast with Zorvan and Arden when they get here. I'll come get you in the morning.” I take one last swig of the mead, hop up from my chair, and waltz out the door and up to my room for some much-needed rest.

My bedroom, like the rooms of all the keepers, is on the second floor. It's large and furnished with a king size bed, a few chairs for company, and dressers. There's also an enormous walk-in closet, a bathroom, and an office attached to each of our rooms.

I step into the enormous marbled bathroom and begin running my bath. We have a rudimentary plumbing system we set up after seeing it in the human realm a few times. We don't yet have a way to heat it before it travels to the tub, so we have the tub lifted and a bed of coals underneath.

Using my elemental gifts, I stretch out my hand and ignite the coals. I pour some of our cleansing oils into the tub

before I strip out of the clothing I had worn to the mortal realm. I press my shirt to my nose and inhale. It smells like their realm, but it also smells like strawberries and sugar. *It smells like her.*

The scent brings back the feeling of her hands and mouth on me and my cock twitches at the thought. She's beautiful. The most delectable creature I've ever seen. The thought of her being alone with Zorvan makes my pulse quicken. I'm worried for her safety. I owe him my loyalty, but if he harms a single hair on her head...

I toss the shirt to the floor and sink into the warmth of the bath water. It feels good on my skin and helps soothe some of the tension I'm holding. My long hair floats around me in the water and I take a deep breath before completely submerging myself in the water.

When I resurface, I take my time to scrub every inch of me. I wash my hair and my beard and apply oils to them to keep them soft and healthy. I want to look and smell good for Arden when she gets to the castle.

Once I feel clean enough, I close my eyes and dip back below the water. I stay there for a long moment letting my lungs start to burn from the lack of air. I picture Arden's beautiful blue eyes. Her supple lips. Her brown hair. I imagine wrapping that brown hair around my fist causing her lips to part for me. Blood rushes to my groin making me hard as steel. When I reemerge from the water, I'm met with honey brown eyes staring at me surrounded by dark blond hair. I blatantly roll my eyes, not trying to conceal my irritation.

"I saw you come in, and I thought you might want some company," Iona says, trailing a finger down my chest. My erection grows soft.

"You thought wrong," I retort standing from the water, splashing her as I do. I grab a large bath sheet and wrap it around my waist. I position myself in front of the mirror to groom my facial hair.

Iona pretends to be unaffected by the water drenching her shoes. “Oh, come on. You’ve been gone for nearly a week,” She whines, following after me like a lost dog.

“That week gave me time to evaluate things. I think our relationship, or whatever this is, has run its course.”

“We’re engaged! You can’t just end things!” She says, crossing her arms over her chest and pouting.

“I can, and I am. We’re done. Now get out before I have to physically remove you.”

“My father will hear about this,” she growls, stomping her foot, and storming out the door.

I let out a sigh as I continue to work on my hair and beard. I lather up my face, and take a straight razor to it.

I never should have got involved with Iona to begin with, but she was available, and Zorvan was pushing me to choose. Her father is one of Zorvan’s advisors. Her station made her a viable choice for a mate, and the union was scheduled for a year from now. She was one of about eight females from Solardin who Zorvan had approved for me to choose from. It just made sense at the time.

Me calling off the wedding is going to cause some serious strife, but I don’t care. I don’t love her, and she only wants to marry me for the power it would give her.

Once in my quarters I pull on some comfortable pants and fall onto my bed. Arden’s face floods my mind again, and I drift to sleep thinking of her.

## Chapter 6: Arden



### CHAPTER 6: ARDEN

**W**e enter the grounds through a huge rust colored wooden gate. The doors are manned by two fae men in silver armor. Once we're inside they shut the doors behind us. The castle ahead of us is a light gray color with dark gray roofing on all the spires. It is magnificent and like something out of the books I read. There are lamp posts all around the front grounds of the castle lighting up the walkways and the gardens. Dawn is approaching, and I expect they'll be extinguished soon.

The front gardens contain a variety of different flowers and shrubs. The flowers are every color you could imagine. Some remind me of roses, or peonies. Others I would expect to find in a rainforest; huge with vibrant oranges and pinks.

There are elaborate fountains in the shapes of aquatic animals that I've never seen, spraying water into the air. At least I think they're aquatic, judging by their flippers and gills. We are nearly to the castle doors when I realize that my mouth has been hanging open since the gates opened.

Shaking the shocked look off my face, I ask, "You live here?"

"I do."

"And Jarrah?"

"Also resides in the castle. And now you do, too."

My stomach starts to bubble from nerves. I was fine while we were traveling, but now that we've arrived, I'm anxious. I am a prisoner. My heart starts to race at the thought of being trapped here. It is beautiful, but I doubt they have comfortable quarters for people that they loathe.

“Dungeon or tower?” I ask in a joking tone even though I’m not kidding at all. I need to mentally prepare for what lies ahead.

“What?” Zorvan asks, confused.

“Where do you keep your prisoners? In a dungeon or a tower?”

“You’re not a criminal. You’ll be free to roam the castle during the day. At night you’ll have your own quarters to stay in. But to answer your question, the prisoners are kept in a dungeon.” He gives a hand signal for the guards to open the castle doors.

“How generous of you,” I mutter, earning me a sideways glare as we step over the threshold into the front hall of the massive building.

Everything is polished and pristine. The floors are marble, shining white and black contrasted against the light gray walls. Ahead of me there is a giant marble staircase. It goes about twenty feet up to a landing then diverts into a left and a right staircase. The balusters are white with black banisters on top. The landing has a large window that oversees what I assume is a courtyard.

On the main floor on either side of the huge staircase are hallways leading back past several different doors and additional hallways. There are paintings on the walls of different fae men and women wearing brilliant outfits.

What attracts my attention the most, though, isn’t the size or the cleanliness of the castle. The most impressive thing about this entry hall is the enormous dragon figures that sit at the bottom of the staircase. They look as though they may be hand carved, and they are taller than me. One is black with silver horns. The other is muted teal in color with gold horns. They’re magnificent.

Zorvan’s voice startles me. “Do not go out of my sight. Some fae enjoy feeding on humans. Some cannot help themselves. Until we can get you to the herbalist to get herbs

to block your scent, you mustn't be without me or Jarrah by your side."

My stomach twists with fear. I ask in a furious whisper, "Why would you bring me somewhere that everyone wants to eat me? Why couldn't you just leave me at my home? Whatever Todd did, I had nothing to do with it, and now I'm in danger. Just let me go back."

"This is your home now. You were in danger back in the mortal realm, too. You just didn't know it. Todd has a lot of enemies. I'm perhaps the most benevolent of them. It's cute that he thought some human alarm system could keep me out of your house, but others like me would have found you eventually. Also, do not speak to me that way. Especially not where my subjects can hear you."

I'm staring at Zorvan debating whether to push it when an angry voice roars, "What the fuck did you do to her?"

"Calm down, Jarrah. She's fine," Zorvan says in a dismissive tone as Jarrah leaps down the last five steps and plants himself between me and Zorvan, pushing me back gently with one hand to create space between us.

"She doesn't look fine, Zorvan. She looks injured." Jarrah turns his back on his friend, and tucks a stray piece of hair behind my ear. He examines the cut on my forehead, and gently strokes my cheek with his thumb.

That warm sensation shoots through me, and I lean into his touch. I don't know what that jolt of energy is but I'm craving it any time they're near.

"Are you okay? Jarrah asks.

He seems to be concerned about me, and I'm going to use that to my advantage and attempt to flirt with him. *Yes. It's definitely that it benefits me and not because I'm attracted to him or that there's a weird pulsing energy between us.*

"It looks worse than it is," I reply with a small smile. I tug my bottom lip between my teeth and look up at him through my lashes. I notice how his beard is neater today than

it was yesterday. His hair is pulled back into a bun on the top of his head in that deliciously masculine way.

“Get your hands off of her,” Zorvan growls and I narrow my eyes at him over Jarrah’s shoulder.

“Explain why she’s injured,” Jarrah demands, whipping around to face Zorvan again. “And why is she wearing your shirt?”

A part of me wants to interject and tell him that it wasn’t all Zorvan’s fault, but I don’t. I’m searching for any angle I can use to get back home, and driving a wedge between them may be the key.

“She fell prone in the forest and was attacked by a talix. It shredded her shirt so I offered her a spare.” Zorvan says casually.

My brain short circuits at the thought that I’m wearing his shirt. My bra is also gone, which means that he had to strip me naked to tend to my wounds.

“How did the talix get close enough to strike? You were supposed to protect her.”

“She’s clumsy. She fell.” Zorvan shrugs.

Jarrah takes in my appearance and looks me over from head to toe. I’m sure I look terrible. “Are you hurt anywhere else?”

“My back—”

I don’t even get the words out and Jarrah has spun me around and lifted my tunic.

“Jarrah!” I protest trying to keep myself covered. I notice that we have an audience of four female fae on the landing of the steps. To the right of the staircase on the main floor there are several fae women and men standing and whispering among themselves.

Jarrah traces a finger down my spine with a feather-light touch and it sends a shiver through me to my core. “My

Stars, Arden. We need to get you to the healer,” he says as he lowers my shirt.

“That’s where we were headed before you went all alpha male. I’m injured too, not that you bothered asking. The talix got me before I was able to dispatch it.”

“Good,” Jarrah growls. He wraps a gentle hand around my bicep and he leads me back the hallway on the right. I glance over my shoulder with a smug look at Zorvan as we leave. I expect him to say something but he just scowls after us with his hands clenched at his sides.

“Go on. Nothing to see here,” Jarrah grumbles at a group of whispering fae as we shuffle past them. They’re muttering things like ‘why would they bring a human here?’ and ‘she smells delicious’ as we walk past. I steel my resolve. The seed of fear that’s planted in my gut will not be given an opportunity to grow. I’ll survive this, figure out a way to get home, and handle everything else after that.

We step inside of a large bright room on the right side of the hall. It’s a warm white with the sun blazing in through the windows. There are plants in the corners, and hung from the ceiling with macrame. Everything in the room practically glows from the bright light. Where the hospital rooms in the human realm are bleak and sad, this is comforting, and warm.

It concerns me that there are enough mishaps that the castle needs its own soccer field sized infirmary. At the back of the room there is a petite fae woman with auburn hair and a silver circlet with emeralds adorning her head. My eyes widen, taking in the small antlers jutting out from under her flaming red hair.

She sits on a large, sage-colored pillow on the floor. In front of her is a long but low-to-the-ground table where she has a number of herbs and oils spread about. She is working some of the ingredients into a paste in a mortar and pestle. The action creates a wet snapping sound as she works. She glances up from her work then does a startled double take.

“Lord Jarrah! To what do I owe the pleasure?” She asks as she clambers to her feet and gives a shallow bow. Once she’s standing, I realize that they aren’t human feet, but rather hooves. A faun if I had to guess based on the stories that I’ve read.

“My new friend needs your healing hands, Airen,” Jarrah replies with a smile. He places his hand at the small of my back, careful not to touch my wounds.

“Yes, of course I would b—oh! A human!” Airen says, interrupting herself. Remembering Zorvan’s words about people wanting to feed from me, I lean into Jarrah’s side.

My face must betray my thoughts because Airen gives a light-hearted chuckle and says, “Oh dearie, don’t worry. Fauns don’t feed from humans. C’mon now, let me take a look at that cut on your head.”

Jarrah’s fingers graze the curve of my ass as he gives me a gentle push forward. The look on his face tells me it was intentional. I level him with a glare and he feigns innocence.

I hesitantly step toward the fae woman. “Um, my back also needs some help,” I say quietly, “if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Of course not, that’s what I’m here for. Now come here, come here.” She guides me over to an empty bed and sits me down. She pulls a washcloth from a porcelain basin of water and begins to clean the wound. “That’s a mighty big cut you’ve got there. Good thing you had access to my salve. That should prevent any scarring of that pretty face.” She gives me a bright smile. Her soft voice and kind words put me at ease.

“Thank you,” I reply, “Zorvan must have put it on while I was unconscious.”

“The attention of the master of the castle and one of the lords? You must be a pretty special human,” Airen’s quizzical gaze flits over my shoulder to Jarrah.

“I’m just collateral damage in some feud,” I say, bitterness dripping from my words.

Airen leans in to whisper, “If that were true, you’d already be dead.” As she speaks, she presses her fingers to the cut on my forehead. I feel a warmth pass through her finger tips and into my skin. It’s different from the feeling I get from Zorvan and Jarrah’s touch. She sits back on her stool and smiles, but it quickly turns to a frown.

“Is something wrong?” I ask.

“You’re not healing.” She says giving a worried look to Jarrah. “My healing powers always work. Even on humans.”

Jarrah moves to my side to get a better look. “What could be causing it?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t mean to sound like all the males around here, but this never happens to me. Let me see your back.”

I swing my feet around so my back is to Airen. Jarrah places his large hands on the tops of my knees. His gaze is intense, his eyebrows furrowed.

“Do you mind? I need to lift my shirt for her to see.” I wait for him to turn around or leave or even just close his eyes. Instead he smirks at me and crosses his arms over his broad chest in defiance.

“I’ve already seen those magnificent breasts of yours. You’ve got nothing to hide.”

I feel my face flush out of both anger and embarrassment. Airen chokes on what I can only assume is a laugh. I refuse to give in to him. I glare at him until he finally gives up, rolls his eyes, and turns around.

“I see you’ve already got him following your commands,” Airen whispers with a giggle behind me.

I hiss in pain as her hands moved over the giant cuts on my back. The same warmth moves through her fingers and into my skin, but the pain doesn’t ease up. She lets out a frustrated growl and pulls the tunic back down over my back. “I just don’t understand.”

“Thank you for trying,” I say as I attempt to jump off the table. She grabs my arm.

“Wait. I can’t use my magic, but I can do some herbal stuff to try to heal the wounds faster and eliminate scarring. Hopefully. The salve usually prevents scarring, but in almost every circumstance the fae who uses it is able to get to a healer right after.”

“Airen, what about the talix venom?” Jarrah asks.

“She’ll have to take the oral remedy to help push it out. It’ll be a few days before it works its way into her system enough to cause any issues. My biggest concern is that I’ve never seen what the venom does to humans.”

“Jarrah,” I say. Tears prick my eyes. *So much for being tough and brave.*

“It’s okay, Little Dove. We’ll make sure you’re okay. I swear it.” He pulls me in and holds me, taking care to not touch my wounds. His touch helps to soothe me, so I let him hold me.

“Wait here,” Airen says and she clops over to an immense cabinet on the other side of the room. There are dozens upon dozens of various sized tins and jars filled with an array of substances. Some are herbs, some are pastes. There are tinctures of just about every color of the rainbow.

When she returns, she has three glass jars and a small black tin. She hands me the first jar. It’s full of tablets. “Make sure to take these every day. They’ll mask your scent and make you less appealing to vampires, incubi, succubi, and the like. If they get close enough, they can still smell you, and you’ll still taste just as good, but if you keep your distance, you should be okay. Unfortunately, there’s nothing I can give you for the shifters. Not because I don’t have it, but because I’m not permitted to give it to any...guests.” She shoots an accusing look at Jarrah who just shrugs. “It needs to build in your system, so avoid the more parasitic fae for at least a week.”

She hands me the second jar which has small mesh bags filled with herbs. “Make this into a tea if you’re having difficulty sleeping. You’ll be in a lot of pain, and you’ll likely spike a fever in three to four days. This will help with both.”

The third jar has what looks like small bits of root in it. “Talix venom is enough to incapacitate and even kill smaller animals, but with humanoids, it causes severe nausea and fever. Once those symptoms hit, chew one of these every three to four hours. It will help with the nausea. The fever you’ll have to ride out. It usually passes just fine, but again, that’s been in fae, not in humans.”

She hands me the tin, “Lastly, this is more of the salve Prince Zorvan already applied. Your wounds need to be cleaned, the salve reapplied, and the bandages redressed regularly. For the first few days you’ll need to have them changed every five to six hours to prevent infection. The salve will hopefully prevent scarring, but as I’ve said I’ve never been unable to heal someone before.” She glances over my shoulder at Jarrah and gives him a leveling look. “And if any of these meatheads gives you any more injuries, you’ll have extra at your disposal.”

“Um, thanks.” I pause, awkwardly holding the jars. “This may be weird, but is it okay if I come down and visit with you occasionally? Might be nice to spend time with someone who doesn’t want me for food.”

*Or sex.*

“Any time, dearie. But I’ll probably put you to work,” she says with a wink as Jarrah starts taking the jars from my arms.

“I can carry those,” I protest, trying to hold on to them and almost dropping the jar of tea in the process.

“Nonsense. I’ve got it,” Jarrah says, “now come on. Let’s get you to your quarters.” With one last wave to Airen, I hurry after Jarrah out of the infirmary and up the staircase.

## Chapter 7: Jarrah



### CHAPTER 7: JARRAH

**T**he circumstances surrounding it are bullshit, but I'm glad that Arden had the opportunity to meet Airen. She is a brilliant herbalist and healer. She is also one of the kindest fae in the castle, aside from maybe Helena in the kitchens. It's important to me that Arden makes friends with the fae so that she feels more at home here.

Arden follows close behind as I lead her up the staircase and to our right. The corridor that houses our rooms is long. Zorvan wants Arden as close to our rooms as possible to keep an eye on her, so she's directly across the hall from me. She scurries up next to me, glances up through her long lashes, and bites her bottom lip. It's something I've seen her do several times while puzzling things out.

"Do you have something to ask me?"

"Sort of. Airen said you're a lord?" She asks.

"Technically I'm Keeper of the War Court, but the staff call all the keepers lords in formal situations."

"Keepers?"

"Sangaris is divided into three kingdoms. Solardin, Kildara, and Feldorn. Feldorn is divided into four courts. Each court has a keeper. I'm the Keeper of the War Court."

"And the other courts?"

"The Lunar Court, The Death Court, and The Nature Court."

"What is the purpose of the courts?" she asks then quickly adds, "Sorry for the questions. You don't have to answer."

“No, it’s okay.” I smile down at her, appreciating her curiosity. “It’s cute that you’re so interested. We help Feldorn to run smoothly. My court helps in times of war. We’re made of soldiers and strategists. I’m a little of both.

“The Lunar Court handles both Lunar and Solar events. They’re our astronomers and soothsayers. They keep tabs on when the moons and stars are best for certain rituals, and they use that magic to help see the future. Lysander is the keeper of the Lunar Court. He’s very gifted at divination, and gets the occasional vision granted by the Stars.” Not that he ever takes them to heart. The last one he got he completely ignored, and I almost paid the price for it.

“The Death Court is the court of balance. They work to make sure the natural order is kept. But they also make sure people don’t go before their time. That court is made up of both reapers and healers. The reapers help return the bodies of the fae to the ground while the healers have healing magic and practice herbal medicine. Emyth is the keeper of the Death Court.”

My youngest friend has reaper magic that is both terrifying and beautiful. He’s the best reaper we’ve had in centuries, including his mother who was also very gifted. “I know death is scary for humans, but if you ever have the chance to witness an execution that he performs, you should take it.

“Finally, the Nature Court handles plant and animal life in the kingdom. They are our hunters and gatherers. The hunters make sure that the animal populations stay under control. Some become butchers and farmers. The gatherers are not only foragers but also gardeners. Tavin is the keeper of the Nature Court. He can grow a field of flowers in under a minute, and I’ve never seen a better hunter than him.”

We come to a halt at the door to Arden’s room. She ponders for a moment before she asks, “Zorvan isn’t the keeper of any of the courts?”

I chuckle at her question. “No. He’s the Prince of Feldorn.”

“Oh,” she says softly with a hint of disappointment lacing her voice. “So, what he says goes then?”

“He likes to think so,” I roll my eyes, “but he needs the agreement from myself and the other keepers before he can make most major decisions.”

“If he’s the prince, where are the king and queen?”

“No longer alive.”

“Oh.” She pauses awkwardly before asking, “why isn’t he the king then?”

“Old Feldorn tradition. You can’t become king or queen until you’ve been mated. It’s a ridiculous rule. They initially wrote it into the laws to ensure the bloodlines would continue.” I roll my eyes. “Lot of good that did. Zorvan is the last of his line, and no heir in sight.”

“A mate is like a husband or a wife?”

“Essentially. It’s more nuanced than that, but that’s the closest thing you have in the human realm.”

“What’s this?” She asks about the door we’re stopped in front of.

“These are your quarters,” I say, pulling a key from my pocket and opening the door. I gesture for her to enter ahead of me. She lets out a small gasp as she takes in the room.

“This is bigger than my house.” It’s an exaggeration but not far off. Her quarters are divided up similarly to mine and the other keepers’.

“We do live in a castle,” I say casually. “You should make yourself comfortable. You’re going to be here for a while.” Guilt floods my entire being at the look of hopelessness that crosses her beautiful face.

We ripped Arden from her life without giving her a choice. We could have killed Todd and left her in the human

realm once we wiped her memory. But Zorvan was never going to let that happen. I'm not sure that I could have left her behind either. Now that I've found her I need her near. I need to see her, smell her, and touch her. I am a fae obsessed.

“Are there fresh clothes I can change into? This is Zorvan's tunic, and my shorts got torn and my sneakers are covered in blood and dirt.”

“There are a few dresses in the closet that should fit you. Zorvan keeps spares for...” I trail off deciding not to bring up the conquests of the keepers. Zorvan doesn't indulge in the company of other fae anymore, but he keeps this room for me and the others. I have several notches in the posts of this particular bed. There has never been a time where I've brought another fae back to my room; not even Iona. Now that I've found her, Arden will be the only female who sees the inside of my quarters.

“Ah. So this is the sex room.” Arden connects the dots. “Great. I hope the sheets were changed.”

“Every day, even when they're not slept in,” I say with a smile. “Go ahead and get cleaned up and get dressed. I'll be back in about a half an hour and I'll take you down to get some breakfast. Chew some of the leedle root while you get ready. The bathroom is in here.” I open the door to the huge room and set the jars that Airen gave her down on the counter top.

I start the water and use some of my elemental powers to light the coals, then turn back toward the door. “I'll be back soon.”

“Okay,” she whispers. After seeing her bathroom back in the mortal realm, I'm not surprised that she's in awe.

I linger in the door for a moment wanting to stay with her, but Zorvan will be expecting me to come talk to him. I take a deep breath. Just before I go, I say, “And Arden, don't open the door for anyone but me.”

She gives me a curt nod. I leave her room and lock the door behind me.

Zorvan's quarters are right next door to Arden's. He said it's so that he can keep an eye on her, but I'm certain it's because he feels the same pull to her that I do. I knock twice on his door before entering. Myself and the other keepers are the only ones allowed to enter Zorvan's room aside from the housekeeping staff.

Zorvan is laying on his back on his bed with his legs dangling off the side and his hands covering his eyes. "Was Airen able to help her?" he asks not bothering to look at who just stepped inside his room.

"No, actually. Her magic wouldn't work on the wounds. Her bandages need to be changed every six hours or so, and Airen gave her leedle root for the venom," I grind out in anger over him not protecting her.

Zorvan pushes up on his elbows, "you're just saying that to make me feel bad."

"No. I'm not. Airen really tried, but nothing worked."

"What the fuck?" Zorvan whispers. "She should have been able to fix it."

"Yeah, well she couldn't. Arden has to deal with the pain and the fevers from the talix attack because you weren't paying enough attention to help her."

"Save it," Zorvan snaps. "We're just going to have to make sure her wounds are tended to. She'll be fine. She has to be."

I roll my eyes, "I told her I would take her to breakfast in a half hour. You need an attitude adjustment before then."

"I think my attitude is perfectly understandable, all things considered. She was sleeping with Todd." He says through clenched teeth. "TODD!" He yells. "She deserves more than a talix attack."

“I know very well who she was sleeping with. But she didn’t know who—or what—he was. She didn’t know about you or me. She doesn’t even know about herself.”

“And she won’t. At least not yet.”

“Zorvan—”

“No. Something has locked down her fae form. Even with mixed blood, she should have come into power by now. If I can’t get her power to surface then she can’t be mine. I’ll have to send her back to the mortal realm where she belongs.”

“*Ours*,” I correct him, “She’s ours, and I won’t let you send her back.”

I notice a small tic in his jaw as he stares me down, angry with me for challenging his rules. “She won’t survive here if she’s powerless, and you know it.”

“I’ll protect her. I’ll at least do a better job than you did. I’m not letting her go.”

“You’ll do as I say, Jarrah.”

“Yeah, we’ll see what the others have to say about it,” I say leaving the room and slamming the door behind me.

“Woah, big guy,” Tavin says as he approaches the door, “Why are you so grumpy?”

“Just Zorvan being Zorvan,” I say without offering any more context.

“When do we get to meet the girl?” he asks eagerly.

“Once she’s done cleaning up, I’m taking her to the dining hall if you want to gather the others.” I want to keep her to myself because I know once the others meet her, I’ll have to share, but there’s no sense in delaying the inevitable.

“Fantastic,” Tavin says, clapping his hands together. Then he knocks on Zorvan’s door before entering.

I lean against the wall just outside of Arden’s room. The shifter in me is pushing me toward my mate. My lion is

begging me to mark her as mine. Thankfully I'm in full control because I won't do that without her consent, and I doubt I'll have that any time soon.

## Chapter 8: Arden



### CHAPTER 8: ARDEN

The tub in my quarters is unlike anything I've ever seen. It could easily fit me and three other people. It's suspended over top of a bed of now heated coals. I let the water run and once it's warmed, I step in and let out a sigh of relief. The walk through the forest and the talix attack have left me sore and filthy. There are branches and mud in my hair that I have to gently remove. I scraped and bruised my hands and knees when I fell. The bath feels like heaven.

Jarrah said I only have half an hour, so I don't have time to waste. I scrub myself to the best of my ability. I push through the pain, and try my best to keep the bandages dry. I finish my bath, dry off, and open the door to the closet.

I gape at the immense size of the thing. *Why are there so many clothes in closet that rarely gets used?* I sift through the garments, searching for something that I'll like that will also fit. Some are closer to cotton and denim like I'm used to. Then there are others that are so soft and nearly sheer that I'm not sure if they're supposed to be worn on their own or over top of something. Maybe they're night clothes.

There are so many that I have a hard time picking one. I locate a nice purple sundress and pull it over my head. I don't want to look unkempt, but I don't want anything too fancy either. It proves to be a good choice because it rests loosely on my wounds.

On the opposite wall there are several pairs of shoes lined up neatly on shelves. I find a pair of black flats and slip them on then make my way back into the bedroom. I let my damp hair fall around my shoulders before twisting it into braids. It seems that the fae haven't invented their own version of a hair dryer yet. Maybe they use magic instead.

I give my reflection a once over, and I perch on the settee at the foot of the bed and wait for Jarrah. Barely two minutes later he knocks on the door then unlocks the door without waiting for me to answer. He steps inside with a smile, but it falters as his eyes roam over my body. His jaw is tense, and his scrutinizing gaze is causing me to feel self-conscious.

“Should I pick something else?” I ask quietly as I play with a piece of my wet hair. “I didn’t know how formal this would be. I figured since it was just breakfast, I wouldn’t need anything more than this.” I worry my lip as I wait for him to respond.

“No, you look fine.” He replies and gestures for me to exit the room.

*Just fine?* I think, wondering if I had misread his feelings toward me. Something inside of me deflates at that. Internally I roll my eyes at myself. *This man kidnapped me. There is no reason for me to seek his approval.*

“Will it just be us eating? I guess it’s probably a little late in the morning at this point.”

“The other keepers and Zorvan will be joining us. We’ll let you get settled before we introduce you to the rest of the court leaders and the advisors.”

I nod in response. He escorts me down the stairs and in the opposite direction of the infirmary. We round the large dragon statue at the bottom, and nearly collide with a group of people huddled just past it. There are four fae women and two fae men. I recognize two of the women from the landing when I first arrived. All six of them are scowling at me. I wrap my arms around my middle and hurry to keep up with Jarrah.

“Who were those people back in the hall?” I ask quietly, glancing over my shoulder.

“The men are two of the kingdom’s advisors, Falmir and Mirv. With them were their mates, Malina and Stelora and their daughters Iona and Faylin.”

“They looked mad. Do they not like humans?”

He snorts in response, “They don’t like anything but themselves.”

We enter a large dining hall with over a dozen large round wooden tables. Each table has eight chairs at it. Then at the head of the room there’s a long rectangular table that has five chairs all facing out toward the rest of the room. It reminds me of the table from the painting of The Last Supper.

The biggest difference is that the chair in the middle looks more like a throne than a chair. It has an intricate carving of a large black dragon on the back of it. The dragon looks similar to the one in the front entryway, but this one has gold horns instead of silver. It’s absolutely beautiful.

“When we entertain, we sit at that table, but for today we’ll sit here,” Jarrah directs me to one of the circular tables nearest to the head table.

I stand awkwardly before asking, “does it matter which seat I take?”

“Nope, whichever,” he answers, so I choose the seat that faces the dining hall. He pulls my chair out for me and helps me slide it in. I smile and thank him for the polite gesture.

We’re sitting for only a few moments in awkward silence when the doors to the dining hall burst open and three jovial men stride in. The first and loudest one has bright red hair that comes down to his shoulders. His eyes are a stunning yellow-green color. He’s made of long lean muscle like Zorvan.

The second man has dark brown skin and short black locs that expose his pointed fae ears. His large eyes are a light grey, and when he grins it’s predatory and wolf-like.

The last man is platinum blonde with sharp features. He’s what I would imagine a forest elf would look like in a fantasy book. He’s got a shy smile and kind emerald green eyes that slowly lock on to mine. The second our eyes meet the smile drops from his face and he stops in his tracks. The

kindness in his eyes completely disappears. It's replaced with something more sinister.

"What the fuck?" he breathes, and his friends stop and look in my direction.

"Jarrah?" The redhead asks furrowing his brow. Jarrah gives a nearly imperceptible shake of his head like he's telling them 'not right now'.

"Allow me to introduce you to our new guest," Jarrah responds standing from the table. "This is Arden."

I follow suit and stand from the table. I awkwardly smile at the men in front of me. They're all staring so intensely at me that I want to run. They all look like they would chase me if I did. I briefly wonder what they would do if they caught me and the thought causes me to clench my thighs. They're all so annoyingly handsome.

Jarrah clears his throat next to me, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Should I leave?" I ask quietly, feeling uncomfortable under their gaze.

"No!" The one with the wolfish grin moves forward and reaches for me so fast that I flinch. He realizes that he's startled me and stops. He says more calmly, "Sorry, that was very rude of me. I am Lysander." He gestures to the redhead, "this is Tavin." And finally to the blonde haired man, "And Emyth."

Emyth is staring at Jarrah like he wants to murder him. He's refusing to look at me. Tavin hasn't picked his jaw up off the floor. Lysander just stares at me like he's waiting for me to say something.

"Jarrah, a word?" Emyth grinds out.

"I'm not sure that's wise," Jarrah says, glancing between the other two and myself.

"She'll be fine," a voice sounds from behind me.

“Oh great. My knight in shining armor,” I snark as I turn to face Zorvan.

“Next time I’ll let the talix eat you, Princess,” he shoots back.

“Probably a better fate than whatever you have in store for me here,” I mutter under my breath and Jarrah snickers next to me.

Zorvan levels him with a glare.

“Alright, that word then,” Jarrah says and claps Emyth on the shoulder and escorts him out of the dining hall.

“Sit,” Zorvan commands, “I’m starving.” His eyes linger on me in a way that gives me chills.

I sigh and return to my seat. The three men sit, but none of them sit directly next to me. They all exchange glances with one another.

“What? Do I smell? I took a bath,” I joke, trying to lighten the mood. When none of them laughs or even cracks a smile I add, “Tough crowd.”

After what feels like ages in an uncomfortable silence, a portly woman and two other fae come in and begin depositing plates of food on the table in front of us. Eggs, bacon, ham, sausage, toast, pancakes, fruits, and several foods I’ve never seen before. It all smells delicious and my stomach growls making me realize how hungry I am. Lysander’s gaze snaps to mine and he immediately begins piling food onto my plate.

“Eat,” he says, firmly. Then he pours water into my glass and stares intently.

I stare back at him before taking a few bites of my pancakes. I hum softly at the delightful flavor. There’s something special in them that I don’t recognize. I slowly try everything on my plate. I polish off the pancakes, my eggs, the bacon, and a small tart-like treat before resting my fork on my

plate. Once I'm done eating I notice that the guys are all staring at me, and it makes me blush.

Lysander looks like he's about to say something when loud voices erupt from the hallway. They continue on for about a minute, and then Jarrah returns alone. He slams the door behind him and stomps over to the table where we sit.

"Emyth won't be joining us," he growls as he takes a seat next to me and begins filling his plate.

"Did I do something wrong?" I whisper to Jarrah.

"No. No, of course not," he softens his voice and places his hand on mine.

A growl comes from Tavin. I jump at the sound. He's baring his teeth, his canines have elongated and his eyes have turned into glowing cat's eyes. I grip Jarrah's hand so tightly I think I might break it.

"Tavin," Jarrah says in a stern, calm voice, "you're scaring her."

"Stop touching her," Tavin growls and I pull my hand away from Jarrah.

"He did a lot more than touch her in the earth realm," Zorvan says casually, taking a sip of his coffee and narrowing his eyes at me.

"You keep fucking saying that, but it's not true," I say, embarrassment and anger causing the flush to return to my cheeks. "I'm engaged. I would never do that to Todd." At the mention of his name, every single one of them growl at me, making my heart pound. I need to get away from these guys and fast.

"Right. Speaking of which, how long have you been letting that shitbag put his mediocre dick inside of you?" Zorvan asks, taking an aggressive bite of his bacon. He and the others all study me with interest.

I stand so quickly I knock my chair to the floor. "That's none of your fucking business," I shout, and turn to Jarrah, "I

want to go back to my room.”

“We have more to discuss,” Zorvan says.

“No. We don’t. I have had enough of you belittling me and slut shaming me, thank you very much. What I do with my body is none of your concern.”

“It is my concern. Not that it matters anymore. You’ll never see him again,” he replies coolly.

My eyes start stinging and tears threaten to spill. I have been holding it together so well up until now, but the reality of my situation sets in with his words. With my fists balled and my teeth clenched, I blink away the tears. I turn on my heel and storm away from the table.

Just as my hand makes contact with the handle of the door, Lysander catches up with me. He places his hand on the door just beside my head, closing off my only escape route. I spin and face him and my breath catches when I find his face just an inch or two away from mine.

“Please don’t go,” he requests softly.

He gently drags a knuckle down my cheek, leaving a trail of sparks in its wake. My eyes flutter shut at the sensation. His touch mixed with the scent of mahogany and vanilla makes me relax a little.

“Why are you all so handsy?” I ask, not responding to his request.

He steps back from me. “I’m sorry. We’re all shifters. Our animal sides like the connection. Please stay. I think there’s some stuff we need to talk about before you go.”

I nod, slowly. He doesn’t seem convinced that I won’t run, but eventually pushes off the door and returns to the table. I reluctantly follow after him.

I glare at Zorvan. “Go on then. Say whatever it is you need to say.”

“We need to establish some ground rules.”

I huff and plop back down in my seat. “Fine. What are they?”

“First, you are absolutely not to go anywhere except your quarters without one of us with you. You’re welcome to go wherever you want, but you need an escort.”

“I’m a big girl and I can take care of myself,” I interrupt.

“You’re a human and you don’t have the means to protect yourself against the fae in this castle. They’re all very powerful, and not all of them will be as accepting of you as we have been. It isn’t safe for you to wander about by yourself. I won’t discuss it further.”

He doesn’t wait for me to challenge him before he continues. “Second, you will have your meals with us, daily. If we cannot be here for any reason, you will take your meal alone in your room.”

I am about to make a sarcastic remark, but he cuts me off, “Third! You will stop acting like a petulant child. You will call me ‘sir’, ‘Prince Zorvan’, or ‘my grace’, and you will not talk back to me. I don’t allow my court to speak to me that way, I will not allow you to either.”

“I will do no such thing. You’re my kidnapper. Not my ruler.”

“You will not cause me to lose the respect of my people. If you cannot follow this simple rule then you will not be permitted to leave your room.”

“Not like I want to go anywhere anyway. Not with one of you lot following me around. And if it gets me out of having to sit through three meals a day with you, then so be it. You have done nothing to earn my respect, you overgrown pixie.”

Tavin snorts at my insult, Lysander gapes at me, and Jarrah looks proud. Zorvan on the other hand looks like he might kill me. I stare him down, daring him to continue with

his bullshit rules. When he doesn't say anything, I stand to leave, "are we done here?"

"One last rule, no sleeping with any of my keepers."

The keepers heads all snap toward Zorvan, giving him angry glares. *That's rather presumptuous of them.*

"For the last time," I say in exasperation, "I'm engaged. I have no interest in sleeping with any of you. Jarrah, can you please take me back to my room?"

"I'll come with you, too," Lysander says.

"Me too," says Tavin.

The three keepers are clearly pissed at Zorvan for declaring them off limits.

They stand to follow after me, but Zorvan says to the three men, "wait. I need a quick word with the three of you. To me he says, "Wait just outside the door. Do not go any further. Can you follow that simple order?"

"Yes m'lord. Whatever you say, m'lord," I say sarcastically, giving a dramatic curtsy before I step outside of the room and into the hall.

I plop down on the floor next to one of the large stone pillars in the hallway with my legs straight out in front of me. In this dress, it's not very lady-like, but I don't care. I miss my comfy clothes from the human realm and it's only been twelve hours. I hear their raised but muffled voices just on the other side of the doors. I can't make out what they're saying, so I just pick at my nails and wait for them to finish.

My thoughts drift back to ways to get out of here. My plan was to flirt with Jarrah to get him on my side but now that I'm forbidden from sleeping with him, that might be a bit tricky. Not that I had any plans of actually inviting him into my bed, but it would be easier to con him if he thought I was.

A female voice pulls me from my thoughts, "What makes you so special that you get to have breakfast with Zorvan and his men?" I lift my gaze and find one of the pretty

fae women from before. She's got long straight dark blonde hair, and amber colored eyes. With her high cheekbones and full lips, she looks like a model.

I push myself up off the floor and raise an eyebrow at her, "You'd have to ask them that. I'm not exactly a willing guest."

She scoffs as if she doesn't believe me and advances into my space, "You better keep your filthy human hands to yourself. Jarrah is mine."

My heart sinks at that. Between Zorvan's rules and Jarrah having a girlfriend I may have a much harder time seducing him than I thought. I also feel a pang of jealousy at the thought of him being with someone else. Which, considering the circumstances, is ridiculous.

A plan dawns on me. If Zorvan insists on bringing up that missing twenty-four hours to embarrass and shame me, then I'm going to use it to my advantage as well.

Keeping my face neutral, I look down at my nails like I'm bored. "I think you're going to have to tell Jarrah to keep his hands to himself if you want him to stay yours."

She moves so fast that I don't even register what's happening until it's too late. Her hand is around my throat and she's holding me a solid foot and a half off the floor. Fangs shoot out and she hisses at me before saying in a hushed voice, "What the fuck does that mean?"

I'm clawing at her hands and kicking my legs, desperately searching for air. I get enough momentum to swing my left leg up and knee her in the ribs. I simultaneously reach out and claw at her face.

"You bitch!" she screams as she drops me to the floor. I land on the side of my foot and my ankle gives out with a loud *pop!*

The door to the dining hall flies open, and the others come running out. Lysander runs to my side while Tavin pins

the fae woman to the wall and growls at her. Zorvan just stands in the doorway and scowls at me.

“What is going on out here?” Jarrah demands.

“That feral animal attacked me out of nowhere,” the fae woman says, pointing at me, blood surfacing where I scratched her. “Humans aren’t sophisticated enough to live among us. Why would you bring her here?”

“Arden,” Jarrah asks in disbelief, “Is that true?”

“Only because she’s a psychopath and tried to strangle me,” I answer. My voice hoarse from where her hand had been gripping my throat.

“LIAR!” The fae woman shrieks.

Two more men rush into the hallway. They’re the men that Jarrah said were Zorvan’s advisors.

The taller of the two demands, “What is the meaning of this?” He approaches where Tavin still has the woman pinned to the wall.

“Daddy, that *thing* attacked me. I want her punished,” she pouts. I roll my eyes from where I still sit on the floor rubbing my hurt ankle.

The man’s head snaps to where Zorvan stands, “I want her executed.”

“That’s a little extreme, Falmir,” Zorvan replies, his voice bored.

“She attacked a royal! Not just any royal, but Jarrah’s betrothed!” Falmir shouts.

The jealousy returns. It’s not just a pang this time. It’s enough that I see red. I try to act on it, but my injuries make standing impossible.

“There seems to be some confusion surrounding who attacked whom,” Zorvan says. His eyes bore into me as if he might be able to see the truth written on my skin.

“And you’re going to take her word over Iona’s?” the man asks and his hazel eyes turn gold as fury rolls off of him. “You of all people know that humans cannot be trusted!”

“Tavin, let Iona go,” Zorvan instructs. “We’ll have Airen brew up a truth drought for Arden. That’ll clear things up.”

“I’m not taking that,” I say. “I’m telling the truth. She attacked me.”

“And why would she bother herself with scum like you,” Falmir sneers at me.

“Yes, enlighten us,” Zorvan says, waiting for an answer.

“I may have insinuated that Jarrah touched me,” I say with a smirk at Iona who is shaking with rage.

“*Touched* you?” Falmir asks.

“You know,” I shrug, “intimately.” If they’re going to keep me prisoner, I’m going to make their lives hell.

Falmir snorts at my answer, “see, she’s a liar.”

Jarrah and Zorvan both glare at me, but don’t say anything to deny my claims.

Falmir understands exactly what their silence means, and growls, “we had an agreement.”

“And that agreement still stands,” Zorvan says. “The mating ceremony is still on.”

“Actually,” Jarrah starts slowly as if he doesn’t want to say whatever he’s about to say, “I called it off last night.”

“My daughter will not be made a fool!” Falmir yells, his face turning the most brilliant shade of purple.

Zorvan is the one to answer, “Lower your voice when you speak to my men, bloodsucker. I am still the master of this kingdom. Unless you want to challenge me,” he adds with a

glint of hope in his eyes, as if he wants Falmir to do exactly that.

“No!” Falmir says as all the color drains from his face.

“Of course you don’t.” Zorvan snorts in amusement. “Jarrah, we need to discuss this new development. As far as I’m concerned, nothing has changed. Jarrah will take Iona as his chosen mate.”

Iona gives me a smug grin. I decide that I don’t look like much of a threat splayed on the floor so I try once again to stand up. I let out a hiss of pain as I test putting pressure on my bad ankle. Jarrah and Lysander both move to catch me, and Falmir and the other man both scowl at them as they do, causing both of the keepers to hesitate.

Tavin rolls his eyes, “Oh for fuck’s sake,” he says as he strides over and lifts me like a newlywed. “I’m taking her to the infirmary. You all can sort out your issues.”

## Chapter 9: Tavin



### CHAPTER 9: TAVIN

I scoop Arden up into my arms and leave for the infirmary. Having her this close to me has my tiger purring in my chest. She smells like summer; fruity and sweet. I can also smell the others on her, and I want to rub my scent on her to make it go away.

“Are you...purring?” she whispers to me, placing a hand to my chest. The purring grows louder.

“My tiger is, yes.”

“Is that what you shift into?” she asks, looking up at me with wide eyes.

“It is.”

“Why is it purring?” she asks.

I don't want to tell her it's because of her, so I play it off as if it's nothing. “He likes pretty girls. It happens all the time.”

It doesn't happen all the time. My tiger hasn't purred like this in years.

“I appreciate you helping me to the infirmary,” she says in a near whisper.

“Don't mention it,” I respond as we cross the threshold to see Airen.

“Arden?” Airen says looking up from her work, “why are you back already? Is everything okay?”

“She had a run in with Iona,” I answer for her. “You two have already met then?”

“Yes, Lord Tavin. Lord Jarrah brought her in to tend to her wounds earlier. Come on, put her on the bed,” she says as

she pats the one nearest to her.

“What wounds?” I ask as I look at Arden. I had noticed the cut on her forehead, but it didn’t look that serious.

“I was attacked by a talix on the way here,” she answers and I let out a growl.

“I thought Zorvan was joking about that.”

“No, unfortunately. I fell down in the woods and Zorvan didn’t notice right away. It gave the creature an opportunity to attack. Airen gave me what I needed for the wounds, though. She’s wonderful,” she says, clasping her hand over Airen’s.

“I wasn’t able to do enough though,” Airen says with a frown.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“My magic doesn’t work on her. I’m not sure if it’s because she’s human...” Airen trails off.

“You’re still wounded?” I ask

“I’m fine. It stings, but it’s fine. Apparently, the worst will come in a few days.”

“Did you feel anything when I tried?” Airen asks.

“Some warmth. It briefly eased the pain, but other than that, no.”

“It’s so odd,” Airen shrugs. “Let’s get that ankle wrapped, and I’ll give you some slightly more effective herbs for the pain. I’m so frustrated that I can’t make you better. You don’t deserve to be in pain.”

My tiger is prowling just beneath the surface. Arden being injured is making him really unhappy. He wants to put her in a nest and not let her go until she’s all better, but I need to shut that nonsense down.

Airen tries in vain to work her magic on Arden’s injured leg while I watch helplessly on the sidelines. Airen has

been our healer for the last two decades and she's damn good at it. She can't make things perfect, but she can get them close. The fact that she can't heal Arden is concerning.

"I'll have to wrap it, and hope that it heals properly on its own."

"I think it's just a sprain. I've done it before. I'm unbearably clumsy most of the time," Arden laughs. "It's my fault for getting into a fight with a fae woman on my first day here."

Airen leans in toward Arden and whispers, "between you and me, Iona is a raging bitch." Arden lets out a snort of amusement, and even I crack a smile.

Airen works quickly, her lithe fingers wrapping Arden's ankle. Then she pulls out a splint and puts it on either side of Arden's ankle. When she finishes with that, she closes the curtain around the bed and checks the dressings on her wounds. It's only been a couple of hours, but she redresses them anyway. She pulls back the curtain when she's done, and Arden is decent again.

"Let's get you back to your room," I say and offer her my hand. She takes it and slowly slides off of the bed. She gingerly tests her weight. It seems like she's able to put a little more weight on it than before.

"Thanks, Airen. Again."

"You're welcome. Now don't come back again so soon. Not that I don't want to see you, but I don't want you to keep getting hurt," she says. "Especially if I can't heal you."

Arden chuckles, "I'll try. Not sure what kind of trouble I can get into locked in my bedroom." She rolls her eyes.

I had thought that Zorvan was being a bit over the top with his rules, but after her run in with Iona, and now that I know that she can't be healed. I don't think so anymore. She's been here less than five hours and she's already got a bullseye on her wounded back.

We walk in silence up to her room. She uses my arm for support, stepping softly on her injured leg. I pull my key from my pocket and open the door. When she's safely inside I cross my arms and lean against the door frame.

"Do you want to come in for a little bit?" she asks with a shy smile.

"That's awfully forward of you," I say with a smirk.

"Oh, I just meant...nevermind," she's blushing and it's the most adorable thing I've ever seen. I start thinking of all the other ways I can make her turn that shade of red.

"You just meant what?" I ask, my curiosity piqued.

"Just I have so much to learn about Sangaris, and Feldorn. And it would be nice to have some company."

If I stayed to keep her company, I wouldn't be able to control myself. I'm itching to feel her skin on mine. Even if it weren't a terrible idea, she's injured, and she needs to rest.

"I would love to, but I have business to attend to. I'll be back this evening to escort you to dinner. I'll have to have the kitchen staff bring you something for lunch since the guys and I will be busy."

"Oh. Okay," she says and disappointment flashes across her features before she schools her expression. "I should probably get some rest anyway. The little nap I took while Zorvan carried me through the woods wasn't the most restful sleep I've ever had."

Jealousy wells up inside of me and I have to suppress another growl. I don't get attached to women. Ever. It's just not who I am, and that's making me worried. My tiger is being possessive, and only calms down when I'm able to see her. The way she smells has me salivating. I've been in denial since I laid eyes on her, but the truth is evident in the way both me and my tiger are reacting. Arden is my mate.

Why the Stars would bind me to someone who is part human is beyond me. It doesn't matter what fae bloodline she

comes from if it's tainted with human blood. Her life will be shorter, her powers will be weaker. It doesn't make sense that someone as strong as I am would be attached to her.

It occurs to me that I also need to figure out why Zorvan is being so weird about her. If it's what I think it is, things are about to get a lot more complicated.

“Okay, well I'll let you rest. I'm going to lock your door for your safety. Don't worry about any surprise visitors. No one who means you any harm has a key.”

She nods, then asks, “is there a library in the castle?”

“Of course there is. I can take you after dinner if you're up for it.”

“I would like that very much. Thank you.”

I give her a nod, then muster up all of my willpower to walk out of her room and lock the door behind me.

The rest of the guys are already scattered about Zorvan's office when I enter. Tense silence hangs in the air so thick that I can taste it. Zorvan sits at his large black desk. The zoya trees that were used to make it grow exclusively to the north of Feldorn. Zorvan has a flare for the dramatic and has everything in his office made from the shiny black wood and adorned in golden accents. His hands are clasped in front of his mouth and he's scowling at Emyth who is pacing back and forth.

“Is she safely in her room?” Jarrah asks, casually lounging in one of the large leather and zoya wood chairs and I nod.

“Airen was unable to heal her...again,” I add with a glare at Zorvan.

“Again?” Lysander asks.

“She was attacked by a talix in the forest. She needs medication and bandage changes, but otherwise she's fine,” Zorvan says as if that's supposed to fix the fact that she could have been killed.

“So are we just going to ignore the fact that she could be Millie’s twin?” Emyth blurts out.

“Of course not,” Jarrah says.

“Why didn’t you warn me?” Emyth is now yelling.

Aside from Lysander he’s the most kind hearted out of the five of us. But he also has a darkness inside of him that flares when he’s in stressful situations, or when he feels that he’s been betrayed. It’s as if there are two people living inside of him.

It has caused us to come to blows on more than one occasion. When he gets angry or aroused, he’s a total sadist; combine that with his reaper magic, and it becomes a deadly cocktail.

Jarrah isn’t phased, though. “Truthfully? Because I wanted to see your reaction.”

“What if I had hurt her?” Emyth snaps.

“You didn’t, did you?”

“No, but—”

“Then it’s fine.”

“So what does this mean?” Lysander asks, changing the subject. “Is Millie in the earth realm?”

“Based on human life cycles, and customs surrounding reproduction, Millie would be Arden’s grandmother if she were alive. That said, Arden spoke about her grandmother as if she were dead.” Zorvan says with a much gentler tone than we’re used to and he gives Emyth an apologetic look. “We didn’t ask her directly.”

“I thought she was dead a long time ago. I had made peace with it, but seeing Arden...it stole the breath from my lungs.” Emyth stops pacing and slumps into a chair. He puts his elbows on his knees and slides his hands into his blonde hair.

“Why would Millie mate with a human?” I ask.

“I’m not sure. I’m not even positive that Arden has human blood. I am certain, however, that she is more than a half-blooded fae. Her father must be one of us as well.” Zorvan says, causing all of us to look at him confused.

“How the fuck do you know that?” Jarrah asks.

“I took a small bit of her blood when I met her in the park and tasted it. The magic was faint, but it was enough for me to discern her heritage. She’s got Ashylan blood lines mixed with shifter.” His answer elicits a scowl from Jarrah.

“Millie’s parents were Ashylan,” Emyth says quietly.

“Do you know what their fifth element was?” I ask.

“Her grandmother controlled shadows which was passed on to Millie’s mother,” Zorvan answers.

“How do you know all of this?” Lysander asks.

“Her grandmother was one of my grandfather’s advisors.”

“Millie’s grandfather controls electricity,” Emyth says.

“I haven’t heard of a shadow Ashylan for years,” I muse.

“Not since Melody, Millie’s mother. She was a powerful one, too. I’m honestly surprised that Millie never demonstrated shadow bending abilities.”

“What do you think is locking down Arden’s magic?” I ask. I am curious about what kind of shifter she is. My tiger is even more interested than I am.

“My bet is that Todd has something to do with it. Why else would he be with her?”

“I don’t know, man. He seemed really upset by our extracurricular activities with his fiancée,” Jarrah says with a smirk.

“What extracurricular activities?” Emyth asks.

“I’ll let you use your imagination.” Jarrah is goading Emyth now. He’s looking for a fight to cover up his feelings, but I saw the way Jarrah looked at the girl.

“Why would you sleep with her?” I ask. “Just curious, since you and Iona seemed to be getting along fine until you got back from the human realm.”

Emyth’s reaper magic permeates the room, making me feel sick. He doesn’t move, just waits for Jarrah’s answer.

“You saw Arden,” he says with a shrug.

“Well, yeah, but why else? You called off your mating with Iona right after meeting her. I’m supposed to think that’s a coincidence?”

“You what?” Emyth asks, his magic pulling back a bit. “We all agreed we would only break off our engagements with the advisors daughters for our—”

“He’s not calling off his engagement with Iona,” Zorvan chimes in.

“Yes. I am,” Jarrah stares Zorvan down.

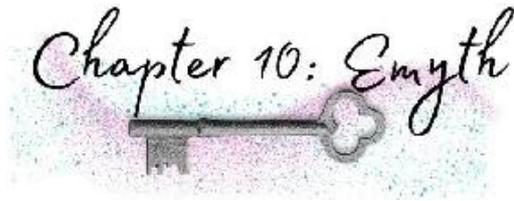
“No. You’re not. Arden is not your mate. It’s not possible,” Zorvan replies.

“Why isn’t it possible?” Lysander asks.

Zorvan gives us all a dark look, daring us to challenge him.

“Because she’s mine.”

## Chapter 10: Emyth



### CHAPTER 10: EMYTH

“No.” Is all I say.

“No?” Zorvan asks.

“No. She’s not your mate.”

“And how would you know, Em? Are you suddenly a soothsayer?” Zorvan snaps.

“No, I’m not suddenly a *soothsayer*.” I say rolling my eyes. “She can’t be your mate because she’s mine.”

All eyes in the room narrow at me.

“You just think that because of your attachment to Millie,” Zorvan scoffs.

“No, it’s because I can feel the mate bond calling to me,” I argue, raising my voice. “I scented it on her in the dining hall, and my basilisk is pushing me toward her. I almost shifted on sight.”

“Guys, I think we’re not addressing the real issue here. How can four of us think we’re mated to the same bitch?” Tavin asks.

I growl at the word bitch and he makes a sarcastic face at me. I know why he’s concerned, but Arden isn’t like Aurelia.

“Four of us? You too?” Jarrah asks, but he doesn’t seem surprised. It’s like he expected it to happen.

“Five,” Lysander says, casually, with a smirk.

“Not possible,” Tavin says. “Something is off. Maybe the hunters have a witch working with them that brewed a pheromone spray or something to confuse us.”

He's grasping at straws. Human witches are powerful, but typically unable to meddle with fae magic. There have been rare instances, but in those instances there was speculation that the witch also had fae blood.

"If that were the case, then why isn't every unmated male in the castle after her? It's just the five of us. Besides, Zorvan felt what I did when we were with her in the mortal realm. I think it's not only possible, but it's true. And unlike the rest of you, I'm fine sharing her," Jarrah says, shocking me a little.

We've all shared women before but only for one night stands. When it came to serious relationships, like with Iona, Jarrah had never been willing to share. Which is understandable.

"I'm good at sharing," Lysander says, shooting me a heated glance and I feel a blush creep into my cheeks.

"No one is sharing her!" Zorvan yells, slamming his fists on the desk. "She is off limits. She is a prisoner."

"You can't keep me from her," Jarrah says in an even tone, refusing to match Zorvan's energy.

"I can and I will. You will not touch her. That is an order. Furthermore, you will all maintain your engagements to the advisor's daughters. I'm not risking the stability of our kingdom because you're all thinking with the wrong head."

"None of us will follow through with mating them. And the advisors will understand our hesitancy to mate their daughters if we're fated to someone else," Lysander says. He's always been way too optimistic about things. A hopeless romantic if there ever was one. I guess that's one of the benefits of having parents who actually love each other.

"They're all power-hungry cunts," Tavin scoffs. "They'll understand, but they won't give a flying fuck. They just want their daughters mated to the highest-ranking pieces of meat available and right now that's the four of us. Not including Zorvan, of course."

“You will mate with those fae. End of discussion,” Zorvan says.

“You just want Arden to yourself,” Jarrah accuses.

“I’m inclined to agree with Jarrah,” I say. “However, what remains a mystery is why. Why would you risk mating with a part human woman who wouldn’t be able to safely produce a dragon heir.”

“I *wouldn’t* risk it. That’s the part you’re not understanding. I won’t have her as my mate, and neither will any of you. Do I make myself clear?” He stares us all down, daring us to challenge him. We keepers are the only ones who are strong enough to challenge him for his throne, but he would likely still win. None of us respond.

Arden looks just like my first and only love. The mate bond calls to me, but I’m suspicious of the beautiful woman who has four powerful men—not including myself—pining for her. Well, three. Tavin doesn’t seem sold, yet.

There’s more we need to discuss, but I can’t stay inside any longer. The walls feel like they’re closing in on me, and I’m feeling murderous. My reaper magic is threatening to spill from me. I need to reign it in, and the only way to accomplish that is to give it what it wants. I storm out of the room, slamming the door behind me. I get a number of curious stares when I throw open the front doors and stalk outside. I stop by the guards station at the gate to grab my bag on the way through.

Just on the other side of the gates I pause to strip, and scan the forest ahead. Doing a little hunting will help soothe my magic, but I don’t relish the idea. I stash my clothes and knives into the bag. I transform into my basilisk form, scoop my bag into my mouth, and snake my way into the woods looking for an animal to be the target of my wrath.

A poor unsuspecting deer falls victim to my need to kill. I see it at a small watering hole not far from the castle. I slither in its direction, careful to not make a sound. It doesn’t

hear me coming until it's too late. A twig snaps beneath my massive scaled body, and it turns to see what made the noise.

The second its eyes land on mine, it's stunned in place. I slither closer and wrap the full length of my body around it. I squeeze and squeeze, the blood supply cutting off until finally it takes its last breath.

I transform back into my fae form. I gut it and skin it there in the forest, slicing into the flesh and carving it as if it were made of butter. When I'm good and coated in its blood I slide my pants back on, tie the beast's legs, and drag it from the forest to the servant entrance to the kitchens. It takes me a long while, but I need to get the energy out.

I knock twice on the door and Jobie opens it. He takes in my appearance, decides not to ask any questions, and takes the deer for processing.

I've made it halfway up the stairs to my room when a voice calls out from behind me, "Emyth! Wait!" I sigh and turn around to face Faylin who is rushing up the steps after me.

"Yes, Faylin. What can I do for you?" I ask, coldly. She's my betrothed, but I've never had an interest in the girl. She's nice enough, but that's the problem. My soul is so fucked up that a nice girl like her would wilt under my deadly shadow.

She grimaces when she takes in my bloody appearance. "I heard there was a human in the castle. Is it true?"

"Yes. She's a prisoner here for the time being." I bristle at her talking about Arden. After the incident with Iona, I don't trust any of the women we're supposed to marry. To be honest, the only woman I trust in this castle right now is Helena, the cook.

"Did she really attack Iona?" she asks in a whisper, looking around to make sure no one is listening to our conversation.

“According to the others, she defended herself against Iona.”

“And you believe that?” Faylin’s eyes are wide. Iona is one of her best friends, and her cousin. How they get along is beyond me, but I guess sometimes opposites really do attract.

“I find it hard to believe that a human would be stupid enough to attack a fae when she knows what we’re capable of.”

Faylin nods and changes the subject, “Right, well, would you like to have dinner with me? I thought we could discuss our mating ceremony.”

“Not tonight.” *Not any night.* “Zorvan has insisted that we have dinner with Arden.”

She furrows her brow, “Arden is the human? Why would she be having dinner with you and the others? Iona, Braniva, Calliope, and I aren’t ever invited to sit with you for meals.”

“Zorvan’s rules. I don’t question him.” I do question him. Especially when it comes to Arden, but I won’t tell Faylin that. We need to present as a united front or the council will tear us apart from the inside out.

“Does he plan to take her as a concubine?” She whispers looking around. “I know the old fae kings used to do that with humans.”

I snarl at the suggestion. The idea of that makes me angry and my magic threatens to surface. I really need to get it under control before I accidentally hurt someone. Again.

“No,” I grind out, and her face falls in disappointment. “He would need a wife to have concubines. And Arden is off limits as far as the keepers and the prince are concerned. Now, I need to get washed up.”

“Emyth,” she lays her hand on my shoulder to stop me as I move to step away, “what is so special about her?”

Without facing her I decide it's better to lie, "Nothing. There is nothing special about Arden."

Back in my room, I scrub the deer's blood from my body until my skin is practically raw. Fuck Zorvan and his stupid rules. He thinks that he can command us to stay away from her, but that's not how mate bonds work. My magic calls to her like it will be snuffed out without her near.

Once I've finished with my bath and made myself presentable, I walk down the hall to Arden's room. I don't knock. I just put my key in the door and enter. It's not a social call. I plan to scare her just a little bit.

She's laying on the bed asleep. Her lunch is on the dresser untouched, and she's still wearing her purple sundress from this morning. It's riding up on her legs exposing her beautiful creamy thighs and my mouth waters at the sight. She's thicker than most fae women and it makes me want to sink my teeth into her flesh. Maybe if things work out, she'll let me do just that.

I gently climb onto the bed, straddle her, and pull my dagger out of its sheath on my belt. Without thinking I reach up and brush a strand of chestnut hair off of her face. The contact of my skin on hers makes my magic sing. She must feel it too because she stirs and her eyes flutter open in surprise.

"What the fuck are you doing in here?" she gasps. "Get off of me you psycho."

"What are *you* doing here?" I demand pressing my dagger to her throat.

"Here in my room? Sleeping! What does it look like?"

"No! In Feldorn!"

"Your prince fucking kidnapped me. It's not exactly like I had a choice!"

"What were you doing with Todd?" She squirms underneath me, the friction causing blood to flow to my groin.

She looks so beautiful pinned beneath me. Fear and anger swimming in her bright blue eyes.

“We’re engaged.”

“Are you a hunter, like him?”

“No.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Then why bother asking me?!”

“To see if you’d tell the truth.”

I grab the top of her dress and slice down the front of it, ripping it open and exposing her bare chest.

“What the fuck?” She whispers and her breaths start coming in quick pants. I glance up at her eyes. Her pupils are dilated. She licks her lips and my eyes drop to her beautiful mouth.

“You don’t bear the hunter’s mark. I guess you’re at least telling the truth about that.”

“Of course I was! What hunter’s mark?! Todd doesn’t have one! I didn’t even know that hunters and fae were a thing until a couple of days ago! Get off of me you lunatic!”

I bend down and whisper in her ear, “I don’t think I will. I think I’ll show you a little of what will happen if you betray any of us.”

“Betray you? I Just want to go home!”

“That’s the thing about being a prisoner. You don’t have much of a choice.” I hold the knife to her gut, about to carve a reminder into her flesh of who owns her.

Before I can do anything else she snaps back, “You’re delusional if you think I’ll stay here without at least trying to get home. Beat me, mark me, punish me. It doesn’t matter. I *will* get back to the human realm.”

As much as I don’t trust her, I also don’t want her to go anywhere. This mate bond will be the death of me. “After I’m

done with you, I think you'll be too afraid to try to leave."

I add pressure to her stomach with the tip of the blade. Her eyes widen with fear, but I can also smell her arousal blooming between her thighs. "Interesting," I say, tilting my head to the side. I can't figure this girl out.

"What are you going to do?" She's breathless.

"First I'm going to—" she interrupts me with a hiss of pain and she grasps her head in her hands.

"What is wrong with you?" I ask with a hint of panic in my voice.

"I need my medication," she hisses.

"What medication? What are you talking about?"

"It was in my backpack. Please go get Zorvan," she pleads.

I barge into Zorvan's room. He's half-dressed and angry.

I ignore his glare and say, "Arden needs you. Something about her backpack?"

"You can't just barge in here because she is making demands, Emyth."

"Shut up and listen to me for once! There is something wrong with her. She needs some sort of medicine that was in her bag."

His eyes go wide and he grabs her bag from his closet and sprints out the door with his shirt in his other hand. He runs into her room and pauses when he takes in her torn dress and the bead of blood on her stomach from the tip of my knife. He scowls back at me and I shrug. He climbs onto the bed with her. He puts a finger under her chin and tips her head up.

"Where is it?" he asks, pointing to the bag.

"Front pocket," she says before groaning in pain. He pulls out a small bottle from the front of her bag and opens it

and hands her one of the pills inside. She swallows it without any water and lays back on the bed. She stays that way for what feels like an eternity with her eyes closed and her fists pressed to her temples. She abruptly realizes that she's exposed to both me and Zorvan. She bolts upright and puts a pillow over her chest.

“What were you two doing?” Zorvan demands.

“That psychopath came in here, ripped my dress, and held a knife to me.”

“I was checking for a hunter's mark.”

“Stars sake, Emyth. Jarrah and I have seen her naked. She doesn't have one.”

“Just double checking,” I shrug, trying to ignore the pang of jealousy I have about them being with her. “It was a good thing I was in here though since she needed her medication.”

He turns his attention back to Arden, “What is wrong with you?” Zorvan asks with a hint of anger lacing his voice.

“What?” Arden asks, incredulously.

My gaze snaps to Zorvan. My basilisk and I are both pissed that he's insinuating that something is wrong with my mate. *Our* mate.

“What. Is. Wrong. With. You?” he spits out. “Clearly you're defective.”

Arden scowls. “Defective? I have a seizure disorder. I've had it since I was a baby, but I'm not *defective*. My medicine lets me lead a perfectly healthy and fulfilling life.” Worry flashes across her features. “I won't have access to it here in Sangaris, though.”

Zorvan stares at Arden intently. “If you stop taking it, what happens?”

“I get horrific headaches that turn into absent seizures and I start hallucinating. I haven't had an episode since I was a

teenager.”

“A seizure?”

“Yeah, it’s like a glitch in the brain. Don’t people have them here?”

“Fae are mostly unaffected by human ailments,” I explain.

“I’m going to give one of these pills to Airen and see if she can recreate it. Otherwise I’ll have to make regular trips to the mortal realm to replenish your supply,” Zorvan says in an irritated tone as he takes the bottle. He removes a pill before putting the bottle on her nightstand. “Emyth, come with me.”

I give Arden one last glance before I step into the hallway after Zorvan. Once the door is shut he growls “of course she’s not only part human but she’s also broken.”

“I don’t trust her, but I don’t think she’s broken, Zorvan. I think that you’re trying to find any excuse you can to dislike the girl.”

“The fact that I couldn’t properly mate her, even if I wanted to, is cause enough. Not to mention the fact that she’s got some sort of connection with you lot. Who has ever heard of such a thing? Five mates.”

“There have been instances. Not for several centuries, but it’s happened. My magic is desperate to be near her. My snake, too. The urge to mate her—”

Zorvan rounds on me, his nose an inch from mine. He’s got a good six inches on me, but he doesn’t scare me. He’s all bark and no bite when it comes to me and the other keepers. “How many times do I have to tell you that you will not touch her?”

“You’re going to have a hard time keeping not only yourself, but her four other mates in check,” I say with a smirk.

“We’ll talk about this later,” he says in frustration before pulling his shirt over his head, and continuing down the

stairs.

He leads me down into the infirmary where Airen sits at her desk reading a book. As soon as she sees us she scrambles to her feet and offers a bow.

“Three keepers and a prince all in one day. I just need to see Lysander and I’ll have collected the whole set,” she chuckles at her own joke. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Zorvan hands over the small green tablet, “can you tell me what this is made of? And can you make more?”

Airen inspects the pill. She takes it over to her cabinet and grabs a couple of corked bottles. Then she moves over to her table and she plops down on her pillow. Once she’s settled she puts the tablet in her mortar and pestle and grinds it into dust. She then uncorks the two bottles and with one in each hand she pours them into the dust simultaneously. While all of this is happening she’s muttering a spell under her breath. A black smoke wafts off of the mixture as it sizzles in the mortar.

Airen waves the smoke away from her face and gives a small cough, “sir, where did you get this?”

“Where it came from doesn’t matter. What matters is if you can make more,” Zorvan’s patience is always very thin, but he’s even more impatient when it comes to Arden, it would seem.

“Yes, well, I already make this compound, just...not as strong.”

“What do you mean? For who?” Zorvan asks.

My curiosity is also piqued.

“The criminals awaiting trial,” Airen answers as if we should know that.

I understand immediately what it is. My job is to execute the ones guilty of more heinous crimes. I give Zorvan the extra time he needs to puzzle it out.

“Why would you give them this medicine? The only thing we give them is a—”

“Magic suppressant. Yes.” Airen finishes for him.

“What happens if you stop taking them?” I ask. I probably should have learned this in my studies, but studying plants and medicines was never a strength of mine. My ability to heal wounds is decent, but my mother insisted that herbalism was a waste of my time and talents. She insisted that I spend more time practicing my reaper magic.

“It depends on how long you’ve been taking them, and how quickly you stop. If you taper off, your magic should gradually return bit by bit. If you stop abruptly, it’s kind of like a dam breaking. Depending on how much magic the person has and how long it’s been building, it’s possible it could kill them.”

Zorvan grows pale and curses under his breath. “I need you to make a full taper of these. Can you do that?”

“Of course. It’ll take me about a week. Is that alright?”

“It should be. Just not any longer. And do not tell anyone else about this.”

“Of course not. Can I ask who they’re for?” Airen asks. By the look on her face, she has her suspicions.

“I’m going to keep that to myself for the time being.”

“I understand,” Airen says.

“How do you recommend we taper off the meds?”

“I would say two weeks at the next lowest dose, two weeks at a dose lower than that, then we can move to the dose that we use on the prisoners. Then we can do it every other day before stopping all together.”

Zorvan nods, “then prepare enough for that, please.”

“Yes sir,” Airen says offering a curtsy before Zorvan leaves the room with me trailing after him.

He has a lightness about him that's been missing for some time. He still looks pissed, but there was a hopeful edge to his voice when he asked Airen for the taper.

“What are you thinking?” I ask hoping that for once he'll talk to me like a friend. That he'll treat me the way he used to before our lives got complicated.

He grins at me with a glimmer in his eye and claps me on the shoulder. “I'm thinking that if they needed a magic suppressant *that* strong for Arden, that she may be a viable mate after all.”

## Chapter 11: Arden



### CHAPTER 11: ARDEN

The men left in such a hurry, and I didn't hear the telltale sound of the key in the door. This may be my only chance to escape. I jump from the bed, and discard the shredded sundress. I throw on the most comfortable clothes I can find, grab my meds, shove them in my backpack, and slip on some shoes

I double check that I have everything I need from the room, grab the bread from my lunch plate, and tuck it into my pocket just before I check the door. I give a silent thank you to whatever deity is watching over me, and slip out the door. I have no idea where I'm going or how I'm going to escape unnoticed, but I owe it to myself to at least try to get out.

Glancing up and down the hall, I take a deep breath and shuffle as fast as I can on my splinted ankle toward the stairs. A castle this big has got to have servants' quarters or tunnels outside or at the very least a back door.

I'm not a small person, but I know how to be light on my feet. My shoes barely make a sound as I limp down the hallway. Ahead of me, voices are drifting up the stairs. *Goddammit.* I duck behind one of the statues in the hall.

Lysander's voice reaches my ears. "I'm going to go over to the library for a few minutes before we get ready for dinner. I think I know of a book on fated mates that might help us."

"You know what? I'll come with you," Jarrah replies and their footsteps grow faint.

I sigh in relief and continue down the hallway. I move down to the landing and peek over the railing. It's rather quiet in the front hall. Each time I've been in the foyer, there have been fae sitting on the benches talking and enjoying each

other's company. I assume the majority of the regular loiterers are at dinner.

I continue sneaking down the steps and move in the direction of the dining hall. The din coming from inside confirms my suspicions; the rest of the castle residents are eating.

My mind is going a million miles a minute trying to figure out how I'm going to get through the dining hall to the kitchens unnoticed. *This was a terrible idea* I think as I search for another way out of the castle.

The first room I stumble upon is a large sitting area. It's perhaps a smoking parlor. There are couches and chairs around the room, and a giant fireplace on one wall. I wonder if I could escape through the chimney, but I quickly dismiss that ridiculous idea. I'm not Santa Claus. I walk in and creep around the perimeter looking at the singular window for a way to open it. Unfortunately, it opens into the courtyard and the courtyard is surrounded by the castle.

The voices of two female fae can be heard in the hallway. I duck behind a couch under the window, pull the curtain around me, and hold as still as possible. My heart is pounding in my chest as they enter the room I'm in.

"She's a problem that needs to be dealt with," it's Iona's voice. "I can smell her all over the damn castle."

This was such a bad decision. I didn't even think about anyone being able to smell me. Airen said the scent blockers needed time.

"I still can't believe she attacked you. That's bold for a human," the other woman says.

I roll my eyes.

"I just told daddy that so he would take care of the problem for me. I mean she did scratch me, but only because I was about to snap her fragile little neck." Iona laughs.

"And your father didn't kill her?"

“He demanded her execution, but for some reason Zorvan and the others are determined to keep her around. I don’t get it. She’s a weak little thing. She could never be what Jarrah needs. Even if she could, I have worked too hard to have Jarrah as mine. I won’t let that human trash ruin it for me.”

“Maybe he’s not interested in her like that. And like you said, she’s just a human. Even if she lives to her full life expectancy, that doesn’t mean much,” the other girl says.

“Oh, he is interested in her. The moment he returned from the mortal realm he tried to end things with me. It seems like the other keepers are interested in her, too. Lysander nearly took my head off when he saw that I had hurt her. You know that he doesn’t care about any of the females in this castle. Plus I saw Emyth sneaking into her room earlier.”

“No. He wouldn’t do that. Tavin would, but not Emyth.”

“He did, though Fay. I saw it. You know Emyth has been hung up on Millie for all these years. That girl looks just like her. We need to find a way to take care of her. If not she’ll ruin everything we’ve worked for.”

“She’s just a human, Iona. Besides, what would Zorvan do if he found out?”

“A human threat is still a threat. Anyway, I’ll make it look like she ran off. Or like it was an accident. OH! maybe I can pin it on someone else. Airen has been on my nerves lately. Maybe her.”

I bristle at her trying to frame Airen. She’s the only fae that has been kind to me. The thought is fleeting as realization dawns on me causing my stomach to flip. My granna’s name was Millie. It has to be a coincidence, but I am the spitting image of my grandmother.

A male voice pulls me from my thoughts, “Iona your mother and I need to have a conversation with you.”

“I’ll be back in a little bit. Maybe talk to Emyth if you get a moment. Confirm what I told you. As soon as we have the chance, we need to talk to Calliope and Bravina and fill them in on everything.”

Only one set of footsteps retreats from the room. My choices are limited. *Is it worth the risk to me to try to get out of here?* Once I’m sure Iona is long gone, I stand up and pull the curtain back.

“Faylin?” I whisper, causing the fae woman to jump.

“Stars,” she breathes as she takes me in, “you do look just like her. Wait, were you here for that whole conversation?” Something akin to fear flits across her face.

“I was. And I don’t care about what was said, but I realized...I think we can help each other.”

Her eyes narrow at me, “how?”

“You want me gone, and I want to go home. I don’t trust Iona. She would just kill me. I need a way to get out of the castle grounds unnoticed. That’s all I need from you. I’ll figure out how to get back to the veil from there.”

“You’re insane. Even I don’t risk the forest at night.”

“It’s either take my chances in the forest, or stay here and take my chances with Iona. I can’t stay here. I have a life waiting for me back home. Please,” I don’t care that I’m begging. I need to get out of here.

She considers me for seconds, but it feels like ages. “Fine, but if we get caught, I will throw you to the wolves so fast.”

“I will take full responsibility. I can’t be any more of a prisoner than I already am.”

“If you think that’s true then you know nothing of Prince Zorvan. Alright. We need to move quickly. People will be leaving dinner soon, if they aren’t already. Follow me,” she leads me toward the door, her light green dress flowing behind her.

She pokes her head out the door then moves out into the hall, her steps silent as she goes. The next room down is a magnificent ballroom. Like everything else in the castle, it's massive. The floor is marble. The high ceiling has an intricate mural of all sorts of beasts that, until recently, I considered mythical. There are dragons, pegasi, sphinx. There are manticores, and wolves. There are even half beasts like fauns and satyrs. It's stunning.

From the ceiling hang three massive round crystal and gold chandeliers. One of the walls has two large picture windows with black and gold damask curtains drawn over them and long golden drawstrings. I feel a pang of disappointment that I'll never have the opportunity to see a party held in such a beautiful place.

Faylin leads me to the left-hand side of the room, grabs a sconce on the wall, and pulls. A piece of the wall shifts back and to the side, allowing passage into a tunnel. We step into the darkened hallway, and she shuts the door behind us.

I watch as she holds up her hand and ignites the candles on the walls in the hallway. It's not as creepy as I expected, just a plain old tunnel.

"When we were younger, we would use these servant access tunnels to sneak out of the parties that we didn't want to attend," Faylin explains.

"Why wouldn't you want to attend them? It's so beautiful in there."

"We grew up in a place not unlike Feldorn Castle. It's perhaps even more grand than this one. The parties get old after a while."

I'm not sure how to respond, so I change the subject. "You're to be mated to Emyth, then?"

"I am," she answers curtly.

"He seems...interesting," I decide not to bring up the fact that he broke into my room, stripped me, and threatened to cut me.

It doesn't matter though because she pauses in the hall, takes a deep breath, and asks, "did he sneak into your room earlier like Iona said?"

"Yes, but it's not what you think," I say quickly. "He's convinced that I'm some spy here to murder everyone and take over Feldorn or some nonsense. I don't know. He was rambling."

She gives me an assessing look then continues down the hall. "How did you end up a prisoner of the keepers anyway?"

"It's a bit of a long story," I say, concerned about how much I should tell her.

"Well, we have a long walk ahead of us so spit it out."

Her voice is lighthearted, but I can tell her curiosity is getting the best of her. She seems to have lightened up a bit since I told her why Emyth was in my room. *There probably isn't any harm in telling her the basics, right?*

"Okay, well I guess it started in the park the other day. I met Zorvan. I don't know if he followed me home or if he already knew where we lived." This is the first time I've really considered what happened when I met Zorvan. *What was the purpose of him approaching me at the park if he was just going to ambush me at home?*

I tell her the story of what happened. I leave out the part where I allegedly had sex with Zorvan and Jarrah, and the fact that Todd is a hunter. "They decided to take me with them. Then poof, I was here. Being attacked by a beast in the forest and threatened by Iona." It takes the entirety of my story, but we finally reach another door. Faylin opens it, and the blinding light of the outside spills into the dark hallway. She pokes her head out to see if anyone is outside then pauses.

"It sounds like they used a memory modification spell on you, which is a shitty thing to do to a human in my opinion. What did they do to your fiancé?"

“They left him behind. That’s why I’m trying to get back.”

“They left a human alive after they were seen?”

“Yeah. I guess they knew him or something.” I’m trying to be vague. I prepare myself to run in case she changes her mind. I have no doubt she would catch me.

“What is your fiancé’s name?” There’s definitely fear in her eyes now.

*Fuck. Why did I open my big mouth?* My heart is racing and I’m not thinking straight so I answer her. “Todd. Why?”

“Todd Feathers?”

I nod.

“You were engaged to *Todd Feathers?*”

Now she’s panicking, too.

*Jesus Arden. Learn how to tell a lie.*

“Shit shit shit shit. I’m sorry. I can’t help you. We need to go back and get you locked back in your room before Zorvan knows you’re missing. If he finds out...” she shakes her head frantically.

“Wait! We’re almost there. He doesn’t know where I went. We can do this.”

“No. You don’t understand. If he finds out you’re missing, his dragon will stop at nothing to find you.”

“Dragon?” I ask. My heart is in my throat. I knew he shifted into something big, but I never imagined it was a dragon.

“Yes. Dragon. Now we need to *go.*”

She grabs my hand and pulls me back through the tunnel. I look longingly over my shoulder at the door. I was so close. I was going home.

“Faylin, please,” I beg as I dig my heels in.

She stops and rounds on me, “I want nothing more than to get you out of this castle and away from the keepers. It would be helpful to all of us. But Zorvan has spent the better part of a decade hunting Todd down. The fact that he left Todd alive means that you are part of a larger plan. If he finds you gone, he will burn the world to ash to find you. Now, let’s go.”

The last word leaves her mouth, and a violent tremor shakes the ground. We exchange glances, and I feel her fear mirrored in my own wide eyes. She grabs my hand and pulls me back through the hallway. This time, I don’t resist.

We retrace our steps through the hidden door and across the ballroom. She’s stopped being cautious now, and it costs her. She doesn’t check to make sure the coast is clear before she steps into the hallway, and she collides with someone just on the other side of the doorway.

“Faylin, have you seen...” Tavin’s eyes narrow as his gaze falls on me.

He pushes past Faylin and brushes a few strands of hair off of my now sweaty forehead. I’m sure I look well put together and not at all like I was just hobbling through a dark tunnel on a sprained ankle.

“There you are, babe. You have Zorvan in quite a tizzy. What on earth were you two doing in the ballroom.” There’s suspicion and a hint of malice in his eyes.

“We, uh, were—”

“Faylin was being so kind and showing me around the castle. Emyth and Zorvan left my room in a rush earlier. I went to find one of you, but ran into Faylin first.”

“Yes. I was very intrigued. I haven’t had the pleasure of meeting many humans,” she says quickly, giving Tavin a tight smile.

“I see,” Tavin says with a raised eyebrow, clearly not buying our shit. He doesn’t press the issue, though.

“We had better go calm the dragon down before he burns down the whole castle looking for you. Come on.” He takes my hand and leads me to the front of the castle.

That delicious warmth spreads through me at his touch. The scent of mahogany and jasmine hitting me at the same time. My heart calms to a peaceful rhythm after the excitement of my near escape.

Faylin begins to follow after us, but Tavin turns to her and says, “I don’t recommend coming near Zorvan right now, Faylin. I believe he may act *irrationally* toward you.”

“Right. Of course. Could we maybe not mention that I was involved?”

“Sure,” I say immediately, keeping my promise to take the blame.

Faylin says goodbye and scurries off deeper into the castle.

Tavin looks at me like I’m a puzzle he can’t figure out. “You would lie for her?”

“Not so much lying as it is omitting the truth,” I say. “No reason for her to get in trouble for being nice to me.”

“Interesting. Well, let’s be on our way,” he says, and we make our way out of the castle.

We step through the front doors, out into the sunshine. I’m trying to hide my disappointment over my failed escape. Who knows if that opportunity will ever present itself again.

Tavin leads me on a path through the flowers and shrubs that decorate the outside of the castle. The glimpses I caught of the gardens on our way in from the forest pale in comparison to seeing them in the daylight. Whoever tends to these grounds takes great pride in their work.

The flowers are beautiful and fragrant. There are some blooms the size of daisies and some the size of dinner plates. Some of them grow on bushes, while others cling to vines that have woven their way around trellises that are placed

throughout the garden. There are large flagstone stepping stones cutting paths through the flora.

The building itself is huge. It's a large rectangular building with several rounded spires and parapets decorating the various tops of the towers and walls. At its highest points it's five stories tall. The shorter parts are only two stories. I'm curious about what those towers contain.

The silence in the air is broken by a deafening roar that vibrates to my core. Tavin's urgency increases, and I struggle to keep up. We walk the full length of the castle, then crest the small hill that sits behind it. I gasp at the sight before me.

Down the hill at the edge of the woods is an enormous black dragon. He has gold horns that jut straight back off of his head, and a golden underbelly. The tops of his wings are also dusted in gold and they shine brilliantly in the sun.

I've obviously never seen a dragon before, but he seems agitated. He's hunting for something. No, not something. Someone. He's hunting for me. I'm filled with fear and excitement at the thought.

"Easy there, big guy! I've got her," Tavin yells at the giant lizard and his head whips around in our direction.

The dragon snorts in annoyance. Smoke billows out of his enormous nostrils as he stomps toward us, the ground shaking with each step that he takes.

I pull my hand from Tavin's and walk toward the giant beast. My brain is telling me to run, but I feel a magnetic pull to him. My body moves on its own and before long I'm in the dragon's space.

I reach my hand toward him. He lowers his head toward me, smoke still seeping out of his nose and mouth. I press my fingers to his snout, and it causes me to shiver in delight. His scales are warm to the touch. He is magnificent.

"Hey," I say quietly and smile at him. My heart is pounding in my chest, but it isn't from fear. Adrenaline, maybe. He begins to shift and shrink down in size until

standing before me is Zorvan the man, not Zorvan the dragon. He's angry. And naked.

He grabs my wrist. "Where were you?" He demands, pulling me flush against his body.

I let out a small gasp. It's an intimate position to be in, even if we were both clothed. My entire body is buzzing at the contact.

"You left my door unlocked when you ran off with Emyth. I tried to find you, but when I couldn't I decided to explore the castle a bit."

"Haven't you learned your lesson about going off on your own? The talix, then Iona. Are you trying to die, you stupid girl?"

I try to pull my wrist free from his grasp but he grips it tighter causing me to hiss in pain.

"Let me go," I demand.

"Not until you promise to never do that again."

Realization dawns on me, and a small laugh bubbles out, "you were worried about me. The big scary dragon was scared I was hurt."

Anger flares in his eyes, "no, I was worried that I lost my leverage. You are of no use to me dead. I would like for you to stay alive longer than one single day."

"Then maybe put a bit more effort into keeping me alive," I shout.

We stand there staring each other down. We're breathing heavily, and neither of us are willing to be the first to look away. He looks like he wants to either kill me or consume me. I glance down at his full lips, and he definitely notices. His lips pull up at the corner, a smirk threatening to take over his face.

"Well as fun as this is, I'm starving. Can we go get the others and go eat?" Tavin says behind me and I jump a little.

I had forgotten we weren't alone. Tavin chucks a pair of pants at Zorvan, and I turn away from him while he pulls them on.

Once he's decent he shoves past me, "come along pet. We'll be handling the repercussions of your actions after dinner."

## Chapter 12: Lysander



### CHAPTER 12: LYSANDER

“Can you please stop pacing?” Jarrah asks while I walk back and forth in Arden’s room. Tavin, Emyth, and Zorvan have all split up to search for her while Jarrah, and I are stuck waiting in case she comes back to her room.

“What if something happened to her?”

I’m not too proud to admit that I’m panicking. I have waited two centuries to find my mate, and I seem to have lost her less than a day after finding her. My wolf is losing his mind.

“Then pacing won’t help.”

“How are you staying so calm about this?”

“Because I know if I allow myself to freak out even a little bit, then I’ll lose it. And that won’t help anyone.” He gives me a judgmental glare.

I sit on the edge of her bed and put my head in my hands. My wolf is itching to break free. He wants to run after her, and find her, but I have to trust that my brothers will do their jobs. It’s bullshit, though. While I’m stuck here, forcing myself to keep it together, I can hear Zorvan’s dragon losing it outside.

Focusing on that won’t help anything though, so I ask Jarrah, “We haven’t had much time to talk since you got back from the earth realm. How did everything go?”

“Mostly okay. We met up with that witch just fine. She was able to do the spell and locate Todd for us. Everything was going according to plan until we actually found Todd. We had been staking out his house for about twelve hours when Arden came outside and the plan changed.”

“How did she end up with him of all people?”

“I don’t know. Something about it doesn’t feel right.

“What do you mean?”

“Todd being not only a hunter but *the* hunter we’ve been tracking, Arden looking just like Millie, them being together, her having shifter blood, her being our mate? It’s all just weird and it doesn’t feel like a coincidence.”

“Maybe Arden can fill in the blanks for us?”

“I doubt it. She doesn’t even know she’s fae. Until we know more, we’re not going to tell Arden anything. I’m glad that we have her with us because she wasn’t safe with him, but I also don’t one hundred percent trust her.”

Emyth comes in the room and I jump from the bed.  
“You found her?”

“Tavin did. She was wandering the castle.”

“By herself?” I growl. After the incident with Iona it’s clear that locking her in her room is the safest thing to do. Especially if she insists on wandering off.

“Seems so. It’s Zorvan’s fault. He dragged me out of here in a hurry earlier and neither of us remembered to lock the door.”

“Why were you in here?” Jarrah asks. His voice is even but I can tell he’s pissed.

“I needed to talk to her.” He shrugs. “Are you guys ready for dinner? They’re going to meet us down there.”

“Yeah, my wolf needs to see her.”

“Just your wolf?” Emyth asks, knowingly.

“We both do,” I admit.

“The conversation about you being alone with her isn’t over,” Jarrah says as he follows us out.

Emyth rolls his eyes. “It’s not that big of a deal. I just wanted to see what information she could give me when I

added a little pressure. That's all."

"Emyth!" I scold. "Tell me you didn't!"

"I did what I had to. She wasn't totally freaked out by it either." He's got a dark smile on his face.

I dig my fingernails into my palms. Emyth's desires are so dark that they scare even Zorvan sometimes. He could have really freaked Arden out or hurt her.

"Don't do it again," Jarrah says.

"I think that's entirely up to Arden." Emyth says with a smirk. "Rules or no rules, if she legitimately isn't a threat, Zorvan cannot keep us away from her."

"Well at least we agree on something," I mutter.

In the dining hall Arden is laughing at something that Tavin said, and her smile makes me absolutely weak in the knees. I decided at that moment that I would kill to make her look at me like that.

Zorvan looks murderous. Even more so than usual. Zorvan and Tavin have taken up the seats on either side of Arden so I choose to sit directly across from her so I have the best view.

"So, you went on a little adventure?" Jarrah asks with a serious look.

The smile fades from her face, "Not you, too. Zorvan has already scolded me."

"Turns out that Artie here is scared of very few things. Keeping her alive may prove to be a challenge," Tavin says with an appreciative look at our girl.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"She touched Zorvan's dragon," Tavin's eyes connect with mine.

Arden takes stock of all our worried looks and asks, "what? did I commit some sort of fae faux pas?"

I laugh. “No. It’s a little more serious than that. Zorvan’s dragon is testy. He doesn’t let anyone touch him. Not even us.”

“I nearly lost a hand the one time I tried,” Jarrah adds.

“He nearly burned me to a crisp, once,” Tavin says.

“Oh,” Arden murmurs. It’s the only reply she gives, but she glances at Zorvan who is refusing to look at her.

We all start eating in silence. It’s Jarrah who finally breaks it. “There are a couple things that we would like some clarity on if you can offer them.”

“Who? Me?” Arden asks around a mouthful of food. Her lack of manners is something I would normally be annoyed by, but for some reason I find it endearing.

“Yes you.” Jarrah laughs.

“About what?”

“Todd.”

“You know more than I do,” she says bitterly. “There was apparently this whole other side of his life that he didn’t share with me.” The betrayal on her face physically hurts me. I need to rein in my obsession with this girl.

Jarrah presses further, “how did you meet him?”

“I don’t see how that’s relevant to anything, but we met freshman year of college. I found out later that our grandfathers were friends.”

“Who was your grandfather?” Zorvan asks, speaking for the first time.

“Mayweather Scott,” she says and Jarrah chokes on his drink.

“I don’t fucking believe this. Granddaughter of a Scott and engaged to a Feathers. What sort of games are the Stars playing at?” Zorvan asks, rhetorically.

“You knew my grandfather.” Arden says. It’s not a question. She looks like her world is about to shatter.

“He was a hunter, too.” Tavin’s words are matter-of-fact as if this isn’t earth shaking news to the girl. “We never officially met him, but we’ve heard of him. He killed a few of ours back in the day. Some relatives.”

Arden mulls over the information and finally says, “I think I’ve lost my appetite. Can someone take me back to my room?”

“You will finish eating, and then you may go back to your room,” Zorvan says.

“Excuse me? Are you going to dictate everything I do?”

“First, yes I am. Second, you didn’t even touch your lunch. It was still on a tray in your room when I came up and discovered that you were missing. You need to eat.”

She stares at him defiantly. Zorvan hasn’t had anyone challenge him like this in a long time and I love that someone is putting him in his place. I just wish it weren’t Arden.

“I will make you eat if you don’t eat it willingly,” Zorvan threatens.

“I would like to see you try.” She crosses her arms over her chest and sits back in her chair.

Zorvan rolls up the sleeves of his shirt, “Tavin, hold her down.”

“What? No. Don’t touch me,” Arden says, shifting away from Tavin.

“Sorry babe, boss’s orders. You know how it is.” Mischief twinkles in Tavin’s eyes.

Arden’s pupils dilate as she stands from her chair. She’s annoyed, but there’s a hint of excitement there, too. Tavin’s eyes flicker to their cat-like state as he prepares for the chase. Arden is terrible at this game. She telegraphs her

movements and Tavin knows exactly when she's going to move.

She attempts to run around him, and he's on her before she's made it five steps. She squeals as he knocks her to the floor, catching her so she doesn't hit her head. She lets out a hiss of pain when her back touches the ground. Her wounds have got to be on fire. Tavin straddles her and looks down at her triumphantly. "Sorry, Kitten. We'll get some numbing ointment on those after we're done here."

"Get off of me!" Arden shouts and Tavin just laughs at her while he pins her hands down at her sides.

He leans in and whispers something in her ear and a blush creeps up her neck at his words. "Alright Zorvan, she's all yours."

The rest of us are watching in amusement. He's acting serious, but this is the way Zorvan plays. It's good to see him like this after all these years. He's been a mess ever since his sisters died.

Zorvan grabs a biscuit from Arden's plate and walks over to stand over her. "Last chance to eat willingly."

"Fuck off," she hisses. He moves so fast that she barely has time to react. He almost gets the biscuit into her mouth, but she turns her head at the last second.

"I guess we're really doing this the hard way," Zorvan says as he grabs her by the cheeks and forces her mouth open. He shoves the biscuit into her mouth and she growls around it. She looks like a wild animal trying to escape him on the floor.

Defeated, she starts to settle. She takes a bite and starts to chew with hatred written all over her face. Without warning she spits the biscuit into Zorvan's face, and I laugh at the size of the balls on this woman. She has more backbone than most of the fae I know.

"You awful little human. Fine, you don't want to eat, see if I care. Tavin, let her up."

Zorvan grabs a handful of Arden's hair and hauls her to her feet. The amusement fades from the rest of us. He's not playing anymore. He leads her out of the dining hall by the crown of her head and all I can do is stare after them because if I try to help her, my wolf will challenge Zorvan and then we'll have a bigger issue on our hands.

"Well, that was fun," Tavin says, brushing bits of biscuit off of his clothing as we all exchange worried glances.

"Yeah, until it wasn't," Jarrah mutters.

The mood in the room has darkened significantly, and I'm no longer hungry.

## Chapter 13: Arden



### CHAPTER 13: ARDEN

**Z**orvan hauls me out of the dining hall by the hair. I swing my arm and hit him in the chest and he lets out a dark chuckle. Instead of letting go, he grips harder as he directs me to the stairs. There are a few fae scattered in the front hall who all stare as he drags me along. It's humiliating. About halfway up the steps I stop fighting him. My back hurts and my ankle is sore. I just want to sit back down.

He shoves the key in the lock so hard, I'm surprised he doesn't break it. We step inside and he throws me on to my bed and locks the door behind him. He rests his palms and his head against the dark brown wood of the door and takes a deep shuddering breath before facing me again. His eyes are glowing, giving him a terrifying edge.

"What are you doing?" I ask breathlessly as he stalks toward me. His hair, usually perfect, is now disheveled and some of the dark strands fall in his eyes.

"I had hoped we could do this the easy way, but you're proving to be more stubborn than I expected."

"I'm sorry if you expected me to just fall in line after you kidnapped me and locked me away," I spit back.

"That is exactly what I expected you to do. Such a weak thing, but so much spirit. I'm gonna need to break it. It's for your own good, of course. Challenge the wrong fae and you'll end up dead."

"I've lived through worse than you and it didn't break me." I know I shouldn't egg him on, but showing fear will only give him the sick satisfaction he's seeking.

"Princess, you don't even know what I'm capable of, yet. Nothing in your wildest dreams is worse than me."

He smirks and removes his belt from his pants. My eyes go wide for a second, fear trickling through me. I try to move away but he grabs my ankles and flips me onto my stomach. I'm breathing heavily now and kicking as hard as I can to get away. He climbs onto the bed and straddles my legs, pinning me down.

He presses himself into my back and whispers in my ear, "this will be over much faster if you stop struggling, but to tell you the truth I like when you put up a fight."

He sits back on his heels and yanks down my pants, exposing my ass to him. I gasp as the cold steel of a large blade slides under the strap of my underwear and slices the material. He does the same to the other side and rips the destroyed garment off of me.

I start to panic and decide to use his own words against him, "I thought you didn't need to assault a human like me since you had your pick of fae women."

"Believe me, you would be lucky if all I was going to do was fuck you."

Without warning the belt cracks down on my bare ass making me cry out. The pain comes with a wave of pleasure.

"You will learn to respect me, Arden."

He lands another blow with the belt. This time I expect it and I simply gasp at the sting. He lands three more blows. Each one increases in both pleasure and pain. On the last one I let out a soft moan. The weight on top of me disappears as Zorvan retreats with haste.

I rush to cover myself, and hope he didn't notice the wetness gathering between my legs. A wave of shame washes through me, but I quickly dismiss it.

Zorvan is heinously attractive, and I would be blind to not see it. There is also something arousing about the way he dominates every situation, every person, and especially the way he dominates me. If this is his form of punishment, I'll gladly take it.

His pupils are dilated and his nostrils are flared. He states, “you’re aroused.”

He’s clenching his jaw and glaring at me like I’ve seriously offended him. It makes my embarrassment fade into hatred. I’m not going to stand for that. He can’t attack me and then act like I was the one who assaulted him.

I stalk into his space and slap him hard across the face. He slowly turns his face back to mine with a sneer.

“Don’t ever touch me again,” I demand.

“Don’t give me a reason to punish you and I won’t. Although it would seem that I need a more suitable punishment. I didn’t realize you were such a whore that whipping you would turn you on.”

I raise my hand to slap him again, but this time he catches my wrist and pulls me to him, “I gave you one hit. I hope you enjoyed it because you’ll never get another one. Rest well, Princess.” He shoves me away from him, exits the room, and slams the door behind him.

I wake from a sound sleep and slowly open my eyes. Even without seeing or hearing him, I know Zorvan is in my room. I can smell the sweet and spicy scent of him. I can feel his presence as if it calls out to me like some sort of demented siren’s song. I couldn’t stop thinking about him after he left my room, and now he’s here. Watching me.

My eyes find bright blue ones, slightly aglow staring back at me. “What were you dreaming about, Princess?” Zorvan’s voice is husky.

I try to grasp ahold of the dream before it gets away from me. It was sexy, but the details elude me. “I don’t remember,” I say, my voice still hoarse from sleep. “What are you doing here?” I ask, pulling my knees to my chest.

“It’s time to change your dressings,” he says, lighting the sconces.

“It couldn’t wait till morning?”

“Airen said every six hours for the first few days. It’s imperative that you have the dressing changed and the ointment applied to prevent any issues. But if you want to die of a horrible infection, that’s fine by me,” he says bitterly and moves to leave.

“Wait. No. Let’s just get this over with.”

“Shirt off,” he commands.

I hesitate.

“I said ‘Shirt. Off’.”

Defiance flares inside of me. “Turn around.”

“I’ve already seen everything you have to offer. Take it off before I do it for you.”

With a huff I turn away from him and gingerly peel off my shirt. I pull the sheet up over my chest to preserve some small iota of modesty.

He climbs on to the bed behind me and takes stock of my wounds. “These look better than they did yesterday.”

“Do you think they’ll scar?” I ask.

“Normally I would say they wouldn’t, but with Airen’s magic not working as it should, there’s no way to tell.”

“Have you ever seen her struggle to heal someone?”

“Not since she was a little faun. She’s the best we’ve ever seen.”

“Of course I’m a freak who can’t be healed,” I mutter.

“You’re a freak, but not because you can’t be healed.”

I swing an elbow back and it finds purchase on his ribs. He lets out a grunt followed by a chuckle. “Watch out or you’ll earn yourself another punishment.” His mouth is right against my ear.

A delicious shiver works its way through my body. I’m suddenly very aware of every single place his body touches mine.

“Why couldn’t Airen do this?” I ask. My words come out needy. It’s embarrassing.

“She needs rest.”

“And you don’t?”

“I don’t sleep much these days.”

We sit in a comfortable silence for a short while as he works to clean the wounds and apply the ointment. His hands are surprisingly gentle. It’s so different from the way he handled me earlier.

“I know you said it was your duty, but I do appreciate you saving me from that beast. What happened to it?”

“I killed it,” he says simply.

“Oh.”

“Oh? You sound disappointed.”

“Not disappointed.” I search for the words to explain. “It’s more that I regret that it had to die considering it was just doing what was in its nature. It was just a wild animal.”

“Wild animal or not, I will not tolerate anyone trying to take what belongs to me.”

“You’re so dramatic about this whole ‘you’re mine’ thing.” I roll my eyes.

He grasps my chin and lifts my face so I’m looking at him, my back flush against his chest, “I don’t think you’re taking it seriously enough. You *are* mine. Mine to do whatever I want to.”

I feel his other hand reach around the front of me. I try to turn my head to look at what he’s doing, but he won’t let go of my chin. Before I can stop him he pinches my nipple between his fingers and twists it.

“Zorvan!” I hiss and I reel back to slap him.

He grabs my wrists and pins me face first to the bed. Pushing my head to the side, he holds my face down with the

palm of his hand. I notice he's careful not to lay on my injuries.

He chuckles darkly. "I told you that you wouldn't get another chance to strike me. You have so much fight in you for someone who grew up with such soft humans. It's been years since anyone has dared to lay a hand on me outside of combat training. Tell me, Princess, how long will it be before you fall into line like everyone else?"

"I won't ever fall in line." My face is half smushed into the bed so my words come out slurred.

"We'll see about that, but I hope you're right. Taking what I want is much more fun than being offered it freely. I suspect you'll get on your knees before me one way or another, though."

"Not in this lifetime or the next," I say, struggling against him.

He groans in my ear. "Keep that up, and I'll take you right now. I would much rather wait until you're healed enough that I can leave my own marks on you."

Heat floods my core at those words. Todd was never rough enough with me despite all my pleading. My attraction to Zorvan confounds me. He's the epitome of toxic, and everything I tend to hate about men. Even still, there's something there that pulls me to him, and I hate him all the more for it.

"You're such a little slut for me, Arden," he says, taking his hand off of my face. I expect him to move off of me. Instead, he grabs onto the shorts I'm wearing and yanks them down exposing me to him.

"Zorvan! Stop!" I shout as I try to wiggle out from under him, but he pins me with his legs.

"Stop moving," he growls as he hauls back and lands a firm slap to my left ass cheek.

“Fuck off!” I yell and try desperately to spin around to face him. He’s solid, and heavy, and his now rock hard erection is pressing into my ass through his pants.

My heart is pounding in my chest. I know it’s wrong, but I don’t want him to go. I stop struggling to catch my breath.

“Good girl,” he purrs, thinking I’ve given up. His praise makes my pussy clench. He slides his hand down my ass and toward my aching clit.

“Please stop, Zorvan,” I beg.

“Afraid of what I’ll find between those thick thighs of yours?”

He slides a finger along my slit and an embarrassing mewl escapes me. “Fuck,” I gasp. He must take that as encouragement because he roughly shoves two fingers inside of me without warning. I gasp at the intrusion. He begins moving them in and out of me at a painfully slow pace.

“You can act like you hate me all you want, but I know how bad you want me. Who knew that all I had to do was rough you up a little bit and you’d be such a good little whore?”

He picks up the pace, pumping his fingers inside of me again and again until I’m just about to come. He abruptly pulls his fingers from me and I whine at the loss. He steps away from the bed, and I hurry to pull my shorts up and pull the sheet back over my chest. My gaze meets his just in time to see him sucking my arousal off of his fingers.

“Jarrah will be here first thing in the morning to change your bandages, again. Rest well, Princess. And think of me while you’re alone.”

And like a ghost he’s gone. Taking the light from the sconces and the air from my lungs with him as he waltzes out the door.

Just as Zorvan promised, Jarrah is in my room just a few hours later. I have barely slept since Zorvan left. I was too turned on and angry. The sun is starting to bleach the sky to pale pinks and purples. My skin is starting to feel a little clammy to the touch. I wonder if the toxin is finally taking hold.

I stare out the window as Jarrah sets to work cleaning my wounds. “The sunrises and sunsets are much more vibrant here than back home,” I muse.

“I’ve noticed that, too.”

“I never wondered before today why the sky changes color back home. I know you said that you have different moons here. Do you have different suns as well?”

“We have quite a few, yes. Our stars migrate. Our world turns, just as yours, but our stars also move. They travel in constellations, and depending on the time of year, there are as many as five major ones visible at one time. Our stars are sentient. I suspect the ones in your galaxy are as well, but they don’t seem to favor you as ours do us.”

“Wait, so we’re on a different planet?”

“I’ve never been able to answer that question. Neither have any of the seers or the scholars. I suspect that ours is a separate dimension, and not a different planet, per se.”

“I don’t think I got enough sleep for this conversation,” I grumble.

Jarrah laughs, “well, we can go have breakfast in a short while and get you some coffee.”

“That sounds like heaven.”

“Now that’s a bizarre concept,” Jarrah says.

“What is?”

“The whole heaven and hell thing that humans are so obsessed with. At least the ones from your part of earth,

anyway. All that worship of a god that none of you has ever even seen.”

“Do you not have gods in this realm?”

“Not that we’ve ever seen, no. Just the Stars. They influence everything.”

“Did they create this world?”

“Not that we know of. They’re almost more like...” he considers his words, “like guardians. It’s as if whoever or whatever created our world put them in charge of us.”

“So they’re like cosmic babysitters?” I laugh.

“In the most simple of terms, yes.” He chuckles.

“How do they influence things?” I ask.

“They are the ones who imbue us with our magics. They determine what we shift into and what gifts we have. If we’re born under a certain constellation, that dictates which of our elemental powers are stronger. They also are the ones who decide if we’re lucky enough to be fate bound to another fae.”

“Fate bound?”

“Yes. Like a destined mate. I think your realm calls them ‘soul mates’?”

“Oh, well that’s just a term people use to describe when they’re really in love with someone. It’s not a destiny thing, or whatever. How do you know if you’re fate bound to someone?”

“It’s different for the different types of fae. The primary symptom is an undeniable and insatiable attraction. But there are other more telltale signs. For shifters, it’s a scent thing. For vampires, they can hear it in their heartbeat.”

“And what does a mate smell like?” This is fascinating. I have read some books written by humans that had similar things, but I never imagined that it was real. *Had those authors met fae? Were they part fae?*

“It depends on the shifter, apparently,” he replies.

“Have you met yours, yet?”

“It appears that being fate bound isn’t in the cards for me,” he says, sounding disappointed.

“You’re still young though,” I muse. “For a Sangarian anyway. You could still meet your mate.”

He gives me an intense look. “Even if she were right in front of me, I am engaged to someone else. I wouldn’t be permitted to take her as mine.”

“Says who? I can’t imagine that the fae don’t practice polyamory to some degree.”

“Zorvan has decided that myself and the other keepers aren’t going to be permitted to be with our mate.”

“Zorvan’s a shithead.” I grumble, but my mind flashes back to the middle of the night when he showed up in my room. The way he commanded me, and consumed me.

“What are you thinking about?” Jarrah asks with a knowing lilt to his voice.

“Zorvan and his stupid rules.”

“You’re thinking about Zorvan?” Jarrah asks with a hint of shock in his voice.

“Why do you sound surprised?” I ask.

“You might want to know...”

“Know what?”

“Fae, especially shifters, can scent when another fae—or a human—is aroused.”

“Fucking hell. Well, that’s really terrible and embarrassing. It also explains a lot.”

“What does it explain?”

“Nothing. It doesn’t matter. Breakfast then?” I really don’t want to tell Jarrah about my run-ins with Zorvan and

Emyth.

He eyes me suspiciously but mercifully drops the conversation, “Sure. Get dressed and we can go.”

I find a new dress in the closet. It barely fits. I decide I’m going to have to ask for different clothes because there isn’t enough in the closet that is in my size. I’ve noticed that the majority of the women here are fairly thin. They float when they walk and their wispy figures perfectly match their ethereal appearance. But I am neither wispy nor ethereal.

I step out of the closet and Jarrah looks me up and down, his eyes settling on my cleavage that is threatening to spill out of the dress.

When he doesn’t say anything right away, I clear my throat. His gaze shifts to mine and he gives a devilish grin. “That is quite the dress,” he says. “Zorvan is going to be so mad. I can’t wait.”

Once we’re in the hall he offers me his arm. I link my elbow in his as we walk.

“Why is Zorvan so weird toward me?” I ask.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s like he’s two different people. One side of him acts like he wants me dead and the other side...”

“The other side what?”

“Well. It doesn’t want to *kill* me.” I say trying to be as vague as possible.

“There are a lot of reasons why Zorvan is the way he is. His parents died when he was young causing him to come into a lot of responsibility too soon. He carries the weight of this whole kingdom on his shoulders. It’s sucked a lot of the fun out of him. He used to be a lot different. He was actually pleasant to be around.”

“Still doesn’t explain why he treats me like his property. Or like garbage depending on what mood strikes

him.”

“That probably has more to do with the fact that you were Todd’s fiancée.”

“*Am* Todd’s fiancée.”

“Love, you’re going to want to get over that. Even if we were to let you go back, Todd likely wouldn’t want anything to do with you. Zorvan and I made sure of that.”

My stomach twists thinking of the ‘evidence’ that was left on my phone. “Why can’t I remember that twenty-four hours?”

“Zorvan put a block on your memory.”

“Why?”

He holds his hands up in mock surrender, “that’s his business to tell.”

“Yeah, like he ever talks to me outside of giving commands.” I grumble.

We walk into the dining hall and take up our seat at our regular table. I pour myself a cup of coffee and take a sip. It’s the one vice I allowed myself back home, and it’s a comfort to have it here, too. The coffee is richer here, though. It’s nutty and bold and not bitter at all, even without cream.

Lysander, Tavin, and Emyth join us and we have breakfast in relative silence. Zorvan doesn’t arrive until we’re all about done eating. He won’t look at me, and merely grunts at me when I tell him good morning.

I decide to not let the grumpy asshole ruin my morning. “Are any of you free today? I would like to see the gardens, and the library.”

“I’m free this morning and can take you through the gardens,” Lysander offers with a wide smile. “They’re my favorite part about living here.”

“That would be amazing. Thank you.”

“I’ll have some time this evening to take you to the library before dinner,” Jarrah says.

“Don’t forget that we have a strategy meeting with the advisors after dinner tonight,” Zorvan says.

“A strategy meeting for what?” I ask

“Stupid war stuff,” Tavin says, rolling his eyes.

“War?”

“Nothing for you to concern yourself with,” Emyth snaps.

I tense, and meet his glare. “No, if I’m going to be living here, I would like to be aware of the goings on. It’s important.”

Zorvan looks at me for the first time since coming to breakfast, and there’s an appreciation there. He nods, “very well. Lysander, you can give her the basics during your visit to the garden. No need to really get into the *finer* details.”

He gives Lysander a stern look and Lysander nods back at him with a glance at a scowling Emyth.

“Sure. I would be happy to.” Lysander gives me a tight smile.

Conversation turns lighter after that. I’m slowly getting a feel for the dynamics between the guys, but they’re all so guarded. I’m not sure if it’s because of my presence or if those walls are always up. I can tell they’re good friends, but their conversations are stilted as if they don’t want to cross some invisible boundaries.

I lean back in my chair and wait for Lysander to finish his meal. The pressure on my back causes a prickling sensation around the wound sites. I’m not sure if I should be concerned. Overall, I still feel okay, but there are some concerning symptoms cropping up. I dismiss it. If it gets any worse, I’ll talk to Airen.

I drink down some extra water, hoping that staying hydrated will help with the healing process. Lysander finishes his food, and we excuse ourselves from the table to go stroll through the gardens.

## Chapter 14: Lysander



### CHAPTER 14: LYSANDER

**A**rden and I stroll through the gardens. I continuously sneak looks at her as she takes in the wonder of the plants surrounding us. Everything is in bloom in the gardens. But then, they always are. Rupert, the gardener, is from the Nature Court and is particularly skilled in flowers and shrubs.

I'm in no rush, so I allow her as much time as she wants to explore the gardens.

Eventually her brow furrows, and she says, "tell me about the war."

"It's ridiculous really. It's not even really a war, and it all started over a woman." I mind my words, careful not to mention Millandra's name.

"Seriously?" she asks in disbelief. "Like a Sangarian Helen of Troy."

"Who is that?"

"She was a woman who allegedly was the cause of a decade long war," she says, and rattles off some information about a mortal war that I've never heard of.

"Sounds about right," I say with a sigh. "How much have the others told you about Sangaris?"

"Jarrah told me the basics. About there being three kingdoms, and a little about the four courts that make up Feldorn."

"Yes. The three kingdoms are Feldorn, Kildara, and Solardin. About fifty years ago, a Kildaran woman was set to marry Emyth to strengthen ties between the Kildarans and Feldorites."

Arden's jaw tenses when I mention Emyth's previous engagement. I want to ask her how she feels about our current arrangements, but instead I continue with my story. "She was the sixth grandchild of seven of the reigning king and queen. Since fae live long healthy lives and she had so many cousins and siblings, she was unlikely to ever take the throne in Kildara. Even if she needed to, Emyth's position could have been filled by his brother."

"Emyth has a brother?" she asks.

"Two. Each of us have siblings that our parents had just in case something were to happen to us firstborn children. I am really lucky. My parents love me and my sister and brother all the same, but the others..." I trail off thinking of the way that my friends' parents had treated their other children.

"Lysander?" Arden asks, placing a soft hand on mine.

My skin buzzes with electricity at her touch, and I wonder if she feels it too. My eyes meet hers, and she gives me a shy smile.

"Right, sorry. The Kildaran girl came here to live and to plan their nuptials. She was here for about four months before one day her father, Varwin, showed up and insisted that they go back to Kildara one more time before the wedding. He said it was important for her to see her brother and cousins again, but it seemed like there was another reason for it.

"Varwin was on edge, as if he were waiting for someone or something to jump out of the shadows and attack them. And maybe he was."

"Teleportation is not permitted between kingdoms. This is to eliminate surprise visits from potential threats. All three kingdoms have additional security measures around the capitals. Feldorn, for instance, doesn't allow unidentified magical signatures to be teleported within the grounds. Kildara is particularly strict about it, only allowing the reigning monarch to teleport in and out of the capital.

“The day after the prince arrived to retrieve his daughter, they teleported to the town closest to the Kildaran border where their carriage waited. According to the locals, they loaded up, and set off toward Kildara. However, they didn’t even make it to the border. The following morning two Feldorite merchants were traveling to Kildara for a festival to sell their wares.

“They found the carriage overturned. The driver and the men that the prince had brought with him were slaughtered, and the prince and his daughter were gone. There hasn’t been any sign of them since.”

“I still don’t understand how that started a war.”

“Well, like I said, it’s not really a war. The king of Kildara believes that his son and granddaughter were taken and his men killed by Feldorites. Specifically, he thinks that Emyth had something to do with it. His reaper magic makes a lot of others extremely wary of him. He, of course, didn’t have anything to do with it. We searched high and low for them and never found them. They’re either in one of the other two kingdoms or not in this realm anymore.

“The king didn’t officially declare war on us, but militia groups who call themselves The Sentinels have been showing up and attacking our outlying villages. Killing our men, raping and stealing our women and some of our children. The children that are left behind are never left alive,” I say.

Arden grimaces, but she doesn’t say anything so I continue.

“Killing children under any circumstances is heinous, but it’s especially true here. While the royal families tend to have multiple heirs to secure their bloodlines, other families have one or maybe two children. There are exceptions to the rule, but birth can be dangerous for female fae. Especially when you complicate bloodlines, like mixing shifter-kin or vampires with full blooded shifters.”

“What are shifter-kin?” Arden asks.

“Half animal and half fae. Like Airen. She’s shifter-kin. If a deer shifter mates with a vampire or an Ashylan fae, then sometimes the product is half-blooded.”

Arden nods as she absorbs all of the information. Humans and beasts in the mortal realm are so straightforward. I wouldn’t blame her if she couldn’t remember everything.

“Do you know for sure that this king...”

“Ardeth,” I supply. I immediately regret saying it out loud.

“Ardeth... That’s so similar to my name.”

*Fuck.* “Yes it is. That’s interesting.” I hope I’m playing it cool enough.

Thankfully, she continues on with her original thought, “So how do you know King Ardeth was responsible for the attacks on Feldorn?”

“We don’t know that for sure. When we attempted to discuss the matter with the king he just told us that he had nothing to do with it. He also claimed that similar things were happening in his kingdom, but wouldn’t tell us where. We’ve been trying to get proof, but the few Sentinel men that we’ve captured have committed suicide before we could coax the truth out of them. They had some enchantment preventing them from telling us anything about who they worked for.”

“That’s horrible,” Arden says.

I nod. “It was also difficult for us on a personal level is that Emyth loved her. He fell apart after she disappeared. He took up drinking, and was constantly angry. One of the fae in the court brought a human back to Feldorn once and Emyth accidentally—” My mouth snaps shut. “You know, that’s something that Emyth should share with you when he’s ready. It’s not my place.”

I breathe a sigh of relief when she nods in agreement.

She’s shaking a little. I’m about to ask if she ate enough at breakfast when I notice that her jaw is set and

there's a stormy look that's settled over her face.

“What do you think they're doing with the women and children?” She asks, her eyes are unfocused as she looks out over the forest. “All those poor babies.”

“We have no clue. Our best guess is some form of slavery, but we have no idea. We've found no bodies, and none of them have returned home.”

“What about Solardin? Where do they fall with all of this?”

“They don't get involved. They've sent a couple of women to marry within our ranks to strengthen the alliance between our kingdoms. Iona and Faylin are descendants of the current queen, Cyndair. Her eldest grandson is set to take the throne once she retires or dies.”

“They don't have a king? This realm feels very patriarchal.”

“It is, but King Esrend died several years ago. Someone challenged him for his throne. He died in the fight. Unfortunately for the poor sap who challenged him, Cyndair was more powerful than Esrend. We were all surprised when he was killed though. He was an ancient powerful vampire.”

She's quiet for a long moment then asks, “How long do fae live if they're not killed in gladiator fights, or whatever?”

“The oldest recorded fae lost track around eight thousand. We do eventually die of old age. It just takes a very long time.”

“So my existence here with you will be a tiny blip. Another forty-five to fifty years, and I'll be gone. And you five will keep living as if I never existed.”

She sounds disappointed, and my stomach flips uncomfortably at the idea of her dying so soon. She's only part fae which will decrease her life expectancy. I'm worried that if I open my mouth to say anything I'll end up saying the wrong thing, so I stay quiet.

After a minute or so she adds bitterly, “Iona can have Jarrah for sure then.”

“You almost sound like you care.” I’m trying to lighten the mood. “Catching feelings for that big ole pussycat?”

Her face turns scarlet, but she covers her feelings with a lie, “Iona just seems like an entitled bitch, and I don’t like when girls like her get their way.”

Arden jumps when a male voice intrudes on our conversation with, “Yes, if that girl is one thing, it’s entitled.”

I chuckle and introduce Arden to our eavesdropper. “Arden, this is Rupert. He’s in charge of the grounds here at the castle.”

“It’s been nearly half a century since I last saw a human. You’re much prettier than the last one I met.” He takes her hand and kisses her fingers lightly.

My wolf bristles, but I tell him to be quiet. Rupert has been the grounds keeper here since before myself and the others were born. He has flaming red hair and bright blue eyes. He’s one of the kindest souls I’ve ever met.

“Thank you,” Arden says, her blush deepening. Now it’s not just my wolf that’s irritated. Rupert is a very handsome man, and he’s in amazing shape from all his time working in the gardens. There’s a lot he can do for the plants with magic, but some of the heavy lifting requires manual labor. I’ve noticed that he also just likes working with his hands. He is a good deal older than myself and the others, but you would never know it to look at him.

“Don’t let this one give you too much trouble,” he says to Arden. “If he does, you let me know and I’ll deal with him,” he adds with a wink. “Now why don’t you go on ahead a little bit. I have some boring garden business I need to discuss with Lysander, here.”

Arden gives me a questioning look as if seeking my permission. I nod for her to go.

“Just don’t go far from me. Stay where I can see you in case something happens.”

“Okay,” she agrees and walks toward some cardamym bushes along the right hand side of the gardens.

“Lysander,” Rupert warns as soon as she’s out of earshot. He stares after her with a look of concern in his eyes.

“Rupert,” I say back, waiting for his lecture. He had to help clean up the mess that Emyth made of the last human.

“Why is she here?”

“Well, Zorvan and Jarrah stumbled upon her in the earth realm. They thought that she should be brought back here.”

“Stumbled upon her?”

“Yes. She was apparently shacking up with a hunter who had a lot of other enemies,” I grumble.

Anger flares in his eyes. “She isn’t safe here,” he whispers, his eyes scanning the area as if someone would dare attack her in front of me.

“She’s safer here than with him.”

“You know that she’s not safe here at all.”

“If it’s because she’s human—”

“Of course she isn’t human,” he hisses. “But I heard what Iona tried to do to her, already.”

I stare at him in surprise. The only reason that Jarrah and Zorvan could tell she wasn’t human in the earth realm was because of the mate pull, and Zorvan testing her magic. With the magic suppressants she’s been given her entire life, no one besides us can tell that she’s part fae. She doesn’t even have pointed ears.

“How did you know?” I ask.

He gives me a sheepish look. “Well look at her. She’s the spitting image of Millie. I would guess that she’s what, her

granddaughter?”

He’s lying. There’s something he isn’t telling me. Zorvan comes strolling up behind me right at that moment, interrupting my thought.

“Lysander, we need to have that strategy meeting now.”

“What’s wrong?” I ask, anxious about the urgency in his tone.

“There’s been another attack. This time in Krean.”

“Shit,” I say. Krean is the village just south of the castle. It’s within the strongest layer of protective wards because a lot of the staff and their families live there, including council members.

“Arden!” Zorvan yells and she scowls at him as he beckons her over.

She sticks her tongue out in a childish way, eliciting a growl from Zorvan. She’s going to ignore his demand out of spite, and normally I would let it play out. Right now, we don’t have the time for their games.

“Please? It’s important,” I call.

She purses her lips, but eventually concedes and heads our direction. We say our goodbyes to Rupert and walk back to the castle.

When we’re out of Rupert’s earshot, Arden asks sweetly, “Hey, Zorvan?”

“Yes?” He replies with indifference.

Her tone is casual when she asks, “how might I go about getting new underwear since mine were destroyed by an angry dragon last night?”

I choke on a laugh. She doesn’t pull her punches with him, and it’s so sexy. I love strong women; and strong men.

Zorvan scowls at her before answering, “I’ll have one of the servants bring you some.”

We reach the door, and I pause. “Wait, if your underwear were destroyed...” I start then I let my eyes drift down her body. She’s wearing one of the dresses from her closet. It’s made of fae fabric and it’s a little tight on her causing her beautiful breasts to pop over the top of the dress a little. It hugs her ass in a glorious way. I want to rip it off her.

Zorvan also gives her an appraising look, “wasn’t there anything that fit you a little better in the closet?”

Arden’s face falls, her gaze dropping to the ground. She wraps her arms around her middle as if she’s desperate to disappear. Her confidence has wavered, and I hate seeing the look of shame on her face. Why the hell would he say something so cruel? Especially in front of the guards. Zorvan doesn’t say another word. He gestures for the guards to open the doors, and stalks away.

“If you’re in need of better suited clothing, I can have one of the seamstresses come measure you and have some things made.” I push her hair over her shoulder and let my fingers graze her collar bone. Her large blue eyes are barely containing her tears.

“It’s just that most of the clothing in the closet was designed more for fae women. If I lost a little weight—”

“Don’t you dare,” I growl and she jumps in surprise. Her wide eyes remind me of a fawn who’s just been found by a predator. Her lips part a little and I wonder what her mouth tastes like.

I nearly give in to the urge to find out, but instead I press a chaste kiss to her forehead and wrap her into my arms. Warmth spreads through me from the contact. She rests her head on my chest and sighs as she leans into my touch. This girl is an addiction that will consume me from the inside out, and I’m going to let it.

Reluctantly, I pull back, but I keep my hands on her shoulders as I gaze into her beautiful eyes. “I’ll send someone up this afternoon while we’re in our strategy meeting. It got moved to lunch time.”

“You don’t have to send anyone. I don’t want to be a bother,” she murmurs.

“You need clothes, sweet Fawn. It was rude of Zorvan to not consider it before now. Please let me do this for you.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Come on. Let’s get you back to your room.”

I take her hand in mine and start leading her back to her quarters. Her hands are clammy. Her forehead was a little warm when I kissed her, but I thought that was just from the magic transfer.

“Are you feeling okay?” I pause and have her face me, and really take in her appearance.

She’s paler than she was yesterday. I touch her forehead with my hand this time. She’s a little warm, but not so much that I’m concerned.

“I’m guessing it’s the talix venom working its way out,” she says. “I have the medicine that Airen gave me in my room. I’ll take some when I get back.”

“Okay. Just take it easy the rest of the day. I’ll send Blevora up a different day.”

“The seamstress? No please send her. I feel okay enough to manage. And I need new clothes.”

“Okay, but if you need a break, send her away. And if you need one of us, have her come get us.”

“I will, I promise. I’m sure I’ll feel better after I take some of the medicine that Airen gave me.”

I don’t like any of this, but I just nod and lead her back to her room.

## Chapter 15: Zorvan



### CHAPTER 15: ZORVAN

**G**uilt courses through me at the look on Arden's face when I ask her about her dress. Of course she doesn't have anything that fits her in those closets. Maybe it's because her fae form has been repressed or because of her human blood, but she's got far more curves than the vamps and shifters around here.

Beautiful, voluptuous curves that I could sink my teeth into if she would allow me to. Stars. Last night was such a mistake. And this morning. *Fuck. I am going to need a cold bath before the day is out.*

More than anything I'm upset that she's parading around with those curves on display for everyone to see. Even Rupert was looking at her with adoration, and he never pays any mind to the women around here. Then she said she wasn't wearing any underwear, and I nearly lost it.

She looks devastated. I have to walk away so that I don't scoop her into my arms and fuck the self-doubt out of her. I retreat to my room so that I can prepare for the strategy meeting. It's going to be a struggle for me to concentrate on the damn thing.

I want to figure out what is going on with Arden so I know if I can safely take her as my mate. My self-control has never been so lacking and I'm playing with fire by stealing touches from her in secret. *If she were to get pregnant—No. I won't let that happen.*

It's going to be weeks of tapering her suppressants before I'll know the answer to whether or not she can carry an heir so I just need to suck it up and deal with it.

I change into more formal attire for the meeting. My father taught me a long time ago that you gain more respect

from your council and your court if you approach these meetings with a royal appearance. I take one last look in the mirror at my outfit. My tunic is black with silver embroidery. It comes to mid-thigh over my black pants.

Over my right shoulder is an emerald satin cape. The last thing I add to my wardrobe is my crown. Silver branches and leaves twist into a circle with shimmering emeralds set throughout. It completely encircles my head and is about six inches high.

I hate the damn thing. It's heavy and gets caught in my hair.

Once I'm fully dressed, I head to the war room. I wish we could have these meetings in my office, but it's not big enough for everyone.

To my surprise, I'm not the first one to arrive. Falmir is staring out the window with his hands clasped behind his back. He doesn't bother to turn and face me when I enter. It's a blatant sign of disrespect and it sets my teeth on edge. I close my eyes and breathe in deeply, desperate to keep it together. I roll out the map of Feldorn in the center of the table, before taking my place at the head of it.

"Prince Zorvan." Falmir finally faces me and gives a shallow bow.

"Falmir. To what do I owe the pleasure of you arriving early?"

"Your new little pet insinuated that Lord Jarrah had relations with her. Is that true?"

"Where Jarrah chooses to stick his cock is none of my business," I say coolly.

It is very much my business. Not only is she my mate, but I was there. The thought of him plowing her from behind while my cock hit the back of her throat— *I'm definitely going to need a cold bath.*

“I’m going to make it your business! His marriage to Iona is set to align Feldorn with Solardin, and he’s betrayed her before their union has even formed!”

“Men take mistresses all the time. This is nothing new, Falmir. In fact, your bastard is currently across the courtyard working in my library.”

Falmir’s face reddens like a tomato. “I feel that Iona deserves a partner who is going to respect their relationship and not make a mockery of it by having sex with a human.”

“So you want to cancel their betrothment, then? I’m sure I could find another female from Solardin who would be happy to marry Jarrah regardless of who he has sex with,” I suggest.

“Yes. And I want a different partner for her.”

“She is free to take a different mate, but the other three keepers are spoken for as you’re well aware.”

“Yes, but *you* are not.”

I snort at his statement. “Iona could not handle being my mate.”

“Are you calling my daughter weak?”

“To put it plainly, yes. I tested her blood myself. She is too weak to carry an heir for me.”

“It wouldn’t just be about producing an heir it would also be about—”

“A position of power,” I cut him off, “and Iona isn’t in a station that would be beneficial to me either. I don’t even care if my future mate is a royal. I just need someone who is physically capable of giving me an heir. I will wait until I find a female capable of doing just that.”

“Marrying Iona wouldn’t benefit you? Why do you think we’re here?”

“You are here because you agreed to unite our kingdoms with your daughter’s hand in marriage to Jarrah.

Despite your royal bloodline, your place in line for the throne means you are still well below the station of a keeper. Iona and you are the two benefiting most from her marrying Jarrah, not me. Additionally, mating her to me would be a death sentence for her. It's not up for discussion.

“Either you keep the agreement that is already in place or I find someone else for my keeper. I'm sure he would be happy to take Arden as his chosen mate. And wouldn't that be so embarrassing for you. I can hear the whispers now 'Did you hear? Iona got dumped for a human! She couldn't satisfy the Keeper of the War Court'.”

Falmir grinds his teeth. He keeps his mouth shut as my men and the rest of the advisors file in. I'm struggling to maintain my composure. My ritual for these meetings involves me coming in before everyone else so that I can plan my words as carefully as possible and look over the battle maps. My ritual was interrupted, and it's set me off kilter.

I clap my hands once to gain the attention of the room. “Alright, we have a lot to discuss and not much time to do it. Krean was attacked last night. Because we have more soldiers stationed there due to its proximity to the castle, there was less damage than the attack on Bellmoor last month.”

“How many of ours perished?” Mirv asks.

Walden, our guard commander, is the one to answer. “Six. One of the guards was killed before the group was detected, and five townspeople. There were eight people abducted.”

“Anyone of note? Who was abducted?” Tavin asks.

“The town's people that were killed didn't have ties to the castle, but the abductees did. Helena's sister and Airen's niece were taken. Along with Telnar and his child,” I answer “Also one of the tavern keeps, his wife, and their two children. The tavern keeps sister works in our kitchens with Helena.”

“Telnar?” Jarrah asks. Rage simmering in his eyes. “How the fuck did they get Telnar without a fight?”

Telnar is a beast of a bear shifter. He served on the guard for many years before his daughter was born. His wife died in labor, and he decided to spend his time raising his daughter. I gave him a handsome severance to keep them comfortable until his daughter was at least an adult.

“They got to his cub first. Then they made him tell them who was important in the village. They didn’t make it very far before the Bennett could return with more men,” Walden explains. “This is the first time they’ve taken a male. They would have had to sedate him heavily to get him out of there.”

“They are starting to take more risks. This is the first attack during the day, and attacking this close to the castle is a stupid move. They have to know we’ll stop at nothing to find them. Also, Walden’s men were able to wound one of the men and get a sample of his blood. We attempted to track him, but it’s a dead end. At least we know what he is.”

“What kind of fae are we looking for?” Lysander asks.

“Vampire with strong blood and moon magic.”

“Solardinite?” Falmir asks in shock.

“Most likely.”

“This is the fifth one we’ve got blood tags on and three of them were Solardinite. The other two were mixed blood. Should we start assuming that this group is from Solardin?” Walden asks.

“It might be wise to at least consider it, but I’m not ready to make a formal determination yet,” I say. The only reason I’m delaying is because we already have a tenuous relationship with Kildara and if we go on the offensive with Solardin it may cause an all-out war between all three kingdoms.

“As a representative of Solardin I would be remiss to not speak up for my kingdom. If for some reason this group is made of Solardinites, they have to be an independent group working against the interests of the queen. She would never do

anything to cause discourse among the other kingdoms,” Mirv says.

Falmir has a blank look on his face and I can’t decide if he’s in shock or enraged.

“I’m sure you believe that, and I would like to believe that as well. That’s why I’m not jumping to conclusions.”

“Should we contact Kildara and arrange a discussion?” Jarrah asks. As Keeper of the War Court, he gets antsy when there are issues between the kingdoms.

“We can send a courier with a letter requesting a conversation.”

Walden clears his throat, nervously. “Sir, there was something else that I hadn’t told you because I didn’t realize it was relevant until after I spoke with you prior to the meeting. It’s come to my attention—do you have a human in the castle?”

I tense at his words and growl, “Yes, Walden, why?”

“I was unaware of the human so I didn’t think it meant anything. The man that was injured had told one of my soldiers to hand over the human or they would burn Feldorn to the ground. He also said that if we handed the human over, the attacks would stop.”

I do my best to maintain my composure. How the hell had these men found out about Arden. I’m angry at Walden for bringing this up in front of everyone. He didn’t have any reason to think he shouldn’t, but it’s a careless move.

“Well, there’s the answer. We hand over the girl, the attacks stop, and Jarrah’s engagement to Iona remains intact.” Falmir slaps the table, a smug smile spreading across his face.

“We’re not handing her over,” Jarrah growls.

“I believe that’s up to Prince Zorvan,” Falmir retorts, pompous enough to think I’ll agree with him.

“She is my prisoner and she will not be used as a bargaining chip,” I say definitively.

“Prisoner,” Falmir scoffs. “Her quarters are nicer than mine and they’re in your corridor. You won’t deign to dine with the rest of the castle but you invite her to your table to eat. When she attacked my daughter unprovoked —”

“Iona attacked her first,” I yell standing to my feet. “If you do not like the way I run my kingdom then you can challenge me for my throne. Until then you can deal with the way I handle my business.”

“All I’m saying is that you call her a prisoner, she has more luxuries than anyone except your keepers. Seems strange for a fae with as much disdain for humans as yourself.”

Once he finishes his little speech he takes stock of how much vitriol I’m holding for him. He shrinks a little in his chair under my stare. I hold his gaze for a moment daring him to keep talking. When it seems like he’s really done I continue the meeting.

“You have spent all of five minutes with the girl. You don’t know how I am or am not treating her. I have her in that room both for her safety, and so I can monitor her. She eats with us, because when the five of us are together away from her is when she is most vulnerable. Aside from a nicer bed, and my company at mealtimes she has no luxuries.

“She is not permitted to return to her home in the human realm, and I’m sure if you asked her, she would tell you that my company is the worst part of her day. So, yes, she is a prisoner.” Not that I have to explain myself to any of these fuckwits. The next person that questions my reasoning for bringing Arden here will be burned alive.

“Arden will not be traded to these people. We don’t know their true motivations or who they serve. We don’t have any reason to believe that they would hold up their end of the bargain. Until we have more information, we continue trying to learn more about them and their motives.

“I have personal reasons for bringing the human here, and they have nothing to do with this war. Seeing that I have a vested interest in her safety, I will keep her in my corridor with a guard posted outside of her room. That is if my keepers or myself can’t personally have eyes on her.

“No one is to harm a hair on her head until I decide how to best utilize her. If I find out that anyone has gone against my commands there will be dire consequences. Am I understood?”

Everyone around the room nods their heads in understanding except Falmir. I slam my fist on the table and repeat myself, “Am. I. Under. Stood?”

“Yes,” he hisses out.

“Good. Does anyone else have anything they wish to say about my new pet or can we move on?”

It’s Mirv who speaks this time, “I couldn’t help but notice that the girl looks like Millandra?”

In my peripheral, Emyth tenses.

“Yes. That’s one of the reasons I want her here. I don’t know why she looks so much like Millie.” *Though I have my suspicions.* I add silently. “But I intend to find out.” *And never tell any of you.*

Before he died, my father insisted that I learn how to put up mental blocks against mind reading abilities. It was one of the first things I learned while training to take over the kingdom. I didn’t see the importance of learning it when I was a child, and I complained about it constantly. Now that I’m in charge, I’m grateful for it.

“Anything else?” I ask. When no one answers I continue on with the meeting and we discuss the mundane ins and outs of increasing security at Krean and the other villages around the kingdom.

## Chapter 16: Arden



### CHAPTER 16: ARDEN

**H**elena delivers my lunch while I'm waiting for the seamstress to arrive. I pick at it, and mull over my conversation with Lysander. The issue of the abducted fae weighs heavily on me. My leg shakes with anxious energy while I think about the situation. If Zorvan hasn't been able to stop it with all of his resources and abilities, there's no way that I could put an end to it.

A rapid *KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK* rips me from my thoughts.

"Come in," I call out.

The door swings open and standing in the corridor is a lithe fae woman with waist length white hair and sharp features. Behind her is a rack of fabrics, and she has a measuring tape draped around her neck.

"Well, aren't you an absolute vision," she says dramatically as she enters the room and boops me on the nose with a long slender finger. The rack of fabrics follows behind her without her lifting a finger. I expect there to be a second person pushing the cart, but it seems that it's manned by magic.

"I'm Blevora, the royal seamstress. And of course, you're Arden. Not many humans around these parts." She gives me a once over and says, "I so rarely get to dress anyone that has a little extra meat on their bones. Let's get started!" She claps her hands together in excitement.

I'm still feeling a little sensitive after Zorvan's appraisal of my appearance, and I grind my teeth at her comment. I have always been a little on the chubby side. I made my peace with it during high school. Until recently I was comfortable with how I looked. Comfortable enough that I

was able to brush it off when Todd was nagging me about eating better and exercising more; or his mom made rude comments about my weight. But something about Zorvan criticizing me made me feel like a self-conscious preteen again.

“Hop up!” She says, placing a stool on the floor and impatiently gesturing at it.

I sigh and step up. She begins taking measurements and writing them down on a small notepad that she seemed to conjure out of nowhere.

“So what did you do to gain the affections of Prince Zorvan?” she asks, making eye contact through the floor length mirror ahead of me.

“Existed,” I grumble, “and I wouldn’t call it ‘affections’.”

“Well, there’s something special about you,” she says with a click of her tongue. “He wouldn’t let just any female stay in his corridor long term. Especially not a human one.”

“He would if it served him, and apparently I’m a pawn in a much larger scheme.”

She hums to herself as she measures from shoulder to shoulder, “and what about Lord Lysander?”

“What about him?”

“Well, you absolutely have his attention. He was the one who sent me. He said ‘Blevora, make sure that Arden gets whatever she needs’,” she says imitating Lysander’s smooth voice. “He said however many dresses, and undergarments you need,” she adds with a shrug.

“Just dresses? What about pants?”

“Oh! Well, he didn’t say anything specifically about pants, but he did say to treat you as one of the royals. And that Zorvan would pay me extra to get it done quickly. So I guess whatever you wish for me to make.”

I hold back a devious grin. *Well, if it's Zorvan's money...* "I'll need pants and shirts in addition to the things Lysander requested. And if you wouldn't mind, please make sure everything has pockets. Well, except for the undergarments. I suppose I'll need some night clothes as well."

She smiles widely at me, "as you wish."

Once she finishes measuring, she brings an assortment of colored fabrics over and holds them up next to my face and writes notes about each one. The fabrics are all different textures and weights. Some are better for more practical wear. Some are basically see through. Some of them feel like butter as they slide across my skin.

She finishes with the swatches, and puts all but nine or ten colors away. "Lysander specified formal wear. Since those are the most expensive and time consuming, I want to make sure you're happy with the colors. These are the shades that best suit your skin tone. He wants four evening dresses, and a ball gown."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"He wants—"

"No, I heard you. I just don't understand why I need *five* formal dresses." I had two nicer dresses in the human realm that I wore for special occasions. The rest of my wardrobe consisted of jeans, t-shirts, and skater dresses.

"They frequently hold events. I suppose it's because he doesn't want you looking like a forest hag. I expect that they'll want me to make new ones once you've worn each of these a time or two. So which colors do you like best?"

Ignoring the 'forest hag' remark, I take my time and look over the fabrics she's picked out. I select the ones I want; seafoam, a light grey, black, and royal blue. I'm having a hard time picking the last color.

I've narrowed it down to either emerald green or a lovely wine color. Blevora seems like she's getting impatient.

Maybe she's anxious about starting since this is probably a big payday for her. I choose the Emerald, and she gives me a bright smile.

"Interesting choice," she says.

"Why is it interesting?"

"You'll see," she singsongs, and packs away her fabrics and struts to the door.

I follow to see her out.

She hesitates just before the door, then faces me one last time. The smile has faded and her tone is serious. "Whatever the reason they have for keeping you here, it's not what you think. I've known those boys since they were born, and this is the first time any of them have cared enough about a woman to buy her a whole wardrobe of clothing. Count your lucky stars that they look so kindly upon you, but guard yourself. Trust your gut, always."

I have no idea how to respond to that ominous message, so I just nod. She opens the door and I linger in the doorway. When she doesn't close the door behind her I poke my head into the hallway and nearly jump out of my skin when I am greeted with a tall fae man wearing leather armor lurking just to the right of my door.

"Who are you?" I snap.

"I'm Elliott, officer of the Feldorn army, and apparently your babysitter. Now back in the room. I have strict orders," he says.

"To guard my room?"

He nods.

"For how long?"

"Any time Prince Zorvan or the keepers are unable to be nearby."

"Unbelievable," I mutter and retreat to my room. The door clicks shut, followed by the sound of the key engaging

the tumblers. I sigh and throw myself face first onto the bed. Then I wait for Jarrah to retrieve me to go visit the library.

A while later I'm startled awake when I feel a shift on the bed. When my eyes open I'm greeted by Jarrah's smiling face. "Hello, beautiful. Are you ready to go to the library?"

"Yes please," I say sleepily.

He stands and holds out a hand and I take it, letting him help me up from the bed. I slip on some shoes and we make our way into the hall and toward the stairs. As we exit, I notice that Elliott is gone.

"So a whole new wardrobe?" Jarrah asks while we're walking down the hall.

"Yep," I say, popping the 'P', and trying to cut off his small talk.

"I can't wait to see you in whatever Blevora designs for you. She's incredible. But you could wear rags and still look exquisite."

"What are you doing, Jarrah?" I ask with a sigh.

"What do you mean?"

"Flirting with me. You shouldn't be flirting with anyone but your fiancée."

He moves with lightning speed, pinning me against the wall and kissing me hard. My brain short circuits from the buzz I feel when his lips meet mine, and I kiss him back. Just as fast as it started, it's over. He rests his forearm above my head and gazes down into my eyes. The scent of leather and amber puts me at ease.

He clicks his tongue in mock disapproval and says, "Little Dove, I will not let a little thing like a contractual obligation come between me and what is mine."

He calls me 'his' so casually, as if it's a done deal. *Maybe it is.* I need to get my shit together.

“I mean it, though. Iona tried to kill me once. She’ll do it again, she said as much herself. The next time she might be successful.”

“She will not harm one hair on your pretty little head. Zorvan made it abundantly clear to the royals and the rest of the court that if any harm comes to you, they will pay dearly.”

“She said she’d make it look like an accident. Or pin it on Airen somehow.”

“When did she say this? When she attacked you?”

“No. When I got out of my room. I overheard Iona and another girl talking about me, and how I posed some big threat to them.”

“You don’t need to worry about her. I swear it.”

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t find you to be the most trustworthy person I’ve ever met.”

He’s hurt by my words, but all things considered, I think I’m being reasonable.

He sighs. “Let’s go. I want to make sure you have enough time to look around the library before dinner.”

The library is located on the second story on the left side of the castle. By my estimation we’re almost directly across the courtyard from my room. He opens the large double doors to a huge room. It must span the length of the castle, and it is absolutely *filled* with books.

“What exactly are you searching for?” Jarrah asks, leading me into the room.

“Honestly just something to entertain me while I’m stuck in my room.

“We do have several story books around. A lot of these are informational though.”

“Information about what?”

“Past rulers, the different magics, different types of fae, that sort of thing.”

We’re interrupted by another man’s voice. “Lord Jarrah! What a nice surprise, and twice in two days! And who is this lovely thing?”

I meet the man’s gaze and give him a polite smile. He’s even taller than Jarrah who is taller than the other keepers. He’s around seven feet tall and thin but muscular. He has curly brown hair and dark hazel eyes that open wide once he takes me in. “Oh! The human! I heard rumors,” he says, glancing at my ears.

“Livarius! This is Arden. She’s a guest in the castle. Arden, this is Livarius, our tome curator. Arden here is looking for something to keep her occupied while she has down time.”

Livarius takes my hand in his and places a chaste kiss to my knuckles. There’s a faint buzz like what I feel with the keepers, but it’s much more dull, and I only feel it where his mouth meets my skin. I wasn’t paying attention when Faylin or Iona touched me, to know if they had the same effect. *Is it the magic that makes their touch buzz? Is it weaker with weaker fae?*

Livarius releases my hand, and I shoot a snarky look at Jarrah. “don’t let him fool you. I’m a prisoner. He’s just making himself feel better by saying I’m a ‘guest’. I always have down time because I’m not allowed to leave my room without a babysitter.”

Livarius snorts at my commentary earning a scowl from Jarrah. Livarius ignores him and says, “You can call me Liv. Please let me know if you need any assistance finding anything.”

“I would like something made more for entertainment.”

When I begin to follow Livarius, Jarrah places a gentle hand on my shoulder and asks, “do you think you’ll need the whole amount of time between now and dinner?”

“Possibly, but if there isn’t much to choose from in the fiction section, then maybe not.”

“Okay, well go on with Livarius. I’ll be right over here if you need me,” he says as he walks toward a different section of the library.

Liv leads me to a section in the back of the library. There are about six shelves that contain what they refer to as ‘story books’, and I peruse them for a while. Livarius explains to me that these are typically what the younger fae read, but that’s fine with me.

“How many am I allowed to take to my room at one time?” I ask.

“As many as you’d like from this section. There are some historical tomes that are only allowed to be read in the library, but otherwise, whatever book you wish to borrow is yours.”

I pick a couple that sound interesting based on the titles. They don’t have inserts or jackets with blurbs on them like I’m used to.

“Can you take me to the section with books on the different types of fae?”

“Follow me,” he says with a bright smile. “What exactly are you looking for?”

“This is all so new to me, so I guess something with descriptions of the types of fae, how to identify them, their strengths and weaknesses, that kind of thing.”

“I know just the book. It has illustrations, too.” Liv pulls a large leatherbound book from the shelves and hands it to me. I flip through it and decide it’s good to get me started for now.

“Would you like me to set these up front so that you can keep looking?” he asks.

“That would be wonderful.” I hand him the books and then begin looking through the shelves while I wait for him to

return.

When he comes back he finds me sitting on the floor with a historical tome on the bloodlines in Kildara. “That one likely isn’t going to be a very interesting read. It’s just information about the heads of the kingdom.” He takes a seat next to me, stretching his legs out in front of him and leaning back on his palms.

“I don’t know. I think it’ll be good for me to have an idea of the timeline of things.”

“Why would a pretty human like you worry yourself with something like that? You’re unlikely to ever even see Kildara in person.”

Closing the book, I give him my full attention. He’s incredibly handsome. All the men here are; even the ones who want me dead, like Falmir. Livarius’ eyes are kind and his words are light, and non-confrontational. He’s genuinely curious about me and my interests. It’s a breath of fresh air after spending the last few days with the keepers and Zorvan being all growly and possessive.

“Truthfully, I just like to read.”

“Finally! Someone who enjoys it like I do,” he says with a laugh. “The library doesn’t get used much. Most fae stop reading once they finish their studies unless they need to research something. Me on the other hand...I never tire of being here reading these books.”

“That’s probably good since it’s your job,” I say.

He laughs. It’s an enchanting sound, and it gives me butterflies.

“Yeah, I guess it makes things easier.”

We sit silently as I take in the rows upon rows of books. The peaceful quiet and the familiar scent of old paper is comforting.

After some time, I say, “I wish I could spend all day in here. It would certainly be more entertaining than my room.”

“You’re welcome to come here any time you like. I’ll help you find whatever you need,” he says with a smile.

“That’s sweet of you. Unfortunately, lizard boy has decided that I’m not allowed to leave my room unless I have an escort. He even has a guard posted outside my room half the time.”

“I could talk to them, and see if they would be willing to let me escort you. I wouldn’t mind having someone here to keep me company. Especially someone as lovely as you.”

I blush at his words, and I consider his offer. It would be nice to get out of my room more frequently. It’s also not like I have fae lining up to be my friends here in the castle. Airen offered to spend time with me, but another friend or two could make my time here more enjoyable.

“Let me float the idea by them at dinner time and see what they say. If I only ask Zorvan, he’ll say no out of spite. The others might be able to talk him into it.”

Liv pushes himself up off the floor and offers me a hand. He pulls me up to my feet, and I stumble on my weak ankle, colliding with his chest. His arms wrap around me, and I notice the scent of chamomile and honey surrounds him. It’s so sweet and subtle that I have to practically be on top of him to notice it.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper and attempt to step away from him.

“I’m not,” he whispers looking into my eyes. His hands have slid to my waist, and his canines are elongating. Where his beautiful hazel eyes once were, there are now two endless pools of black.

“You’re a vampire,” I whisper, intrigued. Iona is a vampire too, but I would never get this close to that murderous bitch.

“Does that frighten you?” He gives me a bright smile.

I shake my head and swallow thickly. Reaching out with my index finger I ask, “may I?”

He nods slowly and I gently touch one of his brilliantly sharp teeth, careful not to touch the tip of it. He groans softly at the contact. I pull my hand away. We just stare at each other for an endless moment. His breathing has quickened and so has mine. I think he might kiss me, but instead he abruptly pushes me away. My ego is feeling a bit bruised until Jarrah rounds the corner. Livarius must have heard him coming.

“There you are, beautiful,” he says. His eyes narrow and shift to Livarius.

Liv turns to face Jarrah, his teeth and eyes back to their regular state. He scrubs the back of his neck, “I guess it’s time for me to go get some dinner.” He glances at the large clock on the wall. “Normally I lock up any time I leave, but I can keep it open if you two want to stay in here while I’m gone.”

“No, I think the books you put up front for me are sufficient for now. I’ll probably be back in a couple of days for new ones.” *And to see you.* I offer him a smile, and chew my bottom lip.

Jarrah puts his arm around my shoulder and leads me out of the library. Livarius follows and locks the door behind him. We say goodbye to each other as he heads to the dining room and Jarrah walks me to my room.

“Looks like you have an admirer,” Jarrah says once we’re away from Livarius.

“What?” I ask, startled by his statement.

“Livarius. He’s never that quick to open up to people.”

“I think he just wanted someone to talk about books with,” I say dismissively.

“If you say so,” Jarrah says suspiciously, and I worry that he could see—or smell—that I am attracted to Livarius.

“Are you going to come back and get me for dinner?” I ask once we’re at my door.

“Or I could come in and wait with you until it’s time to eat.” He’s flirting again.

“Oh, I’m probably just going to read for a bit,” I say, awkwardly.

“Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Change the subject any time I flirt with you or compliment you?”

“Jarrah,” I say in exasperation. “I’m not going to rehash this again.”

“No. You can’t hide behind the fiancée thing. You can’t tell me you don’t feel the pull between us; the need to be near me.”

“I don’t feel anything of the sort,” I lie.

“Your skin doesn’t ignite at my touch?” He asks in a husky voice as he brushes his thumb over my bottom lip.

My lips part into a silent ‘O’ and I shiver at the touch. “No,” I whisper; another lie.

“Jarrah!” Zorvan’s angry voice calls from up the hallway startling me.

“What?” Jarrah snaps, not taking his eyes off of me.

“A word?”

“We can talk at dinner.”

“No, we can talk now!”

Jarrah clenches his teeth and growls before unlocking my door, “I’ll be back in a little bit to get you for dinner. Try not to miss me too much.”

I roll my eyes, go inside, and drop my books on the desk. The door locks behind me, and I fall back onto my bed and let my mind wander to what just transpired between Livarius and me. And then what happened between Jarrah and me. I wonder what it would be like to be pinned between—*no*.

I stop myself mid thought. It's too late. I'm overheating at the thought.

No. I'm not overheating because of Livarius and Jarrah. I must be spiking a fever. I'm nauseated, and I feel really uncomfortable in my skin. I walk to my dresser and pull out a bit of the leedle root and begin to chew it slowly, willing the nausea and discomfort away.

I just have to hope that this is the worst of it. I'm already so weak and vulnerable in this realm. I don't want to add being sick to the list of things that put me at a disadvantage.

## Chapter 17: Jarrak



### CHAPTER 17: JARRAH

I lock Arden's door, and meet Zorvan at the door to his quarters. The giant asshole looks like he wants to rip my head off. I just smile at him knowing that it'll piss him off more.

"What can I do for you?" I ask innocently once we're inside his room with the door shut.

"What were you doing with Arden?"

"Exactly what it looked like I was doing. I'm not trying to hide it from you. I know you think you can control me and the others, but you can't. She's just as much my mate as she is yours, and you're absolutely mad if you think you can keep her from me. From any of us."

"Are you going to challenge my throne for her?"

"What? No! I don't want your stupid throne. I just want my mate."

"You cannot call off your mating with Iona. It's too important."

"I don't want to marry that snakey bitch. She means absolutely nothing to me. Find someone else for her to marry."

"Her father tried to demand that I take her as a mate thanks to Arden's little outburst the other day."

I bark out a laugh. "The balls on that man. It must run in the family because according to Arden, Iona's plotting her demise."

"What? How does she know that?"

"Iona apparently has a big mouth. Arden overheard her."

A growl rumbles low in Zorvan's chest. He can deny his desire for Arden if he wants to, but I know he would do anything to protect her.

"We'll just have to keep an eye on her." I wave it off. Iona isn't bright enough to pull off some elaborate scheme. Especially not when we're already on to her.

Zorvan changes the subject, "I'm not sure about the other women, but Falmir isn't going to let up on our deal. It could shatter our dealings with Queen Cyndair and cause strife between our kingdoms. We already have enough on our plate with King Ardeth and the Kildarans. As far as I'm concerned, once you and Iona are married, you can take whoever you want as a mistress."

"Arden will not be my mistress. She is my *mate*. She deserves the world from me. Not just scraps of my time."

"Do you think she'll grant you the same courtesy, being mated to the rest of us?"

"Whatever she's willing to give me, I'll take." I don't care if Arden is mated to fifty men, as long as I'm one of them.

"You're assuming she'll even accept the mate bond considering how we've treated her."

"How *you've* treated her. She does not loathe me the way she loathes you." My words hit their mark. He needs to wake up and accept the gift the Stars have given us. I already have, and I know I cannot wait years to make our mate bond official.

"I have done what needed to be done, and I will continue to do so. You think I don't want to mark her this second and make her mine? But I can't. For the good of the kingdom."

"You're just scared."

He scoffs, "what could I possibly be scared of?"

“You’re scared that the same thing that happened to Eletha will happen to Arden.”

“Don’t you dare bring Eletha into this.”

“Why? Because you can’t face your own emotions?” I stand from my chair and make for the door. “I’m bored of this conversation. I’ll see you at dinner.”

My hand touches the door, and Zorvan growls, “this isn’t over, Jarrah. If I have to lock you away to keep you from her, I will.”

Over my shoulder I say, “there was a time where I considered you to be like a brother. A time where I thought that we would do absolutely anything for each other. Now I wonder where that person went.” I don’t wait for a response. I walk out of his room and shut the door behind me.

He’ll never admit it, but I’ve hurt his feelings. I’m tired of tiptoeing around him, and letting him control me. It’s high time he remembers that he wouldn’t be where he is if it weren’t for myself and the others.

“Come in!” Arden calls when I knock on her door.

She needs to stop being so trusting of the fae. I enter and find her perched on a chair by the windows, reading one of her books.

“You certainly didn’t waste any time,” I say, chuckling.

“There isn’t much for me to do here. It’s only been a couple of days, but I’m already so tired of being stuck in this room. I’m used to being more on the go. My job required me to stay pretty busy.”

“You were working in the earth realm?” I ask, leaning against her dresser.

“Of course,” she laughs, “I loved my job.” A look of sadness crosses her face.

“What did you do?”

“I did interior design.” I give her a puzzled look and she continues, “It was just a fancy term for decorating. Wealthy people paid me to decorate their homes. They had far more money than I did so it was fun to spend it on things I would never even fathom buying for myself.”

“Oh. So you and Todd weren’t considered wealthy?”

She snorts a laugh. “No. Todd and I had a nice life. We were comfortable, but we certainly weren’t rich.”

“And you would rather go back to that than stay here?”

I just want to understand her motivations, but my question upsets her. Most of the fae women in the castle only want a wealthy mate or a position of power. Whichever will give them the most status in their life.

“Of course I want to go back. I had a life. I had friends. I was going to get married. You think that just because you put me in a nice room and buy me some clothes that would make me want to stay?”

I cross the room and crouch between her knees. I know she doesn’t understand what I’m doing. By putting myself in a position physically below her I’m submitting to her and her wants and needs. I wish she understood how important this gesture is, but I won’t cheapen it by explaining it.

“What would make you want to stay?” I ask. I am desperate for her to be happy here.

“At this point, there isn’t much. I’m a prisoner. I’m not allowed to go anywhere without someone looking over my shoulder. I feel like a child.”

My heart sinks, but I just nod my head. I let out a deep sigh, stand up, and offer her my hand. “Well let’s get you down to dinner, I guess,” I say, trying to not sound like a wounded puppy. Maybe once we get her off her suppressants, we’ll be able to convince her to stay.

She takes my hand. I notice that it’s feeling a little clammy and warm to the touch. She slides off the chair, slips

on her shoes and follows me out the door. I offer her my arm and she considers it for a moment then takes it. We walk in silence down to the dining hall. The court and the rest of the castle residents are still in the process of leaving the dining hall when we arrive.

Falmir leaves the hall and sees us arm in arm and scowls, “Lord Jarrah, a word?”

I poke my head into the dining hall and see that Lysander is already at our table. I give Arden a little push through the doors and tell her to go straight to Lysander. Then I watch her until she’s seated safely with him.

“What can I do for you, Lord Falmir?”

“Your complete disregard for my daughter and her feelings is despicable. You should know that I’m going to talk to the prince about moving up your mating ceremony to prevent you from getting any bright ideas about the loathsome human. You *will* mate Iona, and you *will* respect your mate or I will report back to my mother about your indiscretions. Am I clear?”

I move into his space staring down into his hazel eyes. He’s not a small person, but I still have four or five inches on him. “I do not take kindly to threats, Falmir. Keep pushing and see where it lands you. You know you don’t stand a chance against me or you would challenge me directly instead of threatening to tell your mommy. So I suggest you stop your meddling before it gets you into trouble.”

Just to upset him further I flick him on the nose before leaving him in the hall, and joining my girl and Lysander.

Lysander asks, “Everything good?”

“Everything is just fine.”

“Arden was just telling me about her excursion to the library today.”

“Yes, it seems our little human has had quite a busy day. The gardens, Blevora, and the library.”

“Don’t get used to it,” Zorvan says as he pulls up his chair to the table. Tavin and Emyth are right behind him.

“Well actually, that was something I had hoped to speak with you about,” Arden says with an air of confidence I’m sure is being faked. “Livarius had told me he would be happy to have my company in the library. And Airen had said that she would be willing to let me spend time with her in the infirmary. And even though he didn’t say anything, I think Rupert would let me spend time with him in the gardens. If you five would be willing to escort me, or if they could escort me, I could make myself busy and useful and not have to spend all my time alone in my room.”

It’s a long rambling sentence, and she rushes it all out as if she expects someone to cut her off. To my surprise, no one does.

Zorvan of course says, “no. Absolutely not.”

“I don’t like it either,” Lysander adds, causing Arden’s shoulders to slump in defeat. She had that same look of sadness back in her room. Maybe this little taste of freedom could help her want to stay.

“Well, hang on guys,” I say and Arden looks at me with a glint of hope. “Arden is going to be here for the foreseeable future. Airen, Livarius, and Rupert are all capable, reliable fae. We can trust them to do their absolute best to keep her safe. We could even have Elliott follow her just to be sure.”

Zorvan is scowling at me for speaking against his wishes, but I want to make Arden like it here. This should have been her home from the start, and I need her to feel that way.

“I don’t like the idea of her being without one of us,” Zorvan says.

“My brain will rot if I have to spend every day locked in that room, Zorvan. I promise I won’t try to leave. I’m fine

with having Elliott trail me. Please just let me out of my room.”

Zorvan’s face softens, but he immediately schools his expression. “What do you two think?” he asks Tavin and Emyth who are being especially quiet.

“I don’t care what she does as long as I’m not responsible for her,” Emyth says.

“Tavin?” Arden says, her voice nearly pleading.

“What you do with your time is your business.”

“Fine. As long as you’re here for meals, you may travel to those three places with an escort. If I catch wind of you trying to leave, there will be hell to pay. Am I understood?”

Arden nods her head excitedly, as a look of genuine happiness settles on her face. One that I haven’t seen since she arrived in Feldorn. She has smiled and laughed, but not with the same light in her eyes.

I’m ripped from my thoughts by Falmir’s voice, “Prince Zorvan, I would like to have a discussion with you.”

I shoot him a scathing look, willing him to drop dead. Fortunately for him, I’m not a reaper. He scowls at me but I notice the color drains from his face. I chuckle softly.

“Falmir, I am eating, and I’m still nursing a headache from our previous conversation. Whatever you need to say to me can wait until tomorrow.”

“No. I demand an audience with you right now.”

Zorvan massages his temples and stands from the table. “I will give you three minutes of my time. Do not waste them.”

They head into the hallway and close the door behind them. The others give me a questioning look, but I shrug and go back to eating. I know exactly what he’s going to say, but it

won't change anything. I will be making my mate bond with Arden official as soon as I physically can.

## Chapter 18: Tavin



### CHAPTER 18: TAVIN

**A**fter dinner I excuse myself to my room and take a bath. I dry myself off, climb into my bed and extinguish the lights. Arden's face haunts me every time I close my eyes, so it's no surprise that I dream of her when I finally find sleep.

*She is beautifully dressed in a long dark blue gown and her hair is done in elegant braids. She glides toward me and places her palm on my bare chest. It causes a pulse of energy to vibrate through my body; a weird sensation I have never experienced before.*

*She stands on her toes and kisses me deeply. We float in the air, suspended by magic. I can feel the hairs on my arms standing on end. I push away from her gently and she frowns at me.*

*"Why don't you like me, Tavin," she asks.*

*I sigh, "it's not that I don't like you," I tell her. I hear the words, but I'm not in control of them. It's like my thoughts are projecting out loud.*

*"You barely even look at me. You act indifferent to everything I do. It feels like you don't want to be around me."*

*"I'm distant because I need to guard my heart. I never let myself get attached to anyone except the other keepers and Zorvan. I've lost too many people to let anyone get close."*

*"Let me in," she says softly, looking up at me through her long lashes.*

*And Stars, do I want to let her in.*

*She begins pushing harder on my chest. At first, I think she's trying to push me away. Then her nails start digging into my skin.*

*“Ow, Arden, that hurts.” I say and try to move away, but she keeps after me.*

*“Such a big fae like you, scared of a little human like me?” she asks with feigned innocence. “I said let me in.”*

*Her eyes flash bright purple, then green, then red, then blue. Then they’re black as pitch. Her nails elongate into claws and she pushes harder breaking the skin. I want to stop her, but I refuse to hurt her. She reaches into my chest and grabs my beating heart. I watch in horror as she tears it from my chest, and smiles at me.*

*“You should know better than to trust a woman,” she laughs.*

I wake gasping for air. My body is slick with sweat. My chest is aching as if the dream actually caused some damage to my heart. I slip my pants on, grab the key to Arden’s room, and sneak out the door.

I creep down the hallway and unlock her door. Slowly and quietly, I close the door behind me and look at the beautiful girl laying in her bed. She’s tall for a human, but shorter and thicker than most fae women. Shifters and vampires are usually on the taller side.

She looks so small curled up in the center of the king-sized mattress. She has the sheet pulled up over her body, but she doesn’t look peaceful like I would expect. Her eyebrows are furrowed as if she’s having a bad dream.

“Tavin?” She mutters.

No. I must have misheard her. What are the chances she—

Without warning she bolts upright in the bed, and her eyelids fly open. The sheet falls away from her body revealing her breasts to me. I feel myself harden instantly in my pants.

She doesn’t see me right away, but once her eyes adjust they land on me and she lets out a squeak of surprise. She pulls the sheet back over herself and glares at me. “What the

fuck is with you guys sneaking into my room while I'm sleeping?"

"Who else was in here?" I ask with a little more anger than I mean to.

"Zorvan first. To change my dressings on my wounds. Then Emyth. I was taking a nap, and when I woke up—it doesn't matter. What do you want?"

"I..." don't know how to finish that sentence. "I was dreaming about you and decided to be a creep and let myself into your room?"

"You what?" she asks, with a genuine sense of curiosity.

"It's stupid," I say and go to leave.

She moves from the bed and wraps the sheet around herself like a dress. "Tell me. Please?" She places her hand on my chest just like she did in my dream. I wait for the pulse of magic, but it never comes.

"I was having the strangest dream. I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"And here I thought you didn't care about me," she laughs. "Well, if it helps any, I was having a strange dream too," she says.

I want to ask her what her dream was about, instead I default to flirtatious humor, because that's comfortable for me. "Oh. And was I in it?"

She doesn't answer, but even in the moonlight, I can tell that her face has gone scarlet. She drops her hand from my chest.

"I was in it, wasn't I? You know, you're dangerously close to being naked," I mutter in her ear, and toy with a lock of her hair.

"Blevora hasn't had enough time to finish my night clothes," she grumbles. She's somehow even cuter when she's

half asleep.

She turns her back on me, revealing her bandages. My stomach churns. The wounds must have been large, because the bandages cover most of her back. She retreats to her bed, careful to keep the sheet pinned to her body.

“Do you need your bandages changed?” I ask.

“I’m okay. Zorvan or Jarrah will be in soon to change them.” She curls up on her side and tucks her hand under her pillow. She’s pouting like she has something she wants to say.

I don’t give her the chance. “Well, you’re clearly alright, so I guess I’ll go.”

“Wait,” she says, and props herself up on her elbow. “Tell me about your dream?” When I don’t respond right away she adds, “Please.”

But I can’t be here any longer. If I stay, I’ll regret it. We both will.

“It doesn’t matter. Get some sleep. I’ll see you in the morning.”

I wake up the next morning, relieved that there were no other dreams. I change into my combat clothes and go down to breakfast. I’m the first one there so Helena brings me a cup of coffee while I wait for the others.

Jarrah and Arden are the last two to arrive. She gives me a sad smile that I don’t return. I don’t need her looking at me with anything but indifference.

“What’s on the agenda today?” she asks with a hopeful tone.

“You can go to the library or whatever you choose to do. The five of us have combat training,” Zorvan answers, his face blank and his tone bored.

“That sounds interesting! Can I come?” she asks, eyes dancing between the five of us, hoping that someone will encourage her attendance.

“We’re not training with you,” Emyth snips.

“Does it look like I have any desire to work out?” she asks with a sarcastic look. “No, I just mean to watch.”

“It’s not very exciting,” Lysander says.

“You just don’t want her to see you get your ass handed to you by me.” Jarrah laughs, and nudges Lysander’s arm.

Lysander shoots him a dirty look.

“I don’t care if you come,” Zorvan says, “but you’ll need to stay out of the way.”

“I can do that,” she says, bouncing in her seat.

My eyes drop to her full chest, her boobs nearly popping out of her dress as she moves. I think of how they looked in the moonlight of her room last night, and stifle a groan. I want nothing more than to sink myself inside of her, but women in general aren’t to be trusted. Especially half human ones who show up unannounced.

Keeping myself away from her is already proving to be difficult. My tiger is furious with me for not spending more time with her, but I can’t. I won’t set myself up for heartbreak again. And if she is as good of a person as she seems, then doesn’t deserve the baggage I would bring to the table. The others have just as much emotional trauma as I do, and she shouldn’t be subjected to any of it.

We finish our breakfast and head to the training field. It’s a large flat circle just down the hill from the castle. There are training dummies, obstacles, and an aerial course for the shifters who can fly.

“You can have a seat over there,” Jarrah says, pointing to a patch of grass outside of the actual training area.

The actual training field has an invisible magical barrier that prevents stray magic from damaging the building or the gardens. We had to put the shield up after a couple of fae with strong fire magic accidentally lit the forest on fire.

Arden walks over and sits cross-legged in the grass. The guys and I strip off our shirts, and start running laps around the outer edge of the training area. By our third lap she's staring at us with heated appreciation. I wink at her, making her blush. I don't think I'll ever get tired of seeing the shy look on her face when any of us give her attention.

After warm-ups we jump into hand-to-hand combat. It's good to stay in fighting shape in case we're ever dosed with suppressants. We all had to take them when we were just coming of age to see how it felt.

Ten minutes into our sparring, I start to throw a punch, but come up short. Lysander is looking over my shoulder, and not paying attention. Rupert has come over and made himself comfortable next to Arden. They're talking and laughing with each other.

"What's your deal," I ask Lysander.

"I don't like Rupert being that close to her."

"Rupert? He's harmless. I have never even seen him show interest in any of the fae women. Rumor has it that he had a great love once, but she died or something."

"I've heard that too, but look at the way he looks at her. There's pure adoration there."

"You don't have anything to worry about. Besides, she's off limits to us, remember?" I'm trying to reassure him as much as I'm trying to remind myself, but they do look really cozy with each other.

"Yeah, well I can worry less if he's over here," Lysander mutters, then yells, "hey Rupert! Want to spar with us?"

I roll my eyes at his attempt to lure Rupert away from Arden. To my surprise, it works.

"I would love to. It's been a while since I've done any training though, so you pups will have to take it easy on me." He flashes a toothy grin.

“No magic and no shifting. Just hand-to-hand for now,” Lysander instructs. I have a seat next to Arden to watch.

“Why is Lysander fighting the gardener?” she asks.

“Because Rupert had your attention and Lysander wanted it back.”

“Childish,” she mutters and I let out a snort of amusement. She’s acting annoyed but her eyes are back on Lysander, drinking him in.

Rupert squares up with Lysander, they circle for a moment with their fists up, guarding their faces. Lysander’s desperation to prove himself costs him. He swings first, but Rupert ducks out of the way with ease. He throws a fist at Lysander, hitting him square in the cheek.

Lysander growls at Rupert and attempts to tackle him. Rupert dodges the attack. Lysander loses his balance, and falls on his face. I can’t help the chuckle that escapes me. Lysander is usually a good opponent, but he’s too in his head. His obsession with Arden is clouding his focus.

Rupert offers Lysander a hand, and when Lysander is back on his feet, he sweeps his leg and knocks Rupert’s feet out from under him. It’s a cheap shot. Rupert lands with a *thud*, but he doesn’t hesitate to make his next move. He threads his left leg through Lysander’s legs, and knocks him down with his right. He’s back on his feet and ten feet away before Lysander even registers what happened.

Lysander springs to his feet and snarls at Rupert. His eyes are glowing and I know his wolf is near the surface and in control. He lets loose a blast of air magic throwing Rupert back about thirty feet. Arden gasps and runs into the circle toward Rupert. Lysander doesn’t notice Arden moving into the ring and he sends a ball of fire at Rupert, but it’s heading for Arden instead. Fear floods me and I start running toward them, but I’ll never make it in time.

“Arden!” Rupert yells with wide eyes. He moves to his feet quickly and covers Arden with his body. He holds up a

hand and a shield of water surrounds them extinguishing the flames.

“What the fuck, Lysander?” Jarrah yells running over to where Rupert and Arden are standing. Emyth and Zorvan stay back, but are watching intently.

Rupert sends the water away from them and stands up straight. He grabs Arden by the chin and starts looking over her. “Are you okay, sweet girl?”

“Get your hands off of her,” Lysander says, approaching them. He’s lost control.

Lysander’s body ripples and twists, his wolf coming out to play. Lysander is a big guy, but his wolf is huge. He stands at about nine feet tall. He stalks forward, and a low growl rumbles in his chest.

Arden moves around Rupert and puts herself between him and Lysander. “Don’t you dare touch him. You’ve done enough damage.”

Fear wells up inside of me, and I step toward them. Zorvan grabs my shoulder, and holds up a hand for me to wait. Arden’s face is confident and determined. Emyth and Jarrah stand at the ready. But Lysander’s growls grow softer. Eventually he stops altogether. His hackles lower, and he lets out a soft whine.

Arden steps forward and strokes his fur. It’s the same way Zorvan’s dragon reacted. The way she handles our shifted forms—we’re in trouble.

Lysander shifts back. His clothing shredded when he shifted, and they hang from his body in tatters, completely exposing him to Arden.

“You need to apologize,” she says. She looks like she’s struggling to keep her eyes above his waist.

“He shouldn’t be putting his hands on you. He’s just a gardener.” His eyes are still glowing.

“And he wouldn’t have touched me if you hadn’t almost killed me! What were you thinking?”

Lysander clenches his jaw. “I was thinking that you shouldn’t be letting a commoner flirt with you. That you should have more respect for yourself than that.”

Rupert chimes in, “first of all, fuck you. Second, I wasn’t flirting with her. Where in a sky full of Stars did you ever get that idea?”

Zorvan approaches from behind Lysander. “Considering you keep putting your hands all over my property—”

Arden lets out a frustrated growl. “Oh my god! Stop with the macho bullshit. Rupert, do you need to see Airen?”

Rupert’s eyes soften. “No. I’ll heal just fine. I should get back to work.” He walks past me toward the gardens.

“Arden—” Lysander starts.

“Don’t,” she interrupts, holding up a hand and closing her eyes like she’s trying to keep her composure. “Jarrah, please take me back to my room.”

“I’ll do it,” I volunteer, earning me some odd looks from the others. I shrug, “I’m done with training for today. It’s lost its appeal.”

“Thank you,” Arden says, and we leave the others.

We’ve only made it a few steps when Zorvan calls, “Arden, I think it’s best if you stay away from training from now on. You’re too much of a distraction.”

Arden rolls her eyes and faces him, “blaming me because your men can’t keep their shit together is gross and patriarchal. But don’t worry. I don’t plan on coming back.”

“What’s going on with you and Rupert?” I ask her, wagging my eyebrows.

“Oh my god, you too?” she asks. “Nothing at all. He’s just been kind to me.”

“Oh come on, he’s handsome.” I’m hoping that by pushing her she’ll give away anything about how she’s feeling toward him. *Or maybe toward me.*

“He is,” she says plainly, not giving in to my taunting tone.

“So you’re still pretty set on Todd, then?”

“No... Yes... I don’t know.”

“What has you second guessing it?”

“You mean aside from the fact that I’m stuck here? Probably just the fact that my whole relationship with him is built on a giant lie. I can’t ever trust him again.”

“So honesty is the most important thing to you?” I ask. We’re all lying to her about who she is, what she is, and what we are to her.

“Isn’t honesty important for any relationship? Romantic or not, if I can’t trust someone, I don’t want anything to do with them.”

I hum in reply. I agree with her. My first and only love was lying to me our whole relationship. Even if she hadn’t betrayed the kingdom and got herself executed, our relationship wouldn’t have survived. We walk in silence until a female voice shouts my name. I groan internally as Bravina approaches from behind.

“Tavin! We’re supposed to have lunch with the four of you today. Is that still happening?” she asks, giving Arden a scathing look.

Iona, Faylin, Calliope are behind her. Iona has a smug look on her face.

“As far as I know.”

“Is that why I have to take lunch in my room, then?” Arden asks.

“Yes. Zorvan is making us have lunch with the girls today to discuss our...” I can’t bring myself to say it. I don’t

want to mate anyone, least of all Bravina.

“Our mating ceremonies,” Bravina provides. “Which are being moved up since you’ve started whoring around with the keepers. We can’t have you getting knocked up with an heir before we do.”

I can hear Arden’s teeth grind together. I’m about to step in, but Arden responds, first.

“I’m not ‘whoring around’ with them. They’re the ones that won’t let me go anywhere without one of them tailing me like a lost puppy. Take that up with them.” She turns her attention back to me. “Since you have to have lunch with them, can I take mine in the library with Livarius instead?” She wears a placid mask, but I notice her hands are balled into fists at her side. *Is that jealousy?*

“I don’t see why not. I’ll let Helena know.”

“Thank you,” she says and turns her attention to the others. “Now if you’ll excuse us.” Without waiting for a response, she heads for the stairs.

“Leave her alone,” I warn in a low voice before I move to join her.

“As long as she keeps her hands off of you, I’ll have no reason to harm her. But if she tries to get her hooks into you, too, then I’ll do what I have to for *my* mate,” Bravina says.

I round on her and say quietly enough that Arden can’t hear me, “if I find out that you’ve even looked at her wrong, you’ll be dead so fast that Zorvan won’t even have the opportunity to punish you.” I look at the others. “That goes for the rest of you, too. And Faylin, I’d have expected better from you considering Arden covered for whatever shady bullshit you tried to pull yesterday.”

Faylin looks at the floor and blushes while the others turn their attention to her, mouths agape. When I’m sure I’ve made my point, I jog to catch up with Arden.

Once I'm beside her she asks, "Do you have pants and a shirt I could borrow?"

"They'll be a bit big on you, but yes. Why?"

"I want something I can move around in better while I'm climbing the ladders in the library. It's hard to focus when I'm worried that I'm going to flash Livarius," she says.

I've been keeping my jealousy in check, but that thought nearly makes me snap. I'll decapitate the vamp before I let him see my girl naked. Only she's not my girl. And she won't ever be.

## Chapter 19: Arden



### CHAPTER 19: ARDEN

**A** strangled noise escapes Tavin when I tell him why I don't want to wear a dress to the library. "Yes, let's not have you on display. Poor Livarius would die of shock."

*Maybe I should wear this dress.* The keepers may be spoken for, but that doesn't mean they're my only option for freedom. Maybe with a little flirting, I can convince Livarius to help me.

I meant what I said to Tavin. I don't know what my relationship with Todd will be when I get back to New York, but I know that I can't stay here. Or at least, I don't think I should. But if I'm being honest with myself there's not much keeping me in the mortal realm; just some clients and Todd and a prospective dog.

If I examine it too hard, I might find that Feldorn is more appealing than returning to New York. I push the thoughts away just as we arrive at Tavin's room.

"I can wait out here for the clothes." I come to a halt just before crossing the threshold. I don't want to intrude on his personal space.

"Nonsense. I have a bathroom. You can change in there and then we can walk to the library together."

I nod and follow him inside. His room is even bigger than mine which is hard for me to fathom. It makes me wonder what Zorvan's room is like. Tavin's bed is king size with silky sage green sheets. It's still unmade from sleeping in it last night. His scent of sandalwood and jasmine permeates the entire room. It's grounding.

He opens the door of a large wardrobe and pulls out some pants, a tunic, and a belt. I thank him for them and shut myself in the bathroom. He has a brush on his counter and I run it through my hair which had become tangled during the incident with Lysander and Rupert. I secure the pants with the belt and pull the tunic over my head. It is a little big, but not so much that it will be an issue.

Picking up my dress I walk back into the bedroom, and I let out a small squeak when I get an eye full of a naked Tavin.

“I’m so sorry,” I practically shout. I retreat back into the bathroom and slam the door behind me.

I catch sight of myself in the mirror. My face is bright red. He’s a very large, very muscular man with a perfect ass and a large—

There’s a gentle knock at the door followed by Tavin’s muffled voice, “You get dressed impossibly fast for a human.”

“Just let me know when you’re done, please.” My voice is an octave higher than normal.

Tavin chuckles and his footsteps recede from the door. A moment passes before he calls out, “I’m decent.”

I crack the door open and peek out before stepping the whole way out. “I didn’t know where to put my dress,” I say, trying to avoid the subject of his nudity altogether.

“The hamper is in the corner over there. Are you feeling alright?” He asks.

“Yes, why?”

“You just look really flushed.” He gives me a coy smile.

“Yes, well it’s a little hot in here.”

“Really? I think it’s quite comfortable.”

I drop the dress in the hamper and walk toward the door. “Maybe it’s the talix venom, then. Ready to go?” I won’t

give him the satisfaction of admitting that I'm a little turned on by seeing him naked. Even though he can probably smell it on me. *Fucking shifters.*

"Yes, to the library," he declares and leads me out the door.

"I can't believe that Lysander tried to kill Rupert."

"He's always had a temper. To be honest, we all do."

"Is it a shifter thing?"

"I think it's a fae thing. Fae in general are a cruel species, but we're also loyal and insanely protective over our property and our friends. Even more so over mates."

"Well, I guess seeing that I'm your prisoner, I fit one of those categories. If you're so protective over mates, then why aren't you all protective of the other women? I'm just a prisoner after all. Not like I'm your friend or anything."

A dry laugh escapes him, "they're our chosen mates. Well, our *forced* mates. I certainly didn't choose Bravina. At least I didn't get stuck marrying Iona. Though Jarrah did have a say in being mated to her."

"Wait, he chose her?" I ask

"Sort of. He had his pick of three fae women. Iona was the best option of the three. None of us were thrilled with our choices. We all wanted to wait for a fated mate, but Sangarian politics and all of that." He waves his hand dismissively.

Something in my chest pulls tight at the thought of them marrying those women against their will. "I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry?"

"Everyone should get to marry someone they actually like."

"Yes, they should." There's a sadness in his eyes as he looks at me. "Unfortunately, as keepers we don't get a choice." He shakes his head and his stoic mask is back in place. "It doesn't really matter much to me, though. I see my fair share

of women. Only ever cared about one, and she turned out to be a raging bitch. I would rather just stay unmated and free to sleep with whoever I please.”

“Good to know,” I mutter. “What about Zorvan?”

“Does Zorvan get laid?” He laughs. “No.”

I playfully smack his arm and he tenses at the contact. I make a mental note: *No touching Tavin*. “No. I mean why isn’t he set to marry anyone? Is it because he’s a pompous asshat, and no one will have him?”

“Asshat?” Tavin laughs as we come to a stop outside of the library.

“Yes. He’s an asshat.”

“No it’s not because he’s an asshat. It’s because he is expected to produce an heir and there is a possibility that he will produce a dragon. Unless he chooses a strong enough mate, the pregnancy would kill the mother and probably the baby by boiling the mother from the inside out.”

“Well, that’s terrifying.” A chill runs through me.

“You have no idea,” he says cryptically. “Well, I guess I have to go to this asinine lunch. I’ll send Helena up to feed you. Enjoy your time...reading.” He sounds as if he would rather do literally anything else besides reading.

“I will. Thank you for escorting me. Let Helena know I’ll be here most of the afternoon so just whenever she gets to it. No rush.”

“What are you looking for anyway?”

“Just learning about Sangaris. You know, knowledge is power and all that.”

“So, you’re looking for a way to kill us all and take over?” he asks with a crooked grin that makes me melt a little.

“Well, it wouldn’t be smart of me to give away all of my secrets, would it?” I say, returning his smile.

For the first time he seems to really look at me, and it feels like he's searching for answers. After a long pause, he says, "I suppose not. I'll leave you to it then." He hesitates like there's something else he wants to say, but instead he shakes his head and walks away, giving me one last glance over his shoulder as he leaves.

There are butterflies in my stomach as I put my hand to the door. There is definitely chemistry between me and Livarius, and now we don't have Jarrah chaperoning us. I enter the library and search for him. When I don't immediately spot him, I start perusing the books. There are dozens of them. I read through the titles: *The Stars and Our Fates*, *Shifters and Wereanimals: How To Spot the Differences and Similarities*, *How to Outsmart a Leprechaun and Other Useful Skills*.

I chuckle at the last one before I pull down a book about the different species in Sangaris. I only make it a few pages before a throat clears behind me causing me to jump.

"Livarius! Don't sneak up on a girl like that," I say with a laugh.

"I'm sorry. Vampires are sneaky by nature. We have to be to catch our prey," he says with a dazzling smile.

"I hope it's okay that I'm taking my lunch here. It was this or take it alone in my room, and spending time with you was much more appealing." I add a shy smile at the end. I've never been good at flirting.

"I don't think I could ever tire of your company. It's nice to have someone around who shares my interests." He glances down at my clothes and scowls for a moment, "why do you stink of cats?"

"I'm waiting for Blevora to finish my wardrobe so I borrowed some clothes from Tavin. I know it's not the most flattering, but it's easier to move around in than the dress I wore yesterday."

"I see," he says skeptically. "There are some arm chairs over by the windows. Would you like me to help you bring

some books over?”

“Yes please.”

I wander over with a couple of books and have a seat. These windows overlook the courtyard, and I think I’ve figured out which of the rooms across the way is mine. The curtains are drawn when I’m not in there, so it’s hard to tell for sure.

“So, what are we reading about today, Arden?”

“I was actually just educating myself on the creatures in the forest. I was attacked by a talix my first night here so I figured I should probably know what other dangers lurk in the darkness.”

“Were you hurt?” he asks with genuine concern.

I stand and face away from him and lift the back of my shirt to show the scars. They’re scabbed over now, and Airen told me this morning that I didn’t need the bandages anymore. I suspect they’ll be healed entirely within a week. Whether or not they’ll scar is another question.

A gasp escapes me when I feel his cool fingers trace the wounds. I hadn’t even heard him get out of his chair.

“Airen couldn’t heal them?” His breath is warm on my neck as he speaks softly to me.

“No, and we haven’t been able to determine why,” I mutter.

“Forgive me,” he says as he starts to move away from me.

Without thinking, I reach out and grab his hand, “for what?”

His eyes find mine, “we aren’t alone.”

I give him a confused look, but it doesn’t last long. Helena’s voice calls from the front area of the library, and I drop Livarius’ hand.

“Coming Helena!” I call and head toward her voice. Just on the other side of a large bookshelf, she’s got a cart with a tray on it piled high with food.

“Hello lass! Lord Jarrah wanted me to make sure you got a couple of those little pies you like, Tavin sent extra coffee, and the rose is from Lysander along with the note. I figured I would bring yours up first since those wretched girls are always so rude and needy. Is there anything else you need, dear?”

“No, this is perfect Helena. Thank you so much,” I say, eyeing the delicious pastries she had brought up.

“Anything for you, my girl,” she says, patting my cheek. “I’ll see you at dinner.” She glances behind me at Livarius and gives him a curt nod before exiting the library.

I hold one of the pies up for Livarius, “would you like one? Do you even eat real food? Was that rude?”

“Yes, yes, and no,” he says, taking the dessert from my hand. We head back to the windows and sit down.

“Actually, if you’re open to it, I have a couple of questions.”

“Go ahead,” he encourages around a mouthful of food.

“Tell me how you’re able to walk in the daylight,” I say as I munch on my food.

He laughs that beautiful laugh again. “You haven’t read that in your books yet?”

“Not yet. There’s a lot to learn.”

“The suns in Sangaris are different from the sun in your realm. For some reason that sun burns us, and our suns don’t. It may be your sun’s proximity to the earth, but we have no way of knowing for sure.”

“And the blood? Do you need it?”

“In order for my magic to be effective, yes. But I can feed from anything that bleeds. Not just fae or humans. My

preference is the blevine. They're deer-like animals in the forest that have the ability to phase in and out. Their blood tastes like marshmallows." He pauses and considers his next words. "I don't like feeding from fae if I don't have to, though my magic is stronger when I do."

"Why don't you like it?"

"It's just a very personal thing to do if I'm not going to kill them. I need permission. It feels awkward if I don't know the fae well enough. It's just easier to feed from animals."

"But if the right fae came along...?" I ask.

"If the right *person* came along, and allowed me to, I would feed from them every day."

There's a hunger in his eyes. Is it for my blood or for me? Either way it heats me to my core. All of the men here are predators, but that excites me more than it scares me.

Liv cocks an eyebrow and smirks. "Whatever you're thinking about, I hope it involves me," he says suggestively.

I groan in embarrassment. "You can smell me, can't you?"

"It's okay, Arden. There's nothing to be embarrassed about. Not with me, anyway."

"I miss human men who couldn't tell that I was attracted to them," I mutter.

"Well, that sounds painfully boring," Livarius laughs.

"It was safe and comfortable."

"Is that what you want from life: safe and comfortable?"

A dry laugh escapes me and I stare out the window. "I don't know what I want from life anymore. What I thought was comfort was actually just a landmine of lies. Nothing feels real anymore. I'm not sure who I can trust."

When my gaze returns to Livarius, he has an unreadable expression on his face. He looks like he's waiting for me to continue.

"Has anyone told you you're a really good listener?" I say with a laugh.

"Once or twice."

"Well, I'm sorry for rambling," I say, and take another bite of my food.

"We all need people to talk to, Arden. I'm happy to be that for you."

## Chapter 20: Arden



### CHAPTER 20: ARDEN

**I**t's the fourth consecutive day of spending my afternoons in the library. I'm sitting on the floor in the historical section reading about a great war that occurred over a millennia before even Zorvan was born. Livarius walks into the aisle and stands over me.

"What's up?" I say without looking up from my book.

"I was just wondering what was on the agenda for today."

"Oh, just reading about ancient wars. Honestly this reads more like one of the fantasy books in my realm."

"I imagine most of them read that way to you."

I laugh, "I suppose you're right." I glance up and notice he's staring down my shirt. Blevora dropped off a couple of dresses for me, and I felt bad asking for more clothes from Tavin. None of the dresses exactly cover my cleavage.

I raise an eyebrow at Livarius. "Was there something you needed?"

Livarius looks a little pink in the cheeks as his eyes meet mine. "Uh, I just wanted to know if you wanted a cup of tea."

"Sure, I could use a break," I say as I hop up off the floor and dust my clothes off. The movement draws his attention back to my chest. "Livarius," I say, pretending to be irritated.

"Sorry. You just are normally more...covered than that," he says before he heads over to the seats by the windows.

I chuckle to myself and follow him. There are already two cups of tea steeping on the table. “Rather presumptuous of you,” I joke.

“Well, Helena said you liked tea, so I figured I was safe to assume you’d take me up on it.”

“Helena better stop telling my secrets,” I say playfully.

The last few days have primarily been reading in silence. Even though we haven’t discussed anything earth-shattering, I’m developing feelings for him. He’s funny, and playful, and the way he looks at me gives me butterflies. I set my tea down and chew my bottom lip.

“What’s on your mind?” he asks, placing his own cup on the table and leaning forward attentively.

“I was just wondering...how did you end up here? I’m assuming you’re not from here since you’re not a shifter,” I say.

“Oh, my father is on the council.” Livarius waves a hand dismissively as if he doesn’t want to talk about it.

“Who’s your father?” I ask, a pit forming in my stomach. Now that he’s said it, I know exactly who his father is.

“Lord Falmir,” he replies. His eyes are assessing my reaction, and it makes me skeptical of his intentions.

“Oh,” I say, trying not to give away my hatred for the man. “You know, since you mentioned it, I do see the similarities.”

“Please don’t ever say that again.” He grimaces at my words.

“Why not? He’s not an unattractive man. You have his eyes, which are a rather stunning color.” I’m desperately trying to come up with positive things to say that aren’t complete lies and make me sound neutral.

“Because I don’t want to ever be anything like that prick,” he says, gripping his tea cup so hard I think it might shatter.

I exhale sharply, “oh thanks god. Absolutely no offense to you, but Falmir and Iona can get absolutely fucked.”

The tension between us dissipates. We’re on the same side.

Livarius snorts at my confession, “don’t speak too loudly about them. He’ll have your head.”

“He already tried,” I say, darkly. “Thankfully I have gained enough favor with Zorvan that he wouldn’t even entertain the idea.”

“Why did he try to have you executed?” Livarius asks in horror.

“I kneed your sister in the ribs. And scratched her face.” *And slept with her future mate.*

“Half-sister,” he insists. “I also cannot stand her.”

“So Falmir’s mate...”

“Malina,” Livarius supplies.

“Malina, is not your mother?”

“No. My mother was a onetime thing, thankfully. My childhood was not awarded the same benefits as being a full-blooded royal, but I prefer it that way.”

“Your grandmother is Queen Cyndair?”

“Yes. Unfortunately,” he grumbles. “She’s a wicked woman. She was furious when I appeared. She claimed that I tarnished the family name just by existing.” Livarius rolls his eyes and takes a sip of his tea. “As if it were my fault that my father couldn’t honor his mate.

“Well, she sounds like a treat. Glad I’m with Zorvan and not her.”

“You’d be the first aside from myself. She’s harsh, but Prince Zorvan is cruel.”

My brow furrows. “He’s a bit of an ass, but not cruel.”

“For some reason you’ve found yourself in his good graces. He practically treats you like royalty compared to everyone else.”

“You haven’t seen the way he treats me. My room is nice, sure, but he’s not exactly kind to me. All of that aside, I think he’s just a bit misunderstood,” I argue, though I’m not sure why I’m defending him. “He’s not friendly, but I’ve never seen him treat the staff poorly. That’s how I gauge the character of people who come from money. He also seems to legitimately care for the people in his kingdom.”

Livarius considers my words for a moment before saying, “now that I think about it, I’ve never seen him dole out a punishment that wasn’t earned. Maybe the punishments are more extreme than I would think necessary, but it’s usually with reason.”

I let out a sound of disgust. “Enough about Zorvan,” I say, “do you plan to stick around here for long?”

“I don’t have any immediate plans to leave, but if a tempting enough opportunity presented itself, I would probably take it.”

“And what could tempt Livarius away from all of his books?” I ask dramatically.

“A mate, a place to call my own, the opportunity to explore. Really there isn’t much keeping me here. I need something more, but I’m not sure what exactly that means.”

“I know the feeling,” I sigh, and we sit in a comfortable silence.

A chill works its way through me, and I pick my tea back up to warm my hands. The talix venom has been causing chills and nausea off and on for days. My temperature gets high, then drops again. The leedle root helps, but only for a

short time. Livarius doesn't even ask, he just grabs my bag and pulls a piece of the root out and hands it to me. I chew it slowly.

"What was there for you back home?" he asks, likely trying to distract me.

"I had a small business. I did interior design. My fiancé and I had just bought a house about a couple years ago."

Livarius stares at me for a long time without saying anything, his mouth in a tight line. When I feel like my heart is going to beat out of my chest, I clear my throat and nervously ask, "You know about Todd don't you?"

"Rumors spread quickly after that first day. The hunters in your region have killed a lot of our people. But, yes, everyone knows about Todd."

"Except me," I say angrily. "Ten fucking years of my life, and every single one of them was a lie." I stand and look out the window. I try to will the tears away, but I'm unsuccessful.

Livarius gives me space to process my feelings. It's like he always knows when to push and when to hold back. Everything about being kidnapped and held hostage aside, I'm glad I met him.

Finally, I say, "The biggest betrayal was having to find out who he was through someone else. When Zorvan showed up, he still only gave me vague half-truths. I don't know, maybe if Zorvan hadn't managed to take me, I would have got more answers."

"I don't know how he just stood by while Zorvan stole you away," Livarius says as his reflection appears above mine in the window.

"It wasn't exactly fair. It was Zorvan and Jarrah against him." I wipe a tear from my face.

He gently spins me around to face him. "If you were mine, I would fight to the death to keep you."

“Would you?” I ask with a half-smile.

“Even though you *aren't* mine, I would fight to keep you.”

I whisper, “I suppose that means you won't help me escape back to the earth realm?”

“Why would you want to go back?” He tips my chin up to get a better look at my face as he gently brushes a tear away with his thumb.

“It's where I belong. What if roles were reversed? Would you want to stay in the mortal realm?”

“Well, no. But from what I've experienced, it's very boring, and it smells terrible,” he says pulling a laugh from me. “Plus, I can't walk in the daylight there, remember?” he says with a smirk. “What would you do if you ever got back there?”

“I'm not sure. I would likely have to start my business over again. No-showing on clients is a great way to make sure you tank your business.” I've been so focused on getting back home that I haven't considered what I would do if I were to actually escape.

We stand in a comfortable silence for a moment while I think on it. The fae realm is fascinating. There are fleeting moments when I find myself thinking that it is starting to feel a little bit like home. Almost like I belong here more than I do back in New York.

“Do you have any family there?”

I shake my head, “just a few friends who might miss me.”

“Might?”

“Yeah,” I sigh, “I don't know. Recently it felt like I was in a different spot in my life than most of the people I had previously been friends with. They were all off having children, and I was considering maybe getting a dog, but Todd wouldn't even commit to that.”

“Did you...” He pauses for a second. He seems unsure as to whether or not he should ask the question.

“Did I what?”

“Did you want to have a family with Todd?”

“Oh!” I was not expecting that. “Um, well, he didn’t want children. We had talked about it earlier on in our relationship, but recently he decided that he didn’t like the idea of bringing any kids into the world. Which is understandable, but...”

“But what did *you* want, Arden?”

Todd had made it abundantly clear that he would never have children. It’s been so long since I even considered it, that I have to think about it before I answer.

“I always wanted children. But things with Todd were comfortable and safe, so when he decided he didn’t want them, I just deferred to him, you know?”

He unabashedly allows his gaze to roam over my body and says, “I can’t imagine being with someone like you and not wanting to immediately put a baby in you.”

“Livarius!” I gasp.

“It’s true, you’re beautiful. I would give you all the babies you ever wanted. Truthfully, I’m surprised that humans don’t have children earlier in their lives since their life spans are so short,” he says.

The reality of my miniscule existence hits me like a ton of bricks. I had been feeling the pressure of having kids since I was getting older. Another few years and they would be calling my pregnancy “geriatric”. With Todd deciding that he didn’t want kids, it felt like I was running out of time.

I don’t want to think about my stupid biological clock anymore so I ask, “What about you? Any plans to have little vamps running around?”

“Not at the moment, but if I met the right female I would. Either way, I wouldn’t mind practicing with someone.” His gaze darkens.

He’s attractive in an intense sort of way. I can’t seem to find an appropriate change of subject. I whisper, “Is there anyone here in Feldorn who you have your sights on?”

“Yes, but she’s unfortunately off limits, and betrothed to someone else who doesn’t value what he has.”

“Is she the daughter of a council member?” I ask.

He shakes his head ‘no’.

“Is she...new here?” I’m pushing, and I should stop.

He nods. His mouth is so close to mine. I glance at his full lips and breathe in his comforting scent. If he were to kiss me right now, I wouldn’t stop him.

But he doesn’t.

My voice won’t rise above a whisper. “Well, thank you for the tea. It was very good. I should go put my books away and get back to my room. It’ll be dinner soon, and Zorvan hates when he has to go looking for me.”

“Yeah, alright,” Livarius says with a little disappointment in his voice. “Would you like me to walk with you instead of Elliott? I need to deal with a couple of things anyway.”

I bite my lip and consider his offer, “yeah, sure.”

I’m not sure. I like Livarius. He’s funny and smart and everything that I would be looking for in a partner, *if* I were looking for a partner at all. I was just supposed to be flirting with him—not falling for him. It’s barely been five days of being in Feldorn and I’m already interested in someone that isn’t Todd. *Who is a giant fucking liar who I don’t owe anything to.* His past indiscretions don’t stop me from feeling guilty.

I'm attracted to the keepers, but them being engaged helps me stay grounded about them. Then there's Zorvan, but he's such an ass. Livarius is the opposite. He's available and kind, and he cares about what I have to say.

I'm lost in those thoughts as Livarius and I exit the library. He asks Elliott to keep an eye on things since the library isn't supposed to be unattended in order to protect the more important historical documents. Livarius and I head back in the direction of my room.

"I still can't believe that Zorvan is having you stay in his guest quarters. My father is furious about it." Livarius laughs.

"I would gladly trade him. Having the keepers up my ass is more irritating than it's worth."

"Up your...ass?" Livarius asks, horrified.

I laugh a full belly laugh. I keep forgetting that they don't have the same slang here. "It just means that they're constantly around to the point that it's frustrating. I don't have much time to myself."

"Oh. I thought for a second...nevermind," he says with a shake of his head and a chuckle.

"Your father has nothing to worry about with me. I'm a shiny new toy for a bored prince. He'll get sick of me soon enough and then I'll be gone. Whether he sends me back home, or puts me six feet under, or in the dungeons; I won't be here much longer."

"Arden..." Livarius says quietly, alerting me to the fact that there are other footsteps in the hallway behind us.

"Fuck. It's him, isn't it?" I whisper as I come to a stop outside my door.

Livarius nods. I sigh heavily and turn to face my doom. Zorvan is stalking up the hallway wearing a cheshire grin. He's dressed more formally than I'm used to. He is even more handsome than usual.

“Hello Princess,” he purrs. He tips my chin up so he can look into my eyes, and scowls. “Scoot along, little vampire, but give me the key to her room, first.” Zorvan instructs, holding out his hand, but keeping his attention on me. When Livarius doesn’t immediately comply he adds, “would you like to spend a week in the dungeons then, Livarius? Is this little whore worth it?”

Livarius growls at the insult.

“I’ll be okay,” I say looking at Livarius. “Just give him the key. Please.” I hope that my eyes are pleading enough that he’ll listen to me. I’m not worried at all about Zorvan hurting me, but I’ve heard about what he does when people don’t follow his orders. Livarius doesn’t seem to have the same favor with the cruel prince that I do.

“You know where to find me if you need me,” Livarius says to me, and drops the key into Zorvan’s waiting palm. “Hopefully I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Don’t bother, kid,” Zorvan says. “She won’t be sniffing around you any time soon. I promise she has more than she bargained for with the five of us. I can’t see any world in which she would need a bastard like you.” Zorvan says to Livarius who is clearly doing everything he can to rein in his anger.

“Livarius, please just go. I can handle him.” I ask as I place my hand on his forearm hoping that it will calm him down. His eyes flit to mine and his face softens. He nods, gives a shallow bow to Zorvan and leaves in the direction of the front hall.

Zorvan turns his attention back to me and states, “You’ve been crying. Do I need to kill the vampire?”

Livarius is still in earshot, so I keep my tone even to avoid any unnecessary fighting between them, “It’s been a long week, I don’t feel good, and I’m a little homesick.” It’s partially a lie. I’m less homesick than I feel I should be.

“Are you taking your medication?” he asks, pressing his hand to my forehead. “You need to take it as Airen prescribed it. And your anti-seizure medication, you’re still taking that?”

I giggle. “You sound like an anxious mother. Yes, I’m taking the medicines that Airen gave me, and my anti-seizure medication. But Airen said that this would happen. The toxin just has to work its way out. Hopefully it’ll be over soon.”

Zorvan hums, then says, “Well in regards to what you said to Livarius, you are correct that you’re my new plaything. But don’t worry about me growing bored with you. That won’t happen unless you stop putting up a fight. I don’t see you giving up any time soon, even with the talix venom coursing through your veins.”

“I think that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me. Are you just saying that to make me feel better?” I smirk.

“You didn’t let me finish,” he says with a dark smile. “Even if I were to grow bored of you, I would never let you leave.” The smile fades from his face. The ounce of kindness he’d just held for me is gone. “You’re mine now. Paid for by the blood of my family. It’s time that you accept your fate for what it is.”

“And what fate is that? To be held captive by a narcissistic dictator? Great. Can’t wait. If you don’t mind, I need to get changed for dinner.”

Zorvan’s eyes rake down my body and then back up, pausing a touch too long on my chest. I roll my eyes at him.

“Yes. And don’t wear that dress again unless I’m with you. I don’t want any of the fae in the castle getting any wrong ideas. You may be a whore, but you will dress like a lady.”

“You keep saying that. What exactly makes me a whore?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

“I suppose that ‘whore’ isn’t the correct term since you were never technically paid for your lewd behaviors. Since

you did it free of charge that makes you a—what’s the human word for it—a slut?”

“I didn’t realize that the fae were such prudes. Saving yourself for marriage, are you? Well good luck finding anyone who would want to marry your pompous ass, your majesty.” I say the last part sarcastically before turning toward my room.

Zorvan catches my chin in a bruising grip and forces me to look at him. “We’re not prudes, we just don’t throw ourselves at anyone that pays us the slightest bit of attention. Before you try and argue with me, just remember that I can smell when you’re turned on. I know that your panties are soaked for me right now. Or is that for Livarius? Maybe it’s both.”

He gives a venomous smile before reaching behind me and opening my door. If he hadn’t had such a firm grip on my chin I would have fallen flat on my ass. “Make sure to change *all* of your clothes, and be ready in thirty minutes for dinner,” he says as he shoves me back into my room.

With a growl I slam the door in his face and go to my closet to find a different outfit, cursing Blevora’s name the whole time.

## Chapter 21: Lysander



### CHAPTER 21: LYSANDER

**A**rden hasn't spoken to me in four days. She's still angry about my behavior toward Rupert and I don't blame her. She's cordial with the others, but something else about her seems off.

I pace in my room as I try to figure out how to make things better with her. To be honest I'm not sure that I can. She told Tavin she read my note that I sent up with lunch the day that the fight happened, but that it didn't fix things.

A knock sounds at my door. I answer it to find Emyth standing there. I'm surprised to see him since he was also a little upset with me after the Rupert thing.

"Hey, Emyth," he says. "I have something I need to discuss with you."

"Sure. Come in." I stand back and let him enter the room. Once he settles in one of the chairs in my room I sit on the edge of my bed. "What's going on?"

"It's Arden," he says.

"Is she okay?" I ask as panic starts to flood me.

"Yeah yeah. Perfectly fine," he says dismissively. "I'm still finding it hard to trust her."

"She's our mate. How could you not trust her?"

"Because she allegedly doesn't know she's our mate. It seems a little too perfect that she ended up with a hunter. Not just any hunter either. The one that killed Zorvan's sisters. I keep thinking about Aurelia."

I raise an eyebrow at him. "Arden is nothing like Aurelia. Have you not seen the way she acts here?"

"What do you mean?"

“She had no idea any of this existed. Or if she did, she’s the best liar around.”

“I don’t understand why Zorvan won’t let us administer the truth serum to her.”

“Until she’s weaned off of her suppressants it won’t do any good, and by then she’ll have to acknowledge whether she knew the truth or not. If she can’t appropriately wield her magic, then we’ll know.”

“It’s going to take over a month for that.” He groans.

“It’s been over four hundred years. I think we can wait a little longer.”

Emyth is usually as cool and collected as Zorvan. The fact that he’s so stressed tells me that it’s at least a little bit important to him. Which is more than I can say about Tavin.

“Or we just go and torture the answers out of that stupid fucking hunter. I would love the opportunity to flay his skin from his body. Both for what he did to Z’lara and Zendalia, and for putting his hands on our mate.”

“You would risk going to the earth realm?” I raise an eyebrow at him.

“For answers, yes.”

I think about it for a moment. If we went to the human realm we ran the risk of Emyth going a little psycho in pursuit of his quarry, but I’m also a little desperate for answers.

“We would need permission from Zorvan.”

“Why?” Emyth scoffs. “He doesn’t dictate what we can and cannot do in our spare time.”

“He does when it comes to Todd.”

“No he doesn’t. Zorvan may be the prince and he may have had some tragic things happen, but who of us hasn’t. Besides, our business with our mate is our own.”

“Not when she’s his too.”

“When did you become such an ass licker, Lysander?”

“You know I’ve always been into that,” I say with a wink.

Emyth gives me a smirk for the first time since he walked through the door.

“You’re right. I don’t know why I expected anything different from you. Has Zorvan...been with you...since—”

“Since Eletha? No. To my knowledge he hasn’t been with anyone since then.”

“He knows that he can’t get one of us pregnant, right? And that the female fae have two other holes he could use.”

“You’re foul,” I say, chucking a pillow at him. “Anyway, you know how Zorvan is. He’s always punishing himself for things that aren’t his fault. And even if he were able to give himself a break, he can hold a grudge better than anyone I know. Arden’s going to be paying for her relationship with Todd for a long time.”

“Jarrah may be the only one who mates her, then.”  
Emyth laughs.

“Over my dead body. Besides, aren’t you dying to mate with her?”

“Oh, I’m dying to fuck her, but I won’t until I know for sure what’s going on. Even then, I don’t know if she could handle my preferences,” he says darkly.

Emyth has more unconventional tastes than the rest of us. He’s downright scary sometimes, though you wouldn’t know it if you just knew him on a surface level. The death magic that flows through his veins gives him a taste for some really fucked up things.

“How long’s it been since you’ve been laid?” I laugh.

“Too long,” he mutters. “I’m starting to get a little twitchy.”

“We could find one of the servant girls and—”

“No. I have zero interest in any females besides Arden right now. Despite my hesitations about her, she’s the only one who does it for me anymore.”

“Same. I don’t know how the fuck Zorvan expects us to stay engaged to the council of bitches.” I grumble. “I can’t produce a legitimate heir if I can’t get it up.”

“I don’t think he expects us to mate them at all. I think he’s just stalling, and trying to prevent any of us from mating with her until he knows if he can have her, too.”

“Do you think he can?”

“I’m not sure. I know he won’t try until he knows he won’t accidentally kill her. And until then, she’s off-limits.”

“I don’t think I can wait that long. I’ve waited so fucking long for her. Having her here and not being allowed to touch her is torture. My cock is at half-mast any time she’s around. But instead of mating her, I’m dreading being a whore to the council.”

“You are such a good little whore, though.” Emyth says with a sly smile. He knows I love being called names. I know that this whole conversation is playing with fire. We’ve never been together without a female fae, but I would be willing to forego it at this point.

“Keep talking like that and we won’t even need Arden.”

“Wouldn’t be the worst thing,” he says with a laugh.

“Emyth,” I warn.

“Lysander,” he mocks as he stands and moves across the room toward where I’m perched on the edge of my bed.

He settles between my legs and tips my chin up toward his face, “Watching you go after Rupert the other day was pretty hot. I get why Arden was pissed, but I was hard as a rock watching you defend our mate like that.”

“I really wanted to kill that guy. Who the fuck does he think he is?”

Emyth shrugs, “Arden seems to think he’s okay.”

I grind my teeth. “Arden doesn’t know how the fae function, and she needs to stay the fuck away from him.”

“So possessive. I like it. Tell me, what would you do to her if she were here with us right now?” He reaches down and rubs my cock through my pants. My cheeks heat at his touch.

“You know I like it when you tell me what to do to them.”

“Oh that’s right,” he says facetiously. “You’re always such a good boy for me.”

I groan at the praise.

“Take off my pants, Lysander.”

I unbuckle his belt and pull his pants down revealing his hard dick to me. I wait for his next instructions before doing anything else knowing I’ll be punished if I touch him without permission.

This shouldn’t feel right. Our mate isn’t here. We should only want her. Since finding out she is fate bound to all of us, I have wondered if that’s why we’re all so attracted to each other. Like we’re tied to each other just as much as we’re tied to her. Maybe the Stars knew what we all needed.

“Kiss me, San,” he says.

I do as he asks. He’s not gentle, his kiss bruising my lips. He pulls a dagger from his belt, and without breaking the kiss he gently presses just hard enough to my chest to nick the skin causing a small drop of blood to trickle down.

He sheaths the blade and pulls away from the kiss to admire the cut. Then he leans down and runs the flat of his tongue over the trail of blood, sucking gently on the wound before pulling away.

“The Stars should have made you a vampire.” I laugh breathlessly, continuing to stroke his hard cock.

“Maybe I was in a past life,” he says. For the first time in a long time, I see a legitimate joy in his eyes.

“I missed you, Em.” I whisper, unable to stop myself, but worried I’ll ruin the moment.

“I missed you too.” He groans and kisses me again.

Our moment is cut short by a knock at the door. “Who is it?” I call.

“It’s Elliott, my Lord!”

I give Emyth one last kiss, and hope that this interruption won’t take long. I walk to the door while he tucks himself away and sits behind my desk to hide the evidence of our little affair.

“How can I help you?” I ask when I open the door.

“Miss Arden would like an escort to the gardens, and you two are the only ones on the floor. Should I take her?”

“No. I’ll be right there,” I say, and shut the door.

“Please come with us. I might kill Rupert if I don’t have anyone there to restrain me.”

“Fine.” He rolls his eyes. “But you owe me.”

“Just tell me when and where,” I say with a smirk and we go to retrieve our girl.

## Chapter 22: Arden



### CHAPTER 22: ARDEN

**L**ysander and Emyth escort me to the gardens. I'm not thrilled that it's Lysander, but it's better than being stuck in my room. They're walking behind me and talking among themselves. They're acting cozier with each other than normal.

We step out into the warmth of the afternoon sun, and I immediately begin searching for Rupert. Eventually I spy him trimming some hedges. I glance behind me. Lysander and Emyth are laughing and tossing small stones into a fountain toward the front of the main garden so I decide to risk talking to him.

"Hey Rupert!" I say with quiet enthusiasm. He moves toward me, but I hold up a hand and nod back toward the guys.

"Brought the guard dog with you, eh?" he asks with a smile. I expected him to be more upset, but he doesn't bat an eye. "Those boys seem quite taken with you."

"I don't want to talk about them. Do you need any help today?"

"If you want to grab a shovel and put some mulch down around this topiary, you're welcome to."

We set to work, moving around to different plants. I inhale the beautiful scents of each one as we move around the garden.

"Don't do that with any of the wild flora," Rupert warns. "The ones in the garden are safe, but some of the flowers in the forest... Well, they can either knock you out or kill you."

"Great, even the plants are out to get me," I mutter. "I know some of these flowers are used for the salve that Airen

makes. Are all of the flowers here used for something?"

"Most of them. There are a few that are just here because they're pretty."

"What are these ones here?" I ask about some deep purple flowers growing on a hedge.

"Those are rinsarum. They can be used for sleeping draughts. You need some other very specific ingredients though. It's been a long while since I've looked at an herbology book so you'd have to ask Airen about that. She just tells me what she needs, and I grow it."

After about twenty minutes of working and talking about all of the plants, I feel flushed. The hot flashes and night sweats paired with the almost constant nausea is torturous. I can't wait for the talix venom to work its way out of my body.

I take a long swig of the water that Rupert always keeps on hand, and glance around for Lysander and Emyth. They're nowhere to be seen, which makes me anxious.

I excuse myself from helping Rupert and set off to find them. I round the corner of the hedges and find Emyth pressing Lysander into the wall. They're locked in an extremely passionate kiss. Emyth's hard length is jutting out of his pants and Lysander's hand is wrapped around it, moving in languid strokes.

Watching them feels wrong, but I can't look away. Emyth dominates Lysander with every stroke of his tongue. I sink my teeth into my bottom lip and imagine myself between the two of them. Would Emyth dominate both of us? Would he allow Lysander to take some control?

As if he can hear my thoughts, Emyth pulls away from the kiss and his eyes lock with mine. He looks dazed, and then he smirks. My face is probably scarlet. I feel as though I've been caught with my hand in the cookie jar. I turn on my heel and practically run away.

Lysander chases after me, "Arden wait!"

He grabs my shoulder and spins me around to face him. I look at the sky, then the ground, anywhere but in his eyes.

“We don’t need to talk about it,” I say. “What you do with your body is your business. Sorry I interrupted.” *And watched.*

“No, Arden, it’s not like that.”

“What is it like?” I ask, more out of curiosity than anything.

“Yeah San, what’s it like?” Emyth says, crossing his arms over his chest and cocking an eyebrow. I can’t tell if he’s annoyed or if he’s genuinely curious as well.

“It’s...we...” His gaze shifting from mine to Emyth’s so rapidly I think he might snap his own neck.

“It’s fine, Lysander,” I say, putting my hand on his forearm. “It really is. If that’s what you’re into, that’s your business.”

“I am,” he says confidently. “Into it, I mean, but only with the other keepers. I mean, I like women, too...but...”

“You really don’t need to explain yourself. I’m gonna go back to helping Rupert. You two...finish or whatever.”

When I start walking away, Lysander grabs my arm. “Can this stay between us? The guys can know, but please don’t mention it to Airen or anyone. I feel like it would stir things up with the council members’ daughters if anyone else found out.”

“When I say it’s your business I mean that. I don’t go around outing people.”

“Thank you,” he says, relief spreading across his face. “Will you be ready to go back in soon?”

“Sure, just let me say goodbye to Rupert,” I say with a soft smile earning me a frown from Lysander. “Don’t start

with the macho shit again. I'm not in the mood," I call the last part over my shoulder as I walk away.

Some hours later I'm laying in my bed trying not to throw up. The leedle root is no longer working. My fever is persistent and high. I'm exhausted and uncomfortable, and I just want it to break. Airen said that it could possibly get worse, and that's making me anxious.

Lysander and Emyth brought me back to my room and then went off to do whatever they were going to do. I was okay for a short while after they left, but now I can't stop sweating.

My body is wracked with chills and I try to sleep, but I can't ever get past that half asleep phase. After what feels like an eternity I finally am able to get comfortable enough to doze off, but the dreams that plague me make me wish I hadn't.

*I'm sitting in my living room in the home that I shared with Todd. I have my e-reader on my lap, and there's a brilliant storm outside, relaxing me.*

*The front door opens with a bang, and startles me out of my comfortable state. Todd comes into the living room and points an accusing finger at me. "How could you?" he roars.*

*"How could I what? What's going on?" A bunch of faceless people walk in behind him. I can't make out what any of them look like.*

*"You fucked them!" he growls.*

*"Who?" I demand.*

*"Those repulsive fairies. You let them defile you, Arden."*

*Images of four strong hands roaming my body start to infiltrate my mind. My body pressed between two big beautiful fae men, their erections rubbing against me, desperate for friction.*

*"You're thinking about them. Aren't you?" Todd asks. "You're disgusting." He pulls that dagger from his boot and*

*moves toward me.*

*Panic rises inside of me. What have I done? I think about Zorvan, and what he'll do to Todd when he finds him.*

*Then one word resounds in my brain. MATE.*

I wake, and the room is spinning. Two muscled arms are carrying my naked body to the bathroom. I feel so overheated that I can't breathe. My skin feels like it should be melting off of my body.

Without warning I'm in an ice-cold bath, strong arms still wrapped around me. I look up to find Zorvan there, his eyebrows drawn together in concern.

"There you are," he whispers. "I thought I was going to lose you." He brushes sweaty strands of hair out of my face, and clutches me to his chest.

"Are you...are you naked?" I ask.

"Yes. And so are you."

"God I must smell awful," I say.

"You were just knocking on death's door. The last thing you should be worried about is how you smell," he chastises.

"Well when your knight in shining armor is as handsome as you, you want to look and smell your best."

He smiles at me. It's a real smile that reaches all the way to his eyes, and it makes me swoon a little.

"Well now I know you're delirious," he says with a deep laugh. "If you were in your right mind, you would never admit that you find me attractive."

I close my eyes and rest my head against his chest. His heartbeat is strong, and it soothes me. "That's not true," I say sleepily. "A fool could see how gorgeous you are, so there's no denying it. But I would also tell you what a gargantuan prick you were."

“That’s my girl,” he whispers into my hair, and presses a chaste kiss to my hair.

We stay like that for a long while, and my fever starts to come down. For the first time since the talix attack, I feel comfortable.

“Zorvan?” I ask.

“Hmm?”

“Please don’t leave me alone.”

“I’ll stay until you’re safe, Princess.”

When I wake up, I’m dried off and back in my bed. My sheets are clean and Zorvan is gone, and I wonder if any of it was even real.

The next morning I’m feeling one hundred percent better. The fever is gone, and for the first time in a couple of days I don’t feel like there’s a rock in my stomach.

I let Elliott escort me down to the infirmary to spend some time with Airen. She had meant what she said about putting me to work. It’s not anything difficult. Just measuring things for her and retrieving some herbs and flowers from the attached greenhouse. She has me sweeping and cleaning too. It’s nice to feel needed and busy.

We spend our time talking about anything and everything. She loves telling me all the latest gossip about fae I don’t know, and equally loves asking about the human realm.

“All I’m saying is that I don’t understand how having sex with a non-magical man could be any fun, when the magical ones hardly get it right half the time.” She holds her hands up and laughs. “Women I get. Women know what they’re doing.”

I chuckle and give her an appraising look. Airen is hot. *Why am I attracted to every single fae here?* I shake away the thought and say, “Todd was pretty boring, but I had been with a couple of guys before him...” I blush thinking about the kinkier things I had involved myself in while trying to cope

with all the death in my life. “Anyway, they aren’t all that boring.”

“What about the guys here?” she asks. “Have you had sex with any of them, yet?”

“No,” I say with a laugh. “I’m basically not allowed to spend any time with anyone but the keepers and Zorvan. It doesn’t open up a lot of time for those sorts of activities.”

“Why haven’t you slept with any of them yet?” She asks, confused. “They’re all crazy hot.”

“Airen! They’re engaged. Even if they weren’t, they’d never be interested in me.”

“If you say so,” she says, unconvinced. “What about Livarius or Rupert? You’ve been spending some time with them! Or even Elliott. Maybe he can guard your dungeon,” she suggests, wagging her eyebrows.

“First of all, ew. Second, Elliott is mated! Why are you so concerned about me getting laid, anyway?” I ask with a chuckle.

“You’re in a whole new world with unbelievably hot magical men. I just don’t think you should miss out, ya know.”

I sigh, “if you must know...” I look to the door, nervous that one of the guys will come in. “I think Livarius almost kissed me yesterday.”

Airen gasps and clicks her hooved feet on the tile floor. “Why didn’t he go through with it?” she asks.

“I don’t know. But I wouldn’t have stopped him.”

“You would be an idiot if you did.”

I go back over the moment with Livarius in the library. How he looked at me. How he sucked the air out of the room, and took my breath away. If he ever got that close again, I wouldn’t let him walk away without kissing me.

“Stars, Arden. I knew you would find someone right away. I kind of expected it to be Jarrah, though. He gets all

growly about you.”

“They all do.” I roll my eyes. “I’m their prisoner so I’m their property, blah blah blah. But he can growl all he wants. I’m not interested.”

“Mhmm,” she says, cocking an eyebrow. Clearly not convinced. “So this Todd character, all I know is that he... well, he doesn’t exactly have a glowing reputation around here. How did you end up with someone like him anyway? You’re so sweet, and quite frankly, he’s evil.”

“I really don’t think anyone could comprehend the difference between the Todd you all know of, and the Todd I lived with. When he was with me, he was so plain. I just can’t figure out what the purpose of lying to me was? Our relationship was fine, but not so good that I would expect someone to lie that thoroughly in order to keep it.”

She gives me a wry laugh. “Some males just feel the need to lie about whatever they can. That’s not a uniquely human problem. Wait right here.”

She walks over to a desk in the corner where she has an assortment of drawings and notes about different plants and their uses. She digs around in a drawer for a few minutes and pulls out a rolled-up piece of leather.

When she unrolls it, she reveals a series of vials. She pulls one out and hands it to me.

“What’s this?” I ask, while examining the liquid. It’s clear, but there are strands of a separate deep purple liquid swirling through it. They’re almost like water and a sentient oil refusing to combine.

“It’s a truth potion. Any being who consumes it is compelled to tell the truth. The duration depends on the person and the strength of the drought. That’s from my personal stores.

“I made it extra potent, but you shouldn’t need anything extra special for a human. Even if he is a hunter. If you ever find yourself in a position where you can ask for

answers, start with this. The tricky part is that you can't mix it with anything. Adding any other ingredients to it will disturb the properties that make it effective, so you'll have to administer it directly."

"I love magic," I say as I roll the vial between my thumb and forefinger. "Thank you for this. I appreciate everything you've done for me since my arrival."

"What? You mean failing to heal you, and nagging you about having sex? You're certainly easy to please."

I snort a laugh. "No. I mean offering me friendship. You're the first person in a long time that I've felt this level of kinship with. It's hard to explain, but I knew from the moment we met that you would be important to me." I pause then add, "I'm sorry. That's probably weird. We just met each other."

She takes my hand in hers and says, "That's not weird at all. The Stars put people in our paths for a reason. Some for romantic reasons, some to test us, some to provide fellowship. I felt the same connection to you when you arrived."

A tear falls down my face. "I swear I never used to cry before I arrived here," I say with a laugh. "I haven't had any close friends in a very long time, and I haven't had anyone to really talk to since my sister died."

"For as long as we both remain in Feldorn, you'll have me."

As we're sitting there sharing what amounts to the sappiest moment of my life, the door opens. Tavin walks in and I wipe my tears away. He looks between the two of us, and I'm grateful when he doesn't ask what's going on.

"We need to head to lunch. Are you ready to go?"

"Yes," I say as I surreptitiously stash the truth serum in the pocket of my dress. I look back to Airen, "Thank you. I'll be back sometime in the next couple of days."

"Any time you want to visit, Artie." Tavin and I start to walk out the door and Airen calls out, "Oh and Lord Tavin, if I

find out you or any of the other have been giving our girl a hard time, I'll give Helena a bleanroot tincture to slip into your food."

"Threatening a keeper isn't a wise decision, Airen."

"Neither is fucking with Arden," she says. And she means it.

Tavin stares her down for a minute then ushers me out, shutting the door behind him.

"What's a bleanroot tincture do?"

"It ensures that you can't take a solid shit for at least a week," he says scowling.

I bark a laugh. "You better listen to her then."

"You just make friends anywhere you go, don't you?" He asks. It's a genuine question.

"Not usually. It's been easier here than it was back home. Airen is wonderful."

"Do you two just sit and talk?"

"I also help her with her work. Gathering, cleaning, measuring, that sort of thing."

"Cleaning?!" Tavin asks, his mouth hanging open. "Airen has you doing manual labor?"

"Yes. It's not hard stuff. Just sweeping and mopping. Wiping down the tables. The stuff that doesn't require skill or knowledge of alchemy or herbalism. Though she's teaching me those too. But it will be a while before I'm comfortable making my own tinctures and salves."

"Those types of jobs are not for royals. They're for the help. Next you'll tell me Rupert has you digging holes, or Helena has you washing dishes."

I don't answer him, and give him a sheepish look.

He scrubs a hand down his face. "You've been doing those things too, haven't you?"

“I’m not a royal, Tavin. In the human realm I had to do all of those things myself. We had a cleaner come in once a week for a deeper clean of our house, but I did the dishes, I vacuumed, I did laundry...I’m happy to help them. I like having something to do with my hands.”

“I’ll give you something you can do with your hands,” Jarrah says suggestively, walking up behind us.

“Did you know she’s been doing servants’ work?” Tavin asks, sounding appalled.

“You what?” Jarrah asks. “Why in Stars name would you do that?”

“I’m not explaining myself again. I do what I want and that should be enough of an explanation for you.”

We meet the others for dinner and they all talk about important royal fae stuff while I twist the vial of truth serum in my pocket and think about what it would be like to get the truth from Todd. Would it even require the serum to get the truth from him now that I know about his double life? Do his parents know?

Sangaris doesn’t even feel real to me half of the time. There are still times where I wonder if I’m having a really strange dream. What if I was attacked by the jogger in the park, and my brain made up Sangaris as a way to cope during a coma.

“ARDEN!” Zorvan’s voice yanks me from my thoughts.

“Hmm?”

“Is the food not to your liking? You’ve barely eaten.”

“If it’s not, I’m sure she could just go cook her own,” Tavin says, clearly still horrified by my admission earlier in the day. When Zorvan asks what he means, Tavin recounts our conversation.

“You shouldn’t be doing any manual labor,” Zorvan says in annoyance. “It’s beneath you.”

“It’s beneath a hostage to pick up a mop? Good to know.” I eat a few more bites of my food and ask to be excused. Ever since Zorvan commented on my weight my second day here, I’ve been more mindful about what I eat. It’s like there’s something inside of me that wants to please him in spite of everything.

Zorvan dismisses me and sends Lysander with me to escort me to my room.

“You haven’t been eating enough,” Lysander says once we’re in our corridor.

“I’ve been eating plenty.”

“You’ve lost weight.”

“I don’t think so, and even if I have, I have plenty to lose.”

“Stop being so stubborn. And start eating more. There’s no reason to starve yourself.”

I don’t find it in me to argue with him. Explaining every decision to the guys is getting to be exhausting. It’s like they don’t trust me. I know Emyth doesn’t. I guess for now that’s fine, but I don’t know how much longer I can live with five men scrutinizing my every move.

## Chapter 23: Arden



### CHAPTER 23: ARDEN

Nearly two weeks into my stay in Sangaris, I've made some progress learning about the land. Livarius and I have been spending a lot of time together in the library. There haven't been any more near kisses, but lots of stolen glances, and flirting.

About one third of my wardrobe has shown up in my room, but they're all dresses so I finally asked Tavin for more pants and a shirt. The following day I woke up to find a set of Jarrah's and Lysander's in my room. I can tell whose clothes are who's by the smell. When one set gets washed, another shows up in its place.

Elliott escorts me to the library for lunch one day when the guys are supposed to be meeting with the royals to discuss the mating ceremonies and the attack on Kreaan.

I pick at my food slowly while I read some bits about different animals that live in the forest. Surprisingly the talix is one of the lesser concerns. They're apparently just stupid enough to attack while a dragon is nearby. After about an hour, Livarius gets up and wanders over to a different area.

When he returns he glances down at my plate, "you didn't eat much."

"Oh I just had a big breakfast, that's all." It's a lie. I take a sip of my coffee. It's still the perfect temperature. One of the first days here, I learned that some of the cups in the castle were enchanted to keep coffee at a drinkable temperature. I am slowly wrapping my head around the different types of magic in this realm, but it's a lot to take in.

There are enchantments that the fae put on simple items like the cup to increase their usefulness. The cart that Blevora used definitely had an enchantment on it that allowed

it to follow after her. Enchantments like those take a lot of time and expend a lot of energy, so only wealthier fae tend to have items like that. There are even looking glasses that allow for communication between fae, but apparently that requires some level of blood magic which is not the strong suit of the shifters.

Thinking about the magic of the realm has me thinking about how bland earth is without it. No enchanted items, no magical creatures; it's so boring.

“You said the other day that you've been to the human realm?”

“Yes. Most of the fae have at one time or another. A lot of them go to mate with humans. Pure breeding is important for the royals, but to keep the gene pool deep we do what we need to.” He shrugs.

“Have you...you know...” I ask, glancing at the ground, a blush creeping up my neck.

“Mated with a human? No. But I'm open to the idea.”

“What would be the benefit for you? It's not like a human can provide you with a very powerful heir. And we don't live very long compared to you.”

“Not everything is about power, Arden. For my father it's the only thing that matters, but what matters most to me is enjoying my life with someone I care for.”

If he keeps looking at me the way he is, I'm going to fall in love with him, and I can't let that happen. I stand from my seat and say, “I'm going to go back and grab a couple more books.”

“I'll come with you.” He stands and gently grabs my hand to make me face him again.

He stares at me as an internal battle seems to wage within him. The part of him that terrifies me comes out triumphant. But I wanted it to win more than anything.

“I’m going to kiss you now,” he growls as he grabs my chin roughly and presses his lips to mine. My back slams up against the window.

I slide my fingers through his hair and tug on it gently causing him to groan into my mouth and press against me. I can feel his hard length against my hip. He presses his tongue to my lips, and I open for him. I feel one of his fangs against my bottom lip and I gasp.

He presses his forehead to mine as he says breathlessly, “You smell so fucking good, Artie. I want to feed from you more than anything, but I won’t without your permission.”

“I don’t think I’m ready for that. That feels very intimate.”

He nods. “Not until you’re ready, then.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, and he kisses me. He’s much softer this time.

“I wanted you from the first moment I saw you, but these last several days have meant so much to me. I don’t think I realized how starved for touch and affection I was until just now.”

I look into his eyes and press my hand to his cheek, “It’s meant a lot to me too. Your presence soothes me.”

He’s about to kiss me again when the door to the library slams open, causing us both to jump. Livarius moves away from me abruptly and straightens his hair while I fix my clothes. Zorvan rounds the corner and stops in his tracks at the sight of us standing near each other. His eyes move from Livarius to me.

“We need to get you back to your room right now. You won’t be allowed to leave for a while so grab whatever books you want to take with you.”

“Why can’t I leave? I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Haven’t you?” he asks angrily, his gaze darting to Livarius.

“No, I haven’t. I’ve done everything you’ve asked. Tell me what is going on,” I demand.

“Not in front of him.” Zorvan nods at Livarius.

“Why? I trust him.”

“I don’t. Let’s go.”

Livarius steps in front of me, “You can’t just lock her away. She’s a person.”

Zorvan moves so fast that I barely see it happen. He grabs Livarius by the neck and lifts him off the ground much like Iona had done the first day I met her. He squeezes so hard that Livarius begins to turn purple.

“How dare you speak to me that way? She is my prisoner and I will do what I please. It’s cute that you have a little crush on her, but what I do with her is my business.”

“Zorvan! Put him down!” I scream hitting him on the shoulder repeatedly. He doesn’t let go so I grab a knife off of my plate and stab him in the arm.

He drops Livarius suddenly and hisses in pain. His glowing eyes land on mine and I take a step away from him. *That was a mistake.*

His eyes flicker back to their normal blue as man fights beast within him.

“Arden. I suggest you run very very fast.”

With a shriek I sprint out of the room and he lunges after me. Thankfully he left the door to the library open. I run through it and down the hall yelling at Elliott over my shoulder, “stop him!”

I glance over my shoulder to see Elliott move toward the door then dive out of the way when he sees Zorvan coming.

“Coward,” I mutter under my breath as I run as fast as I can down the corridor, down the steps to the landing, then back up the steps on the other side toward my room.

His footsteps are gaining on me, and my heart pounds in my chest. He is going to kill me if he catches me. If I had any reason to believe I could survive outside, I would have gone that way. Instead I figure my safest bet is to lock myself in my bathroom.

My hand reaches my door and I pull on the handle. My heart sinks in my chest as I realize the fucking thing is locked. I take too long to decide my next plan of action. Zorvan slams into me, throwing me to the floor. I groan as my head smacks off the marble.

“You think you can stab a prince and get away with it? Worse, a dragon?” He straddles my hips and holds me down by my throat. His very obvious erection presses against my belly as he leans over me. My lips part in a quiet gasp when I realize that he’s not only angry. He’s also very aroused.

Something in me decides to poke the dragon. “No, but I saved Livarius from you. That’s enough for me.” My words are a hoarse whisper through the pressure on my windpipe.

Zorvan reels back as if my words cut him deeper than the knife did. “You care for him.” It’s a statement, not a question. When I don’t respond he asks, “have you *fucked* him?”

My face flushes at his directness, “no.”

“If I find out you’re lying, I will skin you both alive.”

“Why do you even care?”

“Because you are *mine*. My prisoner, my responsibility, my leverage. I will not have you whoring around with all of the staff.”

“I am a grown woman. What I do with my body is my choice.” I’m suddenly very aware of the fact that Zorvan is straddling me and I don’t hate it. I was already wet from my make out session with Livarius. I hate Zorvan for being so attractive. Any time our hands even brush against each other in the dining hall it sends shivers down my spine. My body betrays me when it comes to him.

“You keep forgetting that I’m in charge here. So long as you live in my home, your body is my property.”

“My body will never belong to you, you delusional gecko.”

“You may want to tell that to your greedy pussy.” He leans in so his mouth is practically against my ear and whispers, “I can smell how wet you are. Looks like I’m not the only one who likes the chase.”

To make his point, he grinds his erection against my core, and I gasp at the friction. We stare at each other, our rapid breathing the only sound in the corridor. I must be losing my mind, because the only thing I can think about is what it would be like for him to take me right here, out in the open, for everyone to see.

He seems to snap out of whatever trance he was in as he moves his hand from my throat and pats me on the cheek in a condescending way.

“Now come with me. We have more important matters to discuss.”

I push myself up off the floor and follow him to his office.

## Chapter 24: Zorvan



### CHAPTER 24: ZORVAN

The keepers are already in my office when Arden and I enter. I subtly adjust myself in my pants before turning and sitting in my office chair. Arden stands in the doorway and leans against the frame with her arms over her chest. The scent of her arousal has all four of my men practically drooling over her and shooting daggers in my direction. My problem is that she already smelled like that when I went to retrieve her from the library.

There has to be something going on between her and Livarius, but I don't have any proof. With things being so tenuous between myself and Falmir, I won't make any accusations until I know for sure. Instead I'll focus on the other issues plaguing my kingdom.

"We have a problem," I say plainly. "When the militia attacked Krean, they kidnapped children and adults that were important to members of our staff. I suspected that they would use them to their advantage, and this is one time I wish that I had been wrong.

"Helena's sister's body was found hanging from a tree just at the border of our innermost wards. A magical signature triggered the wards because it wasn't recognized, but by the time the guard arrived the perpetrator had fled."

"Is Helena okay?" Arden asks with a furrowed brow. Her concern for the cook catches me off guard.

"I haven't spoken to her, yet."

"She doesn't know?" Arden asks, her concern giving way to anger.

"My first priority when I got the news was to find you. I will tell her as soon as we're done here."

“Jesus Christ, Zorvan. Helena should have been the first to know. Why was it so important to find me?”

“If you would let me finish!” I stop myself before I can get out of control again. I take a deep breath and explain, “Because the person who left the body pinned a note to. It said that they were going to continue killing until we handed you over. There were instructions on where we should meet for the exchange. They want Walden alone to bring you to them. We are not to accompany you.”

“What? Why me?”

“I have no idea. Possibly because they know you’re important to me. They might know why you’re here and want to seek revenge on Todd themselves. It might be an effort to create discord among my people.”

“How will it create discord?” she asks.

It’s Emyth who answers with a scowl at Arden, “Because the people of Feldorn will wonder why he won’t give up a human in order to save the lives of the other captives.”

“Why not just hand me over?” Arden asks.

I’m taken aback by her question. “Because I will not be threatened or blackmailed. These criminals have raped and pillaged their way through Feldorn. They must pay for their crimes. Handing you over to them won’t stop them. It will just embolden them.” *And you’re my mate and I will give you up over my dead body.*

“So what’s our plan since we’re not giving up our girl?” Jarrah asks winking at Arden who rolls her eyes.

Her lack of manners and blatant disrespect drives me mad. I want to make her submit, but even pinned beneath me in the hallway she refused. I wonder what promises I would have to make to her to get her to obey me.

“We have a couple of options. We can do nothing and increase patrols along the wards.”

“We don’t have enough manpower for that,” Tavin retorts.

“You’re right. So our second option is to decrease the area of the innermost ward to make patrols easier.”

“That should be doable,” Emyth notes.

“It would take a lot of magic, but yes, it is doable. Our final option is to set a trap for The Sentinels. They want Arden. We could pretend like we’re going to hand her over, but have the guard lay in wait to attack.”

“Absolutely not. We’re not using her as bait,” Lysander says.

“We wouldn’t have to. We could use a disguise spell on someone else.”

“They’ll know it’s not her if they have the ability to see through magic. It’s a rare ability but not unheard of,” Emyth says.

“I’ll be the bait,” Arden offers.

“No,” the rest of them say in unison.

“Why would you do that for us,” I ask, not willing to dismiss it entirely.

“It’s not for you. It’s for them. There are others that they’ve kidnapped. Women and children who are being held by these people. Who knows what they’re doing to them. I want to help. I need to.”

“While that’s very heartwarming, if you get caught, it’ll make all of this pointless.”

“Some of the staff who have had family taken are my friends, Zorvan. Please.”

“Just let her do it,” Emyth says. “We can be there to make sure no one gets to her.”

“What if we don’t get to her in time?” Jarrah asks, giving Arden a longing look.

“You will,” Arden says with a smile. “How long do we have to prepare?”

“Three days. You will stay in your room or with one of us at all times. This includes bedtime. Someone in the castle has to have told the militia that you’re here so I don’t trust anyone except for the people in this room.”

“What about Livarius, Airen, and Rupert?” Arden pouts.

“No,” I say plainly. This is not up for debate, and she already has way more freedom than I would like.

“They are my friends. Helena, too. We talk about things that we wouldn’t want to talk about with you around.”

“Like what?” Lysander snaps. He still hasn’t moved past Rupert’s familiarity with Arden. He would flip if he knew what I suspect about Livarius.

“Things that I won’t repeat because it’s none of your business. It’s things that they’ve told me in confidence and I won’t betray that.”

“It could be important,” Jarrah says.

“I promise it’s not.”

“How can you possibly know that? You’ve only been here a couple of weeks,” I chide.

“Do you think I’m stupid?” She accuses.

“I think you’re too trusting.”

“I like to think I’m a very good judge of character, thank you.”

“Oh? Did you know that Livarius is Falmir’s son? For all we know he could be telling his daddy all your little secrets.” I didn’t want to use that bit of information, but she needs to know who she’s dealing with. Her trusting nature could get her hurt or killed.

“Yes. I did, actually. I also know that he can’t stand his prick of a father. Which I’m guessing you didn’t know judging by the look on your face,” she snaps.

“I’m surprised. He normally doesn’t divulge that information to people.”

“I told you. We’re friends. Friends tell each other things. I probably know more about the three of them than I know about any of you combined. You five never tell me anything. Personal or not. It’s like pulling teeth to get you to even spend time with me to talk about Feldorn lately. Jarrah and Lysander are the only ones who have told me anything about the kingdom worth knowing at this point, and they haven’t said anything more about it since I arrived.”

“Now you’re just whining. None of that changes my opinion on having a chaperon everywhere you go for the next three days. This is for your safety. After the meet, we can reevaluate, but I will not budge on this. Am I understood?”  
*You impossibly stubborn girl.*

“Fine.” She’s pouting again. Her supple bottom lip sticking out slightly, distracting me for the briefest of seconds.

“Good. I’ll call a strategy meeting for after dinner. Who wants the first babysitting shift?”

“I’ll take it,” Emyth offers while Arden scowls at me. Good. She can stay mad at me. Maybe that will help keep me away from her until I determine whether or not she’s a strong enough female to be my mate. Because so far I have not been successful in keeping my distance.

## Chapter 25: Arden



### CHAPTER 25: ARDEN

**E**myth opted to spend the afternoon in my room. We sit in silence for some time, the only sounds are the turning of pages. I can't take the uncomfortable silence anymore. I need to be alone for a little while.

"Hey Emyth?" I ask hesitantly.

"Yeah?" He doesn't even look up from his book.

"I would like to get a bath. Would you be willing to light the coals for me?"

He sighs and folds down the corner of his book which makes me cringe. While he is in the bathroom, I grab a dress for the evening. It is black with a high neck and long sleeves. This is the most commanding dress Blevora has made for me so far. If I want the fae to take me seriously in the strategy meeting, then I need to look the part.

I tie my hair up off of my neck and carry my dress into the bathroom. Emyth doesn't say a word as he stalks back into my bedroom.

"Thank you," I mutter, glancing at the floor.

All he does is grunt in return before shutting the door behind him. I'm not sure what I did to offend him so severely, but I hope he warms up to me soon. He's cordial when we're with the others, but while we're alone he barely acknowledges me.

I wash myself thoroughly. My encounter with Livarius, and then Zorvan chasing me through the halls left me sweaty and frustrated. Logically I know I shouldn't be attracted to Zorvan, but it doesn't stop my mind from wandering to how it felt in the hall earlier.

When I close my eyes, all I can think about is the way his breath felt on my ear, his devious smile, his cock pressed hard against my body. It makes me shiver as I recount the thrill of him chasing me.

Realizing that this will be the only alone time I get tonight, I slide my hand down past my bellybutton and slowly rub my clit. Just as I pick up the pace there's a knock at the door and I hear Emyth on the other side. "Are you almost finished?"

I clear my throat, "Yes! Be right there!" *Fucking hell. Now I'm even more frustrated than I was before.*

I yank the plug out of the tub and get to my feet, wrapping the towel around myself. I dry off quickly before putting my dress on and braiding my hair, and twisting it around my head like a crown, leaving some pieces down to frame my face.

Blevora had left some fae cosmetics for me and one of the housemaids had shown me how to use it. I put on some eye shadow and the fae equivalent of mascara. I paint my lips bright red and give myself one last appraising look. I look fierce.

When I open the door, Emyth says, "Finally," without even looking up from his book. "What took you so..." He trails off and his head snaps in my direction. His nostrils flare and his pupils dilate.

I immediately feel self-conscious. "Did I do it wrong? I thought I did it the way Tara showed me."

"No. You look fine. Let's go." He's back to his normal self.

"Okay," I say quietly and follow behind him to dinner.

I step into the dining hall with feigned confidence. Zorvan glances in my direction, then does a double take. His mouth pops open slightly causing the others to turn their attention toward me.

Jarrah stands from the table and approaches me. “My Stars, Arden. All you need is a crown and you’d look like a queen.” He kisses me on the cheek and pulls my chair out for me.

I blush at his words. I feel like a child who was found playing dress up in their mother’s clothes. “I just wanted to be taken seriously. Is it too much?”

“For a strategy meeting maybe,” Tavin says, focusing on his food. Lysander punches him in the arm so he quickly adds, “But it’s fine. You definitely look the part of a leader.”

I feel ridiculous all of a sudden. I want to change out of this dress and hide in my room, but I decide to own it. I’m so tired of feeling self-conscious around these guys.

Zorvan returns to his meal and says, “That dress suits you. Blevora has a good eye.”

I’m so shocked by the compliment that I don’t know what to say, so I busy myself by taking a drink of water.

Helena comes out and puts plates on the table for myself and Emyth. “You look wonderful, Arden. What’s the occasion?” she asks.

“Strategy meeting that I’m unexpectedly attending. Speaking of which, I’m surprised to see you here.” I put my hand on hers and say, “Are you doing okay?”

“Yes, dear! Why wouldn’t I be?” She gives me a curious look.

My head snaps to Zorvan whose face is twisted into an unfamiliar emotion. *Is that regret? Or maybe guilt?* “You didn’t tell her?”

“Tell me what?” Helena’s eyes flit between Zorvan and me.

Zorvan takes too long to answer so I decide to do it for him. I pull out the chair next to me and ask Helena to sit. Her brows knit together and her smile has turned into a frown as she wordlessly sits next to me.

“Arden.” Zorvan warns.

“Shut up,” I say, causing Helena to gasp in surprise. Everyone is still so used to Zorvan getting his way in every situation, but he’s being a shit leader right now. He doesn’t get pleasantries. “You had your chance and you blew it,” I say to him then turn to Helena. I take her hands in mine. “Helena, they found your sister’s body today.”

“What?” She says with a laugh, but then my words sink in. Her eyes land on Zorvan, “No. You said... You said you would get her back. You promised me.” Tears start streaming down her face. “How? Where did you find her?”

“They strung her up at the border. She was given suppressants and then her throat was slit,” Zorvan says quietly.

“Those fuckers,” she growls before a sob escapes her.

My gaze drops to the floor. I’m fighting tears of my own. “It’s my fault,” I whisper.

“What do you mean?” She asks.

“They wanted me, and Zorvan wouldn’t give me up. So they killed her to prove a point.”

“Arden!” Zorvan shouts, slamming his fist on the table, startling Helena.

“She deserves to know the truth.”

“We don’t know who is feeding information to The Sentinels. We can’t just go around telling people what’s going on.”

Helena interjects, “With all due respect, your highness, if you believe that I had my own sister killed over a human—no offense dearie—” she pats my hand, “then you can get fucked.”

Tavin chokes on his food trying to stifle a laugh. Lysander’s eyes go wide, and I smile at the beautiful plump fae in front of me. Zorvan’s eyes glow for a split second before

the return to normal. His dragon nearly breaches the surface. I should be scared, but I'm just angry.

He grinds his teeth together, and takes a deep breath to regain his composure. "Helena, you just received devastating news, so I will let that slide, but don't ever let it happen again. You have the next month off to mourn, should you choose. We'll hold your sister's rites in a fortnight as is custom. Now please, leave us to our dinner."

Helena scowls at him then looks back to me with a tear-stained face, "Thank you for telling me, Arden. Your honesty and kindness are refreshing." She kisses my cheek before leaving our table.

Everyone is silent until Helena is out of the room. Zorvan and I are engaged in a staring contest. By the fire in his eyes, I can't tell if he wants to stab me or fuck me.

"You are an infuriating girl." He hisses. "We need to work on your ability to follow orders."

"If your 'orders' were reasonable, I'd follow them.

"They're perfectly reasonable. No one else, least of all the females in the castle, have an issue following them."

"That's because you're used to women being impressed by your wealth and wanting to just shove their boobs in your face to try to get your attention. Whereas I don't give a fuck what you think."

"That's not the impression I got while you were trapped under me earlier."

Four sets of eyes snap to my face and I feel a flush creeping up as I shiver at his words. I refuse to give him the satisfaction of having the last word. Even as I feel wetness pool between my thighs at the thought of him chasing me I feel the need to put him in his place.

"Being aroused by you and wanting to be with you are two very different things. Don't get them twisted."

“As charming as your little sparring match is, we need to finish dinner and get to the war room.” Emyth says, sounding bored. But there’s a crack in the calm facade he typically carries. He’s angry, but I’m not sure about what.

I take two more bites of my chicken and a bite of broccoli and push away from the table. “I’m ready when you are. I’ll wait in the hall.”

“No need. I’ll come with you,” Emyth says, surprising me.

“Are you sure? If you’re still hungry, you can eat.”

“No. I’ve had enough.” He glares at Zorvan as he says it. A silent conversation seems to pass between them. “Let’s go.”

We step into the hallway and Emyth closes the door behind us. “Why do you do that?” He asks.

“Do what?”

“Push him so hard. You don’t know what he’s capable of.”

“I have some idea. Besides, he clearly hasn’t had anyone push him like this in a long time, and he was getting a big head about it. He needs a reminder that just because he’s in a position of power doesn’t mean that he can just treat people like shit.”

“Hmm.”

“Arden!” Helena calls from behind me. She hurries up next to us with a small burlap sack in her hands.

“What do you need?” Emyth asks rather brusquely all things considered.

To my delight she ignores him. “I brought you some of my pies to take to your room. I won’t be around for at least a week or two and I know how much you like them. Jobie can cook, but he’s not much of a baker and he’s in charge while I’m gone.”

“Helena, you didn’t have to do that,” I say, taking the little bag of hand pies from her. “Please, go rest and grieve. I’ll see you when you return. Besides, I could do without sweets for a while,” I laugh.

“Nonsense. Everyone needs a little sweetness to carry them through.”

“Thank you. You’re welcome to visit me in my room if you need a friend.” I grasp her hands and give her a sad smile and a peck on the cheek.

Helena pulls me into an abrupt hug and squeezes me so tight I can barely breathe. “Thank you for telling me, and thank you for your kindness. You’re a sweet girl.”

“You’re welcome. Take care of yourself, okay?”

She nods, a tear falling down her cheek as she hurries toward the front door of the castle. She strips her dress off, and I catch sight of her shifting into a large snowy owl and taking flight just as the doors close behind her. I will never get used to these shifters just taking their clothes off wherever they stand.

“Fraternizing with the help?” A scoff comes from the stairs.

“Iona,” Emyth warns.

I groan and roll my eyes.

“What? Is that not the truth? First with Rupert, then Livarius, and now Helena? Why doesn’t Zorvan just give her a job mopping the floors? It’s all she’s good for anyway.”

“I’m not above doing manual labor, Iona. It’s good to get your hands dirty every once in a while. And what exactly are you good for, anyway?” I ask. “Because I’m pretty sure Zorvan’s got the ‘frigid bitch’ act down enough that he doesn’t need you.” My words make Iona’s eyes glow and her fangs appear. I’d like to see her try anything with Emyth here.

Emyth snickers beside me, but quickly schools his expression when he sees me glance at him. The fact that I

made him laugh makes me giddy inside.

“Just go away, Iona. We don’t have time for your petty bullshit. Move out of the way,” Emyth says.

“The sooner you and the others realize that bringing her here was a mistake, the better off we’ll *all* be,” Iona says as she shoves past me and strolls out of the building.

Once we’re alone again Emyth says, “You really just love pushing *everyone’s* buttons, don’t you?”

I shrug, “I decided my first day here that if Zorvan was going to keep me here I was going to make it as hard on him as possible. Pissing off Iona is just an added bonus because if she’s unhappy, he has to hear about it. He doesn’t get to disrupt my entire life and go by unchecked.

“Even if I were able to go back home at this point, I wouldn’t have a fiancé, a job, or a life. I would have to completely start over. So what if I get eaten by an angry vampire? I don’t have anything to go back to.”

Emyth is quiet for a while and I realize that I just word vomited at him. “I’m sorry. You don’t need to listen to me whine. Do you mind if we stop by my room for a moment so I can use the bathroom?”

“Sure,” he says simply, ignoring my outburst, as he leads me to my quarters.

When I step out of the bathroom, Emyth is looking at the pile of books I have sitting on my desk.

“Why did you pick these particular books?”

“They have information about Sangaris that might be useful since I’m going to be here long term. You all grew up here, but it’s all so new to me, I swear I don’t think I’ll ever learn it all even with the down time I have.”

He gives me a pensive look, “Why are you so kind to the people that work here?”

“I don’t really know how else to explain it to you all. They’re people. *Good* people. I don’t know how the hell Livarius shares a parent with Iona, but he’s a good man, great even. Rupert, Helena, Airen, they’ve all been so kind to me when I needed it. There may come a day where I really need a friend, and who would I have to turn to if I treated them all like garbage. It’s not like I can confide in you and the other keepers.

“I mean think about it. What would happen to Iona if Faylin left or decided that being friends with her is more trouble than it’s worth? If you and the other keepers had to leave the kingdom, that would leave Zorvan painfully alone. Alienating people because of their station in life isn’t any way to exist.”

We stand in silence for what feels like an uncomfortable amount of time. Instead of acknowledging what I said he just changes the subject. “I think we need to get going so we’re not late.”

## Chapter 26: Emyth



### CHAPTER 26: EMYTH

**A**rden and I enter the war room. Zorvan is already seated looking over some papers. He nods at me as we take our seats at the large table.

“Who are we involving?” I ask.

“The advisors, you lot, and Walden and his three most trusted men. I don’t want any more people involved in this than absolutely necessary. The smaller the group, the easier it’ll be to smoke out the rat if things go south.”

“You really think someone in the castle is working for them?” Arden asks.

“Yes. So we have to be prepared for this to go to shit.”

“Do you really think this is a good idea?” I ask. Fear is welling up in me at the thought of losing Arden. Very little scares me anymore. I still don’t trust her, but I desperately want to. I also know that I will flay anyone that even tries to touch her, let alone hurt her.

“No, but it’s our best option,” Zorvan says.

For the first time since offering herself as bait, Arden looks scared. She should be. No threat has remained this elusive in centuries. We’ve talked to the seers, and the astrologists. Lysander has consulted the bones, and even checked old prophecies. The Sentinels must have strong magic on their side to cloak them this thoroughly.

The rest of the keepers arrive, followed by the advisors and finally the guards. Falmir stops dead in his tracks when he sees Arden at the table.

“What is the meaning of this? You won’t allow our daughters—not even our mates—a seat at this table, but you invite her?”

“Since this concerns her directly, yes, I am allowing her to sit with us. This was also her idea so she deserves a say in how it plays out.” Zorvan answers bitterly.

“What was her idea?” Mirv asks.

“Have a seat and we’ll get started.”

Zorvan fills the advisors in on Helena’s sister and Arden’s idea on how to handle it. When he’s finished detailing the plan, he opens the floor up to suggestions on how to best proceed.

“So you refused to give her up in the first place, and it got one of our people killed. And now you’re taking her advice on how to deal with it? What if this is all some ploy for her to escape? What if she’s working with The Sentinels?” Falmir asks.

“I’m not taking her advice. I am, however, taking her up on her offer to make sure that we catch the fae responsible for this. Helena is a treasured member of this kingdom and killing her sister was an act of war. Extreme measures must be taken. As for your concerns that Arden is working against us, I have had her under strict monitoring since she arrived. There is no way that she is involved.”

“If I may?” Arden speaks up and Zorvan gestures for her to go ahead. “I am furious that my presence here caused the death of Helena’s sister. The way I see it, this is the only way that I can personally help make sure the culprits are brought to justice. I may not have magic, or the ability to shift, but I am an asset.

“If it means putting my life at risk, then so be it. You may have whatever opinions of me that you do, Falmir. But I won’t sit idly by while they kill more of the people of Feldorn.”

Jarrah and Lysander look at Arden with such pride in their eyes. I feel a pang of it myself. I never expected this girl to be so brave. I also never anticipated how much she would

care for the people here. She wasn't raised here, but it's like her life essence knows that she belongs.

Falmir just glares in response as if speaking to a human is beneath him. *I hate that guy.*

“Now that we have that out of the way, does anyone have any thoughts on how we can pull this off?” Zorvan asks.

“They want Arden just on the other side of the wards, which seems risky. They can't attack in, but we can attack out with magic,” Jarrah says.

“What if we shift, and lie in wait?” Lysander asks.

“It's too hard to hide a dragon,” I remind him. He sometimes forgets that not everyone has a shifted form as compact as a dire wolf. If you could even call a nine foot tall wolf ‘compact’.

“We could wait in the trees,” Tavin suggests.

“No, we need something stealthier,” Walden says.

“You all have earth magic, right?” Arden asks.

“Yes. Some are stronger than others, but we all have access to it,” Zorvan answers.

“Anyone strong enough to dig a tunnel system in the limited time that we have?” Arden asks with a laugh.

I think she's joking, but it's not a bad plan. Zorvan exchanges glances with me and the rest of the keepers then says, “My magic is pretty strong, but the strongest earth mage I know is Rupert.”

“I wasn't being serious,” Arden says.

“It's not a terrible plan,” Tavin says. “We will definitely need more powerful earth mages, though. I vote we ask Rupert to help.”

“No. Absolutely not,” Lysander snaps.

“Get over yourself. You're acting like a child,” Arden scolds. “If he's the strongest then we may need him.”

“We create a tunnel, and then what?” Mirv asks.

“Then you all lie in wait under the ground for the militia to arrive,” Arden says with a shrug.

“I’m not waiting in some dank cave,” Falmir scoffs.

“You don’t even need to come. I half expect you would kill Walden and give me to The Sentinels yourself to get me out of the way.”

“I’m under strict orders not to harm you,” Falmir says sardonically. “I wouldn’t dream of disobeying our crown prince.”

“I may not be ancient like you all, but I’m also not stupid. You and Iona want me gone. I don’t trust either of you. For all we know you’re the ones working with The Sentinels. So come or don’t. I think we’ll have plenty of manpower without you.”

“Are you accusing me of treason?” Falmir jumps to his feet and slams his fist on the table.

Arden’s voice is steady and calm, “I wasn’t accusing you. I was just saying that I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“Prince Zorvan!” Falmir starts.

“Save it.”

“This is bullshit. I will be writing to my mother about this. About you trusting the word of a human over mine, and about you treating me with such gross disrespect.”

“Tell your mother whatever you want. I would love to have an audience with her to discuss your temper and your daughter attempting to assassinate a prisoner of mine.”

Falmir is practically purple in the face, “A prisoner that you are letting sit in on a privileged strategy meeting. Have you gone absolutely mad?”

“If you don’t sit down and shut up I will have you forcibly removed from the room.” Zorvan challenges.

Falmer stares at Zorvan for a long time, but doesn't say a word as he sits back in his seat. Arden wears a mask of cool indifference. She is so quick to get riled up by my brothers and me, but is able to keep herself knit together so tightly while facing other people. She glances at me and tilts her head to the side like a puppy. I'm smiling at her, and she's noticed.

I clear my throat. "I think the tunnel plan is good. They wouldn't be able to see it. I doubt they'd be scanning underground for magical signatures. My only concern is the speed at which we could reach the surface. If it's just the five of us, it will take at least the entire day tomorrow to dig the tunnels."

"If we involve Rupert it will go much faster," Arden singsongs.

"I'm willing to let him join," Zorvan says.

"Me too," says Walden.

"Is anyone opposed to looping him in?"

"Could we not tell him what it's for?" Jarrah asks.

"I supposed we could withhold that," Arden says. "I don't like keeping things from him, but honestly it might keep him safer if he doesn't know."

"Okay. We have a plan. If anyone comes up with anything better before tomorrow morning, let me know. Otherwise, let's meet in the garden after breakfast to start working on it. Does anyone else have any other matters to discuss?"

"I would like to have a word with you privately," Falmer hisses to Zorvan while sneering at Arden.

"My patience is wearing thin, Falmer. I will meet with you this one time with Jarrah present. I suggest you get all of your feelings out on the table because we will not be discussing any of this again after tonight. The rest of you are dismissed. Emyth, Arden is with you tonight. Do not leave her alone."

*How could I forget?* I regret volunteering to watch over her. My plan was to try to learn more about her to see if I had any reason to worry about her. Instead I'm starting to fall under her spell just like the others. I just hope I haven't made a colossal mistake.

I take Arden to retrieve some personal items from her room, and then lead her to mine. I unlock the door and usher her inside. My bed was made by the housemaid at some point during the day and my clothes had been scooped up and put in the hamper.

I'm thankful to the staff for helping keep it clean. A fact I tend to take for granted, but Arden has been doing a great job reminding me of their worth.

"Go ahead and use the bathroom to change if you want," I say pointing to the washroom.

"I think I'll stay in this dress a little longer. It's so pretty, and I tend to get chilly in my night dress if I'm not covered up. Speaking of which, I don't see a couch or anything. My room has a settee. Could we bring that over so I could sleep on it?"

"I was going to give you my bed," I say in disbelief.

"No, I couldn't. This is your room and I'm already causing a disruption to your routine."

"I'm not letting you sleep on the floor or a couch, Arden. You'll be sleeping in the bed," I say with a chuckle.

"But where will you sleep?"

"In the chair. I've done it before."

"What if...nevermind." She worries her lip, "I insist you get my settee from my room and let me sleep on that."

"What were you going to say?"

"It was a stupid suggestion," she turns bright red.

I raise my eyebrow at her, "were you going to suggest we share the bed?"

“We wouldn’t have to—like—snuggle or anything. It’s way bigger than I need.”

I consider it for a second and then make the most unwise decision I’ve made since she arrived. “Okay, yeah. Just stay on your side.”

I didn’t relish the idea of sleeping in the chair. My king size bed has plenty of room for us to sleep without touching. She nods then pulls out a book and sits in a chair to read.

It’s comfortable spending time with her, like this. No words are exchanged, just silence and each other’s company. I steal glances at her every so often. I love the way she sticks her tongue out while she’s concentrating.

She glances up from her book, and I’m blatantly staring at her. I try to play it off, but I know I’ve been caught. She doesn’t comment on it, but disappears into the bathroom with her bag for about a half an hour.

When she returns she’s wearing a little lacey night dress and has her hair braided in pigtails hanging on either side of her beautiful face. Her makeup is gone, and she looks perfect. The dress that she was wearing was stunning, but I prefer her this way; vulnerable, pliable, and soft.

She wraps her arms around her middle in a self-conscious gesture and says, “Blevora didn’t make me anything more...modest.”

“I see.” I get to my feet and strip off my shirt and pants and stand in my undergarments. “I don’t have anything more modest either,” I say in jest, and slide into the bed.

She climbs in on the other side. “Goodnight, Emyth,” she says softly.

“Goodnight,” I respond and use my fire magic to extinguish the lights.

*I stand in the middle of the training field with the guys. Millie has been missing for over two months, and there are no signs of where she went. Kildara blames us for her*

*disappearance. King Ardeth has called a meeting with Zorvan and we are all expected to attend. We leave first thing in the morning, so today we're training.*

*I pull the flask out of my pocket and take another drink. I'm on my second flask of the day, and I had two bottles of wine during lunch. Elred, a pegasus shifter, is standing at the other end of the training field laughing with a few of his friends. He brought a human to the lands. I can't understand why. Humans are boring, and the vampires love to feed from them. The human likely won't survive a week.*

*Tavin is hanging back for this round of sparring. I'm paired with Lysander and Zorvan is with Jarrah. We run drills and swap off every so often making sure everyone gets a chance to work out. We're on our last round. I'm fading fast because of the alcohol, and I have decided to sit out the last couple of rounds.*

*Elred waltzes over and comes to a stop next to me, "Hey Emyth, I don't have a partner either. Would you like to spar with me?"*

*"Nah I'm good," I say, pulling my flask from my pocket and downing the last of its contents.*

*"Scared?" he jests.*

*"Not in the slightest. I could beat you blindfolded. I just don't feel like it."*

*"You sure it's not because you've been suckling on that flask like it's your mother's tit?"*

*I get to my feet and get in his space, "You have something to say?"*

*"I just think you'd have a better time finding that girlfriend of yours if you weren't half under the table every day."*

*My rage surfaces and my death magic begins to ooze from me like smokey waterfalls tumbling down my body.*

*Before I can think it through, I pull my arm back and punch him in his perfectly straight nose.*

*“Ow what the fuck, man?” He howls in pain. “I was just joking around.”*

*His human friend comes running up behind him, and touches his shoulder. He says, “I’m fine Dean. He’s just a bitter drunk who let his fiancé die.”*

*“LET her die?” I yell. “I didn’t let her die any more than you allowed this...” I leap on to his human friend and begin to choke him. Elred comes over and attempts to pull me off of the human. Keeping one hand on Dean’s throat, I reach out and shove Elred’s chest and release just enough of my reaper magic to briefly paralyze him.*

*What I don’t account for is the fact that my death magic is way more powerful when used against humans. I don’t intend to hurt the human, but because I’m touching him, my death magic seeps into him, searching for a victim. Dean starts violently convulsing underneath me.*

*“Fuck,” Tavin whispers behind me.*

*“Emyth! Get off of him!” Zorvan yells, “Emyth! Move! Please. Get off of me.” Zorvan’s voice becomes Dean’s. Dean’s voice turns feminine. “Emyth,” I feel hands tapping my arms. When I look down it’s no longer Dean beneath me, but Arden. I’m in my bed. My hands are wrapped around her throat.*

*“Emyth.” Her voice is a hoarse whisper.*

*I throw myself off of her and stumble backwards across the room, pressing my back to the wall. It’s been ages since I had that dream. I had night terrors about it frequently in the first few months after I stopped drinking. I yank on my hair as I press my back to the wall and slide down to the floor. Arden is choking on the bed. She eventually recovers enough that she slides off the bed and crawls over to me, sitting back on her heels.*

*She reaches toward me, but thinks better of it and pulls her hand away. “Are you okay?” she asks quietly.*

“Are you joking right now? I nearly killed you and you want to know if *I’m* okay?”

“You were dreaming. It wasn’t you.” Her voice is gravelly from the damage I did to her throat.

“I’m sorry. I...I was reliving something that I’ve been trying to forget.”

“Come back to bed and tell me about it?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I’m not scared of you, Emyth. Night terrors happen.”

“Yeah and what would you know about it?” I snap. Jarrah said that she had a quaint little life back in the earth realm shacking up with a hunter that had killed dozens of our family and friends.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she bites back, standing and backing away from me. She was fine with me choking her, but my words have inflicted some pain.

“I mean I doubt anything bad has ever happened in your boring human life.”

She scoffs. “My life may not have been as exciting as yours, but I’ve still experienced my fair share of trauma.”

“Like what?” I shout. “It sounds like Todd kept you pretty in the dark about everything.”

“Why are you all so fucking pretentious?” she growls and lets out a frustrated sound. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I lost *everyone*. Every single person I ever loved besides Todd. They’re all dead. So don’t act like you know anything about me.”

“*Everyone*?” I ask as shock rings through me. Jarrah had mentioned that she implied her grandmother was dead, but hearing it from her makes it real.

“My mother, my sister, my grandmother, my father. They’re all dead.” She’s nearly shouting.

I swallow the lump in my throat and try to figure out how to respond.

She continues before I can say anything, “My sister died right in front of me. I had night terrors for years afterward. So to answer your question, *that* is what I know about night terrors. That night still plagues my dreams. For years I was terrified to even close my eyes.”

Tears are streaming down her face. I stand and cross the room and wrap her up in my arms. She stiffens at first, but then collapses into my chest and lets out a sob as I stroke her hair gently. I may distrust her, but her grief is real.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, resting my chin on the top of her head. I breathe in the summery scent that encircles her. Her sobs quiet down and she snuffles softly.

She pushes away just enough to look up at me. Her nose is pink and her eyes are red. She’s beautiful. Her hand rests over my heart and I’m sure she can feel it nearly beating out of my chest.

“What were you dreaming about?” she whispers.

I move away from her and sit on the bed with my head in my hands. “I was engaged once. Did Lysander tell you that part?” I ask. She nods her head. “She was a royal from another kingdom. It was for alliances, but I had grown to care for her. Love her even. I’m assuming that Lyander also told you that she disappeared?” She nods again, allowing me space to tell my story.

“After she disappeared, I went through all the stages of grief. During the denial phase I started drinking heavily. One day the guys and I were sparring on the training field. There was another group there. One of them was human.”

“Someone else brought a human here?”

“Yes. And it was just as bad of an idea then.”

Her face falls, but she should know the truth. Humans don’t last long here. Especially ones as trusting as her. I know

she's part fae, but she'll need more than that to keep her safe.

I continue my story. "I expected the vamps to eat him. Unfortunately, I got to him first."

She gasps, "You ate him?"

"What? No!" I shouldn't laugh, but I can't help it. "But I did kill him. By accident. I was so angry. My rage got the worst of me that day and I let too much of my magic out, and it killed him."

She stares at her hands and chews her lip. I wouldn't blame her if she hated me after that. I still hate myself for it.

Finally, she responds, "I'm sorry, Emyth."

"For what? I killed someone."

"But you also lost someone. Grief does weird things to us."

"How did you handle yours?"

"When my sister died, I hadn't met Todd yet. I was desperate to feel anything but the ache and devastation I felt every second of every day. I had a series of drunken one-night stands. I did some ecstasy, some cocaine. I basically just fucked around, both figuratively and literally."

A growl escapes me at the thought of other men touching her.

Her eyes snap to mine and she says, "You killed someone, and I had sex with some guys, and you're going to judge me? That seems a little unfair."

"I'm not judging you."

"Sure you're not," she says sarcastically, hugging herself in the way that she does when she wants to look smaller; when she wants the attention off of her.

"I'm not. I swear. Just angry that people took advantage of the vulnerable state you were in." I say. It isn't

the whole truth. I don't like that she let other men touch her, but she's not mine and it's not fair for me to be upset about it.

"I wanted it though. It helped me feel something other than the pain of my loss, and I would do it again if I had to."

"We all do what we need to survive," I say, putting my hand on her bare knee. Her skin is so smooth, and every touch sends that blissful current of energy through me. I can't help rubbing my thumb over the inside of her thigh. She shivers at my touch. It's been a long time since I've been with a fae woman intimately in a way that was satisfying for me. The last one never spoke to me again. I let myself imagine what it would be like to lose myself in her.

My eyes meet hers, and I see a longing there that matches my own. *Don't get attached*, I scold myself. If I do, it could be my undoing. I almost let her grandmother destroy me once. I won't let Arden do it now.

"We should get some sleep," she whispers. I nod, and we climb back into bed on our respective sides. It takes me a while, but I do eventually drift back to sleep.

## Chapter 27: Arden



### CHAPTER 27: ARDEN

The next morning, a strange dream startles me awake, but it disappears before I can grasp onto it. When I try to move, I notice that there's an arm draped over my waist and an...oh god.

"Um. Emyth?" I try to move his arm but it doesn't budge. He just squeezes me in closer to him. I can feel his breath on the back of my neck, and while this is better than waking up to being strangled, I'm not exactly comfortable with it.

I try to move again and when I do he presses his erection against the curve of my ass and I gasp quietly. He lets out a soft groan, and mutters my name in his sleep. *Shit shit shit*. I shift around to face him. Our noses are nearly touching.

"Emyth," I say more firmly, stroking his silvery blonde hair, "I need you to wake up."

"Hmm?" he says as he starts to stir.

"Emyth, we need to get ready for breakfast."

His eyes half open and he gives me a sleepy smile that absolutely melts my heart. His brain registers what he's looking at, and his eyes nearly bulge out of his head as he scrambles away from me. His fully erect dick is now completely exposed, sticking out of his underwear. 'Impressive' is the only descriptor my brain can conjure.

He clears his throat as he adjusts his shorts and starts pulling a pair of pants on. "Just morning wood. It happens. I'm gonna brush my teeth then we can go."

His words sting a little bit. It feels like he doesn't want to admit that he might possibly be attracted to me. *Why does that bother me?* I chalk it up to my pride getting in the way.

I brush it off and stand from the bed to get dressed while he brushes his teeth. He refuses to look at me when he exits the bathroom. I complete my morning routine, and we head out in awkward silence.

“There’s no reason to feel awkward,” I say as he’s locking his door.

“Awkward about what?” Faylin asks as she approaches us, eyeing me suspiciously. I keep forgetting these assholes are engaged.

“Oh the guys think Rupert has a little crush on me.” I’m lying so easily these days.

“The gardener? No. He doesn’t have crushes. One of my cousins tried to seduce him and he wanted nothing to do with it.” She shrugs, “Maybe he’s into men.”

“See. I told you there was no reason for me to feel awkward.”

“What are you two doing?” Faylin asks. Before either of us can answer, she gasps in horror. “Arden, what happened to your neck? Did someone...choke you?”

I reach up and touch my neck. I make eye contact with Emyth, and a guilty look flashes across his face.

Faylin looks between us, “Oh. I see.” She looks hurt. I told her nothing was going on between us. And technically nothing is.

I reach out and touch her arm, “Faylin, nothing happened.”

“Right, your neck bruised itself. I know how Em operates in bed.”

It’s none of my business who he’s slept with, but that doesn’t stop the jealousy from welling up inside of me. A jolt of energy goes through my arm like I touched an exposed wire. Faylin pulls her arm away abruptly and hisses in pain. The pain in my arm is nothing compared to the searing pain that shoots through my head. I fall to my knees.

“Arden!” Emyth gasps and drops to my side. “Did you take your medication this morning?”

I can’t form words so I nod.

“Faye, go get Zorvan!” Emyth instructs.

Faylin runs off and starts pounding on Zorvan’s door. Emyth places his hands on either side of my head. The pain begins to subside at the contact, and I open my eyes to find his emerald ones staring at me.

“I think I’m okay,” I pant.

“Are you sure? What happened?”

“It felt like something shocked my arm, then my head felt like it split open. The head pain I’ve experienced before, but the arm thing was new.”

“Arden?” Zorvan asks as he jogs up to us and kneels. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Just one of my headaches.” My eyes find Faylin’s. “What about you, are you okay?”

“I think so,” she says.

There’s a red mark on her arm where my hand was making contact with her. Zorvan grabs her arm and looks at it.

“Go to Airen and have her heal you. And swear to me that you won’t mention this to anyone else.”

“I swear it,” Faylin says.

She’s about to leave, but Zorvan’s eyes drop to my neck. *Shit*. He grabs my shoulders and pulls me in to inspect the bruising. I can’t believe Emyth and I both missed it.

“Who put their hands on you?” Zorvan roars, his eyes glowing.

I reach my hand out and place it on his chest, “I need you to calm down before we have this conversation.”

Smoke trails out of his nose, but he takes deep breaths and maintains his composure. Faylin stands behind him, her

arms are crossed over her chest, and she has a smug look on her face. That look changes to surprise when Zorvan doesn't lose control like she expects.

His eyes finally return to normal after a few heavy breaths. "There you are." I whisper.

"Explain," he growls. I glance at Emyth who nods in approval for me to tell Zorvan.

"Emyth had a night terror. He thought I was someone else." Understanding washes over Zorvan's face as he looks to his friend.

"Are you okay?" He asks, placing a hand on Emyth's shoulder.

"I'm fine." He mutters.

"And what about you?" Zorvan places his hand on my cheek. His voice is caring, and his expression soft.

"I'm okay. But maybe we could make sure I have a cot if I have to stay in the keepers' rooms?"

"You shared a bed?" The softness is gone and in its place is rage. But not at me. At Emyth. "Did I not make myself clear? Arden is off limits."

"And you're engaged, Emyth," Faylin chimes in, her voice dripping with bitterness.

"Faylin, I swear to you that nothing happened," I say. "I have a fiancé, and I don't intend to wreck any relationships here. Even if I did, Emyth has no interest in me, and I have zero interest in any of the keepers."

Emyth's face falls. *Did that hurt his feelings?*

"I find that hard to believe." Zorvan snaps.

"Nothing happened." Emyth says matching Zorvan's anger. "We just slept. I don't want the whoring bitch anyway."

"Emyth," I gasp in horror.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Zorvan demands.

“Nothing. Can we please go eat?” I ask practically pleading.

“Fine. But this conversation isn’t over. We’ll talk about it tonight since you’ll be staying in my quarters.”

“Lucky me,” I sigh, and start for the dining hall.

Throughout the morning I have to recount the story of Emyth’s attack three more times. We go to the infirmary after breakfast and Airen applies a new salve to my bruises.

“If this is just from sleeping with Emyth, I would hate to see what sex looks like with him,” she whispers while Zorvan’s in the hallway talking to Emyth. “You shared a bed with him?” she asks incredulously.

“Yeah, I thought it would be better than either of us sleeping on the floor,” I say with a dry laugh.

Zorvan comes back in without Emyth, and Airen changes the subject.

“So how are your meds? Doing okay?”

“You know the medication is for Arden?” Zorvan asks Airen, then he looks at me, “you told her?”

“I thanked her for them. Why?”

“Arden’s been very forthcoming about her seizure disorder,” Airen says with an intense look at Zorvan.

“Why are you two being weird?” I ask.

“It’s not wise to tell the fae your weaknesses, Arden. And Airen, to answer your question, no. Her medication doesn’t seem to be quite as effective as it was. She had an episode this morning.”

“It might just be adjusting to-”

“The fae replacement ingredients?” Zorvan cuts her off.

Airen gives him a quizzical look before a knowing look replaces it. “Yes! I had to substitute a couple of things. Like we don’t have willow bark, but we have trees that are somewhat similar. Nothing to worry about.”

“You’re not telling me something,” I say, glancing between them.

“Nonsense,” she says.

“You both know I could die if you’re not giving me the correct medication, right?”

“I would never willingly put your life in danger,” Zorvan says dismissively.

“Me either. I’ve grown quite fond of you,” Airen says.

“Swear it?” I ask Airen. I don’t trust Zorvan even a little bit.

“I swear. Now go on. Shoo. I have work to do.” And she ushers us out of the infirmary.

I get a few books from my room, and set up camp in one of the oversized armchairs in Zorvan’s room. Reading loses its charm after a couple of hours. I get up to stretch my legs, and I look at all the portraits of important male fae on the walls. All of them resemble Zorvan in some way.

“Your family isn’t terribly proud of their women are they?”

“The men of this bloodline have always been in charge. The first child of every couple is always a male and always a dragon. The women were mostly used as breeding stock and didn’t survive childbirth half the time.”

The callousness makes me feel nauseated. “That’s disgusting,” I mutter. “And I thought women’s rights were going to shit in the earth realm. Solardin seems to have a more feminist friendly take.”

“You’d think, but Cyndair is worse than most men,” he says. He returns to his work, ending the conversation.

I take my seat back in my chair and continue reading. We go to lunch, come back, and it's more of the same. The words in my book are starting to all bleed together.

"Can we take a walk in the garden?" I ask.

"No."

"Please? I need to get out of this stuffy office. No wonder you're so grumpy all the time."

"I'm not grumpy," he scowls.

"You never smile. You're grumpy."

"Maybe I just don't smile around you. Maybe you're so irritating that I find it difficult to find joy when I'm with you."

"That can't possibly be it. I'm a fucking delight," I say, deadpan.

An amused smile crosses his face. "Okay fine. It's close enough to dinner that we can call it for a bit."

Rupert is in the garden trimming the bushes when we arrive. He waves at me, but quickly turns the other direction when he sees Zorvan scowling at him.

"Considering the fact that Lysander tried to kill him, you could be a little nicer."

"What on earth makes you think I would be nice to anyone? I'm basically only friendly with the keepers," he says. "Even that's pushing it."

"It's not a bad thing to have friends, Zorvan. You need to let someone in. Carrying the whole burden of your position by yourself and not letting anyone help will make you miserable."

"I do let others help. I wouldn't have a council or the keepers if I didn't. Nor would I have Walden."

"But do you have anyone to confide in? Someone to talk to when things get hard?"

“No and I don’t need that. Interpersonal relationships are a distraction, and a weakness.”

“That’s a really sad way to look at the world.”

“I haven’t had the luxury of looking at it any other way.”

“You’re in charge. You can look at things however you want.”

Zorvan turns to face me, “Arden, you know how in two days we’re going to be using you as bait for the militia?”

“How could I forget?”

“The militia has zeroed in on you knowing that you mean something to me. They don’t know why it’s important to me to have you, just that it is. Imagine for a second that you weren’t just leverage for me. Imagine that I cared for you. That you were my friend. My lover even.” My breath hitches at his words, and I imagine him doing a million bad things to me.

“If I cared for you more than just as a prisoner, that would open me up to be hurt. It would put you in constant danger. And it would make me want to abandon the clearest strategy that we have. Which is to use you.” He sighs. “I can’t allow feelings for people to cloud my judgment.”

“I understand where you’re coming from, but it doesn’t change the fact that it’s a lonely way to live. Sometimes caring for people is worth the risk, ya know?”

“Says the human who isn’t responsible for an entire kingdom. You can’t possibly understand the pressure. And do you not remember the fact that Todd completely lied to you and fucked you over? No. Relationships are messy and distracting and I want none of that.”

My eyes begin to sting, and I leave him standing there in the garden. Maybe he’s right. Maybe love isn’t worth any of it.

We sit in silence for the rest of the afternoon. When dinner time rolls around, we head there together. There's another strategy meeting after dinner. Zorvan insists that I change into something more 'appropriate' than my pants and shirt.

We walk into the war room, and Zorvan pulls out the chair directly to the right of him and gestures for me to sit down. The keepers show up shortly after us. I don't feel out of place this time. My dress is a little less formal, and the guys are all dressed impeccably. Falmir enters after the keepers. His eyes land on me and his nostrils flare.

"Prince Zorvan," he growls his eyes trained on me, "I am not going to stand for this."

"Oh! Am I in your seat?" I ask, trying to sound as oblivious as possible.

"That is where his primary advisor is supposed to sit. Not whoring human scum."

I let out an amused chuckle, "Well it seems like Zorvan found me to be more useful than you since *he* told me to sit here."

"Arden," Zorvan warns. "This was her idea so she's taking point. You can find someplace else to sit."

"No, I will not," Falmir says, seething.

"Then I guess you *will* stand for it," I say, eliciting a chuckle from Tavin.

"I hope The Sentinels get a hold of you and skin you alive you disgusting magicless bitch."

Jarrah jumps to his feet and reaches for the dagger on his hip. Zorvan stops him by holding his hand up. "Falmir, I'm going to ask you one time to watch your mouth. Take a seat or don't. Either way we're proceeding."

Jarrah returns to his seat. Falmir attempts to sit next to Jarrah, but Emyth slides into that seat. When he moves one

seat down, Tavin takes that one. He realizes the game they're playing and gives up. He pulls up a chair next to Walden.

Zorvan's lips turn up at the corners, and he begins the meeting. "Now that that's settled...I spoke with Rupert about the plan. He was hesitant, but he agreed to join us. He started digging today along with some of the other more powerful earth mages in the guard. In addition to the underground tunnel, I have asked a couple of the more magically adept fae to put a concealment spell on all of us. It might not help depending on what abilities they have at their disposal, but it's worth a shot. Does anyone have any questions?"

"Who all is going to be above ground with Arden?" Lysander asks.

"Walden and two of his men."

"No. I don't like that," Jarrah says.

"We will be directly below her. Walden has the ability to get a message to me. Nothing will happen to her." Zorvan explains, but Jarrah isn't having it.

He starts shaking his head and opens his mouth to protest.

"You don't have a choice," I cut him off.

Jarrah's gaze snaps to me. "Excuse me?" He asks incredulously.

"You don't have a choice. You can go underground or not at all."

"Who died and made you queen?" He's annoyed, but there's also a shimmer of something else there. Maybe admiration?

"Arden is right. If they sense you, the fae they're holding hostage could die. Underground is the safest bet we have to avoid detection. I will not risk more of our people," Zorvan says firmly.

"But you'll risk your—" Jarrah starts.

“Prisoner? Yes. I will risk her. Now if there are no more questions, I would like to turn in for the night. Tomorrow will be spent digging in preparation for the exchange. We will not meet tomorrow evening. We will convene here three hours prior to midday the day after tomorrow.”

When no one poses any more questions, we adjourn for the evening and head into Zorvan’s sleeping quarters. He’d had my housemaid bring in some sleep clothes, and had warmed the embers for me to get a bath while he finished up some paperwork in his office. I climb into bed and read until I can’t keep my eyes open anymore. Zorvan still hasn’t returned to the bedroom by the time I drift off to sleep.

## Chapter 28: Zorvan



### CHAPTER 28: ZORVAN

The paperwork in my office is not doing enough to distract me from my beautiful mate sleeping in my bed in the next room. The door is cracked between the two rooms so I can hear her if she needs me. I wait about fifteen minutes after I hear the last page turn in her book and assume she's finally asleep.

I cross through the bedroom, taking feather-light steps so I don't wake her. I shut the bathroom door softly, and brush my teeth. Washing my face is refreshing after a long day. I'm exhausted, but I'm not permitted the luxury of many breaks. The stroll in the garden today was the first thing I had done for fun in weeks. But of course, I ruined that, too.

I shake the thought away and get dressed in my sleep clothes. I don't usually wear them, but it would be too tempting if I climbed into the bed with Arden wearing nothing. We've already had a number of close calls where I struggled to keep my dick to myself.

When I'm finished in the bathroom, I douse all but one of the flames and go back into the bedroom. Arden's brown hair is draped across her pillow. Her book is still in her hand, and she's snoring softly. I climb in the bed on the opposite side, and pull the book from her hand. I flip through the tome. It's a few discussions on shifters and their fated mates.

*How long would it take her to figure out that we're her mates if we kept her on the suppressants and didn't tell her about her lineage.* She's bright and tenacious and I expect that another month of reading the books from the library and the keepers and myself acting like a bunch of buffoons and she would figure it out.

I close my eyes and beg for sleep, but my mind keeps drifting to the task at hand. I want nothing more than to lock her up in my room and never let her go near any danger, but I can't sit back and do nothing while my people are slaughtered and stolen. I'm proud of her for wanting to step up and help. It allows me to pretend for just a moment that she is a good choice for a mate—for a queen. She has the heart for it.

My heart pulls in my chest, encouraging me to reach out and touch her. My dragon nears the surface and demands the same. My brain won't let me. I can't risk getting attached to her, yet. After the night we shared in the mortal realm, I knew that if I gave in again, I wouldn't be able to pull back. So I have to keep that desire caged up inside. It's the primary reason I wiped her memory. If she had access to those memories, she might think I'm a good fae. I need her to hate me. I've been playing with fire indulging in our stolen moments.

After what feels like hours of an internal battle, I finally fall asleep wishing more than anything that I could hold my mate in my arms.

Some hours later I wake to the slight disturbance of Arden slipping out of my bed. I had inched closer to her throughout the night as if my body were seeking hers out subconsciously.

Maybe it was.

I watch silently as she pads across the room in her short lacey night dress. One wrong move and I would see ass cheeks. Perfectly round, beautiful, ass cheeks that I could sink my teeth into.

She shared a bed with Emyth dressed like that. My dragon growls about her being alone with him. My fae side is struggling to figure out how I'm going to share this woman if we decide to keep her.

The rumbling in my throat catches Arden's attention and she spins to look at me, "not a morning person?" She

chuckles, wiping the sleep from her eyes.

“Not used to being disturbed in my own bed,” I say, trying to act indifferent.

“I told you yesterday afternoon to get me a cot so we wouldn’t have to share, but you were the one who insisted that it wouldn’t be a problem. ‘My bed is so big that we won’t even notice each other’,” she mocks.

“Well apparently I was wrong.” I sigh. Truth is that I knew that I wouldn’t sleep through her getting out of bed or moving around, but I wanted to pretend at least for one night that we could be a regular mated pair.

“Wow, I never thought I would see the day where you would admit that you made a mistake,” she chides, but I’m not in the mood for jokes.

“Yes, well, don’t get used to it. It won’t ever happen again.”

“So what will I be doing while everyone is digging today?” she asks.

“I have arranged for you to spend the day in the library. Walden is instructed to stand guard inside of the library while Elliott stands guard outside. If something happens, Walden can contact me. I will need all hands on deck for the digging process, and that includes Airen and Rupert.

“Livarius is more skilled with fire magic so he wouldn’t be of much use to us. But I do trust that between the three of them, they can keep you safe. If you need to find myself or one of the keepers, you will have to have Elliott and Walden accompany you. Do you understand?”

“Yes sir,” she agrees with a mock salute. Her calling me sir causes something to stir within me. I want to make her do it again. While naked. And taking my cock from behind.

*Stop it Zorvan. Stars.* We both get ready; her in the bathroom, me in the bedroom. Livarius isn’t my first choice of babysitters for Arden, but he makes the most sense. He cares

about her, and I believe he will protect her. *As long as he's not the mole.* But having Walden and Elliott there too, will help. If one of them is a danger to Arden, I have to just hope that the presence of the others will keep them in check.

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“All I’m saying is that I think this is a terrible plan,” Jarrah says while we shift dirt out of the way in a tunnel large enough to fit two of us side by side.

“I know you do. You’ve only said it a hundred times,” I grumble. Then I sigh. I know he’s just worried about Arden. “I hear you, and I understand what you’re saying, but it doesn’t change the fact that we have to do something to get our people back.”

“And you think sacrificing Arden is the best choice for that?”

“Yes. I do. And if you weren’t so infatuated with her, you would agree with me. In fact, if you weren’t busy obsessing over her, you probably would have come up with this plan yourself.”

“He’s right,” Tavin says. “I’m surprised you didn’t jump on this plan. It makes the most sense strategically. All of the plans were bad ones. This one was the least bad.”

“Not if the mole is someone in our ranks. The plan is going to get leaked to The Sentinels and they’re going to capture Arden. I know it.”

“Oh and you’re a seer now?” Falmir snaps as he wipes sweat from his brow. We’re expending a lot of magic and it’s muggy out today so we’re all sweating and cranky. I strip off my shirt and keep moving dirt.

“For what it’s worth, I don’t like this plan either,” Rupert says.

“You have no say in this, gardener,” Lysander says, staring daggers at Rupert. *Fuck. I forgot he was here.* So much for not telling him the plan.

“Enough. I don’t want another word on the matter. We decided the plan as a team, and we’re going forward with it. End of discussion.”

“Fine, but if she gets taken, I will kill you,” Jarrah says defiantly.

“I would like to see you try,” I grumble. *If she gets taken, I’ll kill myself.*

The day continues on like that. Hours and hours of moving dirt to create the tunnel. By the time it’s done we’re all sweaty and tired, and I am so ready to see my mate.

## Chapter 29: Arden



### CHAPTER 29: ARDEN

**L**ivarius and I spend the day chatting and reading. Walden had pulled a chair up next to the front door and sat down at the beginning of his shift and hasn't moved since. Where we are seated next to the windows he can't see us, and we are far enough away that if we speak quietly, we can't be heard.

After lunch we're sipping on some coffee that Jobie had specially prepared for me when Livarius asks, "so why are you in here all day anyway? And what's with the additional security?"

"Has your father not told you?" I worry my lip as I consider telling him the truth. Zorvan told me not to, but I can't leave without saying something. I want to be able to say goodbye to him properly in case things go wrong.

"Told me what? He doesn't tell me anything."

"Zorvan is concerned for my safety. The Sentinels promised to return the people of Feldorn that they had captured as long as I was given to them tomorrow afternoon. They're prepping for the meet or else I would be stuck with one of them."

"What?! No! They can't possibly be giving you over to them. They'll kill you."

"I can't give you all the details, but they don't plan to actually hand me over."

"Why can't you tell me?"

"I told Zorvan I wouldn't discuss it with anyone outside of the council. He believes there's a mole within the castle giving intel to The Sentinels."

“And they’re going through with this plan of theirs anyway?”

“It was actually my plan. I refuse to let anyone else die for me.”

Livarius stands quietly and moves to where I’m sitting. He reaches his hand out for me to take it. When I do, he pulls me into him and brushes my hair behind my ear. There’s an intensity in his eyes that makes me weak.

His voice is barely a whisper, “I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I let you walk into danger without telling you how I feel. The last few weeks I’ve grown quite fond of you. I care for you, Arden. Deeply.”

I blush, “You said as much the other day.”

“I told you I was attracted to you. Not that I had feelings for you. Not that I could see myself loving you.”

Am I really considering kissing him again? My brain shifts to Todd. Guilt attempts to take over, but I push it aside. Todd has had years to come clean with me and hasn’t bothered. I don’t owe him anything.

Or maybe I’m just making excuses.

I don’t wait for Livarius to make the first move. I stand on my toes and wrap my arms around the back of his neck. I kiss him gently. He doesn’t waste time deepening the kiss. We move quietly, aware of Walden sitting at the front. I nip his bottom lip causing him to groan into my mouth.

“Stars,” he whispers. “You smell and taste like pure sugar.” He grabs a fistful of my hair and tugs my head back exposing my neck to him. He kisses down my jaw to my neck and runs the flat of his tongue up the column of my throat. I shiver at the thought of him sinking his fangs into my flesh. There’s a piece of me that has never wanted something so bad.

“You can’t leave marks on me,” I whisper. “Zorvan may or may not have threatened to skin us if he found out we were sleeping together.”

“Rather presumptuous of you,” he grins deviously.

“Isn’t that where this was going?” I ask in embarrassment.

He chuckles. “I certainly hope that’s where this is going. Although Walden is out front.”

“I can be quiet,” I say, biting my bottom lip.

Livarius pushes me against the windows and I wrap my legs around his waist. “I don’t know if I believe you. I think with how opinionated you are, you’re probably a screamer.” He whispers, trailing his fingers down my collar bone over the swell of my breasts. “And even if you weren’t, I bet I could change that.”

His hand slides down my stomach and hikes up my dress. He growls when he finds I’m not wearing any underwear. Zorvan hadn’t had the maid retrieve any so I had just gone without today.

His fingers hover over my aching core, “I bet once I touch you I’ll find you dripping. I can smell how turned on you are. Even still, I need to be sure. Are you positive this is what you want? Because if I start, I’m not going to be able to stop myself.”

“Please just touch me Liv,” I whisper.

He doesn’t hesitate. He roughly shoves his fingers inside of me, making me gasp in pleasure. He works his fingers in and out of me while rubbing my clit with his thumb.

“Fuck. That pretty pussy of yours is so wet and so tight. I can’t wait to be inside of you.”

“Then don’t wait,” I say, surprised at how needy I sound.

“Not before I taste you.” He removes his fingers from inside of me and I whine at the loss.

“No biting. Zorvan—”

“Biting you is something I only intend to do with your explicit permission, baby girl. Now shut up and let me please you.”

Livarius grabs my unused cloth napkin from the lunch tray. He unceremoniously balls it up and shoves it in my mouth. “I can’t have you making any noise,” he whispers right against my ear. “Not a peep.” He looks me in the eye as I nod my head then he drops to his knees in front of me.

His head disappears under the skirt of my dress. He plants gentle kisses up the inside of my thigh, his fangs drag across the soft flesh, careful to not break the skin. I shouldn’t, but I trust him with everything in me. He moves to the other thigh and kisses his way up to my center.

My eyes flutter closed and my legs turn to jello. He lifts my legs over his shoulders, supporting my weight, and he tentatively runs his tongue along my slit. I groan around the napkin in my mouth. He runs the flat of his tongue over my clit and slides two fingers inside of me. He pumps them in and out of me while his tongue works magical circles around my sensitive nub.

My breath comes in quick pants. He applies more pressure with his tongue before nipping at my clit with his teeth. “Come for me beautiful,” he demands as he adds another finger, stretching me around him. When his tongue returns to its work I fall apart quickly, coming hard around his fingers.

He chuckles as he places my shaking legs back on the floor and moves back up my body. “You’re so fucking beautiful, Arden. If I never tasted anything other than you for the rest of my life, I would die a happy fae.”

I reach down and start unbuckling his belt desperate for more. The cloth is still in my mouth preventing me from saying anything. I slide my hand down the front of his pants and rub his hard length causing him to growl in pleasure. I rub my thumb over the tip and smear the precum over the head. My stomach sinks. I remove the napkin from my mouth, “you

can't come inside of me. I haven't had my birth control for nearly three weeks."

"Birth control?" he asks, cocking his head to the side.

"Yeah. It's a medicine that stops humans from getting pregnant."

"What if I want you to have my babies?" he asks in a flirty tone.

I'm somehow even more turned on thinking about him intentionally putting a baby inside of me. But I hold my ground. "Even if I wanted children right now, I certainly don't while I'm being held hostage. Plus, Zorvan would castrate you."

He shivers, "okay no more talk of the evil prince." He kisses me slowly and passionately. I can taste my arousal on his tongue as he grinds his hard cock against my core.

"I need you inside of me. Please, Livarius."

He wastes no time. He shoves his pants down as I hike my skirt up. He lines himself up at my center and pushes himself inside of me. I bite down on his shoulder to stifle my moans. I don't realize how hard I'm biting and I accidentally break skin. The metallic taste of his blood fills my mouth. I don't hate it.

Livarius doesn't hold back as he slams into me over and over. I feel myself getting close again. He must sense it because he reaches between us and rubs my clit with his thumb sending me tumbling over the edge. As soon as I finish he grabs me by the hair and shoves me to my knees.

"Open up for me, pretty girl."

I do as he says. He strokes his cock three more times and shoots his cum into my open mouth. Once he's finished, he places a finger on my chin, forces my mouth closed, and says, "now swallow like the good little slut I know you are." When I do, he purrs, "good girl," Then helps me to my feet.

Something inside of me swells at his praise. My sweet vampire.

I lean in and kiss him. He licks the side of my mouth and groans softly, “not that I’m complaining, but I thought we weren’t biting.”

“I told *you* no biting. I never said anything about me.”

“You know, if you were fae, I could feed from you right now and seal a mate bond with you,” he says casually. “I wonder if it works with humans.”

“Too bad we’re not going to find out,” I joke.

“Mmmm too bad indeed.” He kisses me again. It’s slow and purposeful. “I need you to come back to me tomorrow. Don’t let those rebels take you. I think...I think I l  
—”

“Please don’t say you love me,” I say.

Livarius’ face drops. “Arden—”

“No. I mean it. My heart is in too many places at once. I care deeply for you Livarius, but I don’t know that I’ll be here forever. If I have a chance to go back to the earth realm, I’m taking it. I’m guarding my heart, and you should too.”

Logically, I know things are done with Todd. He lied to me. I just had sex with someone else. My eyes start to sting and I start crying before I realize what’s happening.

“Hey. Hey, what’s going on?” Livarius pulls me in and starts stroking my hair. “Tell me what’s wrong?”

“I’m so conflicted. I spent ten years with the same guy. I thought he loved me. I thought that I meant something to him. Even after everything he did I feel like I just cheated on him.”

He puts his forehead against mine and whispers, “I’m so sorry. I should have pushed harder. I should have made sure this was what you really wanted.”

“No. I did want this. I promise. I don’t regret it. I just...I don’t have any closure, you know? I don’t know why he lied to me for so long. We never officially broke up. I feel so selfish for having sex with you when I don’t know where I stand with him. I don’t know where I stand with Jarrah either.”

“Jarrah is engaged to my sister,” Livarius says, confused. “Unless he decides to call that off, it’s pretty clear where he stands. As far as Todd, he’s an idiot. I can’t believe that anyone could ever let you go. You’re beautiful, smart, and kind. You’re unlike anyone I’ve ever met before. Everyone here is so competitive and out for themselves. You actually take the time to listen. You’re nice to the staff even though you don’t need to be. You’re the least selfish person I know.”

He sits down in one of the chairs and pulls me into his lap. I rest my head on his shoulder and just let myself cry for a while. I’m finally letting myself feel everything I’ve been pushing down inside. It makes it feel like a weight has lifted from my shoulders. After a little while I drift off to sleep on his lap.

“What the fuck is this?” Zorvan shouts, waking me up.

My brain catches up to what’s going on and I lock eyes with Zorvan as I slide off of Livarius’ lap. From the looks of it he fell asleep too.

“This is the trauma of the last three weeks catching up to me.” I grumble.

“Trauma? What the fuck are you even talking about? Have you been crying? Did he make you cry?” Zorvan moves toward Livarius.

“No,” I laugh in disbelief, “you did. And Todd. And every single person who has treated me like garbage since I arrived here. I’m constantly being followed but I’m wholly alone in the castle. Liv is one of the only people that has actually put in an effort with me.”

Zorvan looks like I’ve just punched him in the gut. Good. Maybe he’ll finally understand that I don’t belong here.

His eyes are full of sadness. “Arden, I’m sorry. I…” he reaches for my hand, but he stops short. “You fucked him.”

“What? No. We just—”

“Don’t you dare lie to me,” he growls through clenched teeth. “I can smell him all over you. I told you what would happen if you let him touch you. I told you what would happen if you lied to me. I need *you* for tomorrow. But him?” Zorvan pulls a knife from his belt. He’s on Livarius before I can even move.

He grabs Livarius by the hair and slides the blade across his throat. A scream erupts from me, and Walden and Elliott come bounding around the bookshelves. Livarius drops to the ground in front of me and I rush over to him. Tears start streaming down my face as I cradle his head in my hands. A terrible gurgling noise comes from his throat.

My hands are shaking violently, but I know that I can possibly save him. According to the book on vampires I borrowed, actively consuming blood helps them heal. I reach up and grab the blade in Zorvan’s hands. I don’t try to take it from him. I just allow it to cut my hand. The cut is deep, but I don’t care. I hold my hand over Livarius’ mouth and squeeze, encouraging as much blood as possible to go into his mouth. I press my palm to his mouth and hope that he starts to drink. “Please don’t leave me, Liv. I love you. I’m sorry I told you not to say it.”

Long seconds pass. I hold my breath. I don’t think it’s working. Then he reaches up and grabs my hand. He starts taking long gulps from my hand. His wound begins to knit together. Just as he’s starting to let up, Falmir, Iona, Faylin, and the keepers rush into the room. Iona’s nostrils flare when she catches sight of my blood.

“What have you done?” Falmir gasps and advances toward Zorvan. “You killed my son.”

“Like you give a shit about him anyway,” I snap. “And he’s not dead. He’s healing.”

“That’s not possible. You’re human. Your blood can only heal him if you—” Falmir growls. “You mated with him.”

“What? No. I just gave him my blood.”

“After you drank his, you stupid girl.”

“Arden wouldn’t do that. Would you?” Jarrah asks.

“I don’t know. I didn’t think she would fuck him, but here we are,” Zorvan snaps.

“You did what?!” Lysander shouts.

“Apparently she also loves him.”

My face is burning. All of this attention on me paired with the blood loss and the news of my new mate have me reeling. I gently pull my hand away from Livarius who closes his eyes and lays his head on my lap.

“I don’t feel very good,” he says quietly. “I need to lie down.”

I shush him and brush my hand over his hair. “It’s okay. Rest.”

The closest thing I can compare to how I feel is being high. I had smoked weed a couple of times in college. It’s like the weird floating feeling that I got from hitting the bong too hard. Everyone’s talking, but it sounds so far away and I can’t latch on to one single voice. My heart is pounding in my chest and my skin feels flushed.

Falmir moves toward us and reaches for Livarius. A snarl escapes me and he takes a step back with his hands up in surrender.

I had nearly watched Livarius die, and that might have killed me. I had fallen for him over the last few weeks. I couldn’t explain it, but it felt like a force was driving us together. When he begged me not to leave him, the wall of resolve I had built around my heart shattered.

Tears start flooding my cheeks once again. I trail my fingers down his cheek then down his neck and on to his chest.

It's slow, but I can feel his heart beating. Strong hands grab my shoulders and I look up to find Jarrah.

“Arden? Arden!” His touch, paired with his stern voice drag me out of the fog momentarily. “Arden, are you with me?” He asks and I nod. “Good. We need to get Livarius to the infirmary. Let me pick him up.”

“No! You'll hurt him!”

“I swear to you, on my life, that I will not harm a hair on his head. Please. Your blood helped, but he needs a healer.”

“I will gut you alive if you hurt him.” My voice is not my own. I don't recognize who is talking. It's like another person or another being is inside of me.

“I am not cruel like Zorvan. I just want to help. Please let me,” he begs.

Reluctantly, I let go of him. I get to my feet and follow Jarrah out of the room. Zorvan reaches out and grabs my bicep. I round on him, “Don't you fucking touch me. Never lay a finger on me again or I will—”

“You'll what, Princess?”

“You don't know what I'm capable of, Zorvan Mavrosava. Do not pretend that you know me.” I yank my arm away and follow after Jarrah leaving a stunned Zorvan in my wake. I don't take the time to examine how in that moment I knew his last name. I didn't even know that fae had last names until just now. Right now, the only thing that matters is Livarius.

## Chapter 30: Arden



### CHAPTER 30: ARDEN

**A**iren is given the short and sweet version of events. She heals Livarius then clears him to be sent to my room to rest. She puts emphasis on the word ‘rest’ as if she expected me to jump his bones in his current state. She doesn’t make a single joke about me finally getting laid, just shoos me out of the room.

I’m able to keep my head a little clearer when I’m not directly touching him, but the urge to touch him is so strong it almost doesn’t matter. Jarrah helps me up to my room, carrying a sleeping Livarius like a new bride which makes me chuckle.

We walk in to find the rest of the Keepers and Zorvan splayed out around my room. “Get out.” I say calmly to Zorvan.

“You do not get to tell me to—”

“Get the fuck out of my room. If I never see you again it will be too soon.”

“We need to talk about tomorrow.”

“What is there to talk about? We have a plan. We’re going to stick to it.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea anymore,” he says.

“You don’t get to decide that. There’s a whole council that should be consulted, and it’s my life at risk. My opinion counts more.”

“Arden, you don’t know what a newly mated vampire is like. Livarius will do whatever it takes to be next to you. If he wakes up and finds you gone, he will lose it. If he’s awake before you leave, he won’t allow it.”

“You do not get to say his name ever again. You tried to kill him, you selfish sadistic asshat.”

“I’m giving you grace because you, too, are newly mated and it’s causing some serious hormone surges, but you need to watch your tone with me. Whatever it is that you’re feeling right now, he will feel it tenfold. One or both of you will end up hurt if you go tomorrow.”

I can’t help but grind my teeth together. “I need to do this. Replace one of Walden’s men with Livarius. The plan will go the same way. And if he’s going to react the way you expect then I’ll be even more protected.”

“No. Absolutely not. If I can’t be with her, then neither can Livarius,” Jarrah says. “She doesn’t get to just choose him to be by her side.”

“*She* is standing right here, and she already has chosen.”

“I think she’s right. She stands a better chance with a mate by her side than some random guy from the guard who couldn’t care less if she lives or dies,” Emyth says.

“Thank you!” I say.

“What if he goes off script because he can’t keep his shit together?” Lysander asks.

“Right, like you guys are any better at keeping calm and collected.” I say sarcastically.

“I think we spent all fucking day digging that tunnel and if it doesn’t get used I’m going to be pissed,” Tavin says.

“We’re doing it. If you won’t agree, I’ll do it myself. I will not let these terrorists kill anyone else. And if you can’t get on board, Zorvan, you’re not half the leader I thought you were.”

It’s a low blow, but I also know that his pride is the best place to hit to get him to comply. He lets out a frustrated groan then says, “Fine. But if you get hurt, I will go scorched earth on this realm.”

“Good. That’s the spirit. Now everyone get out so I can sleep.”

“It’s my turn to have you tonight,” Lysander says.

“No. It’s no one’s turn to *have* me. I am mated. I will be staying here, with my mate.”

“No,” Lysander growls.

“You do not own me, Lysander. Stop acting like you do.”

He sends an angry look at Zorvan who shakes his head. Then he says, “You should have one of us stay here just in case Livarius wakes up disoriented. He might try to feed and take it too far.”

He had refused to feed from me in the library, but what would happen now that we were mated and that he almost died? I nod my head. “Fine, but whoever stays is sleeping on the settee.”

The guys decide that since it was Lysander’s night, he’ll stay. He changes into his wolf form to curl up on the settee which is fine with me. I crawl into bed with Livarius and snuggle into his side and breathe in his familiar, homey scent. I had noticed before that he smelled of tea and honey, but now it’s nearly overwhelming. It’s a warm and happy smell. His scent and his presence let a calmness settle over me, and I quickly drift to sleep.

*I’m sitting beside a fire in a large arm chair. Livarius sits in front of me on the floor, both of us facing the flames. I absently play with his hair with my right hand while I hold a book in my left. He gently rubs the bottom of my foot, reading his own book.*

“Arden?”

“Hmm?” *I ask.*

“*I’m glad we’re mated.*”

*“Me too. Even if it didn’t happen the way I would have wanted it to.”*

*He places his book on the floor and turns to face me, “I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way. You saved me. That shows that you cared even when you didn’t have the pressure of the mate bond.”*

*He slides his hands up the insides of my thighs and offers me his hand. I put my book down and place my hand in his. He pulls me down on top of him on the floor. I’m straddling his lap when he kisses me softly. I moan quietly into his mouth and deepen the kiss. He grinds himself up into me and I gasp.*

*“Tell me you love me,” he whispers.*

*“I love you.”*

*The words seem to encourage him. He flips us over and lays me back gently. He hikes my skirt and runs a finger over my center causing me to squirm. “Say it again.”*

*“I love you, Livarius. I need you.”*

*He shoves his fingers inside of me and groans, “You’re so wet for me, Arden.” He pumps them in and out of me a few times then pulls them out and sucks them dry.*

*I’m not sure when it happened, but his pants are off. He slides up my body and notches himself at my entrance. “I love you more than anything or anyone I’ve ever loved before. I would abandon my whole life if it meant that you would look at me the way you are right now for the rest of eternity.” He slides his cock up against my clit then places it at my entrance once more.*

*“I need you Liv. Please.”*

*He shoves into me slowly and intentionally, as if he’s savoring every second. My eyes roll back as his solid length rubs against that perfect spot inside. Once he’s fully sheathed he retreats and slams into me, harder this time.*

*His thrusts become aggressive. It's like he needs to sear the memory of his cock into my skin. I buck my hips and encourage him. He reaches between us and begins rubbing my clit.*

*"Fuck Livarius, I'm so close."*

*"Not yet," he whispers and pulls his hand away.  
"Don't come until I tell you."*

*He pulls my nipple between his teeth and a delightful pain courses through me. I don't know if I can last much longer. "Please Livarius. Please. I need to come."*

*"Come for me, pretty girl." He replaces his fingers on my clit and sinks his teeth into my throat. I screw my eyes shut as my orgasm starts to run through me like a freight train.*

When I open my eyes I realize that this isn't the dream I thought it was, Livarius is actually on top of me, and just as I start to come down from the pleasure of my orgasm, I feel him release inside of me, his cock jerking and coating the inside of me with his cum.

"Fuck! Livarius!" I shout and try to push him off of me.

His eyes fly open. "Fuck, Arden. I...what the fuck?"

Just then the bathroom door opens. Lysander's tired eyes take a second to register what is happening. He runs over and pulls Livarius off of me, and punches him in the face.

"Lysander!" I scream.

"He was attacking you!"

"No! He wasn't."

Lysander takes in our undressed state. The cover was ripped from my body. The evidence of what just happened leaks from between my legs onto the bed.

"You couldn't wait til you were alone?" Lysander growls.

“It wasn’t intentional,” Livarius says, scowling at me. “Lysander, can we have a moment? I need to talk to my *mate*.” He sounds angry.

My stomach churns. *Is he mad that I’m mated to him?* Lysander gives me a quizzical look, and I nod. I know Livarius won’t hurt me, but I don’t like where this is going.

Lysander steps out into the hall greeting a frazzled looking Jarrah who says something about ‘hearing a commotion’. Once the door is shut, Livarius sits on the bed and looks at me.

“What the fuck happened?”

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

“Zorvan got pissed that he found us in the library curled up together.”

“Nothing after that?”

“No. Nothing.”

“He slit your throat. You nearly died. The only thing I could think of to save you was to offer my blood. I had only started reading about vampires, and I knew that blood could help. I just didn’t know that... I didn’t know what would happen. I’m sorry. Do you want to...is there a way to break the bond?”

“No! No. Well, yes. But I don’t want to.” He spins and faces me, sitting on his knees. He takes my hands in his. I look at his magnificent body, and into his beautiful eyes. “I know you want to go back to the earth realm, but the truth is that would have killed me. I’m sorry we didn’t get to enjoy our mating, but I’m not sorry it happened.”

“Me either,” I say quietly.

His eyes roam down my body, and land at the mess I’ve made on the bed. “I know you were freaked out about your birth control earlier, but you look so fucking good with my seed spilling out of you. I would not be mad if I put a baby

in you tonight.” He reaches down and scoops up some of his cum and shoves it back inside of me causing me to gasp.

“Livarius! No babies! Not yet!”

He climbs on top of me and begins kissing me hard, “Not yet. So someday?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. Can we just enjoy this new bond and discuss that later?”

“Fine. Just know that I plan to enjoy you over and over again.”

“Easy there, sport. We need to talk about something else.”

“What’s that?” he asks playfully, kissing me between talking.

“Before you freak out, this was my idea and I’ve already cleared for you to help.”

“I don’t like the sound of this.”

“The meeting with The Sentinels is still on the agenda for tomorrow.”

“No.”

“No? Liv. You don’t have a choice in the matter. I’m going.”

“No you’re not. I didn’t want you going before, I certainly don’t want you going now. But now I get a say in it.”

“You do, but only in the sense that you can choose to come with me.”

“I won’t allow it,” he says firmly.

“Liv, I don’t want to do this either, but I have to. And please don’t start acting like the others. Like I’m your property and not my own person with my own thoughts and feelings. The bond doesn’t give you the right to dictate my life.”

“Why do you care about this stupid kingdom anyway? What has Zorvan done for you?”

“Truthfully, nothing. I don’t owe Zorvan anything, but I owe it to Airen, and Helena, and the other fae who have been kind to me. The ones who are going to lose their loved ones if I don’t step up. The plan that we have is a good one. I promise that I wouldn’t do this if I didn’t have faith in the others. You’ll be by my side every step of the way. I know you won’t let anything happen to me.”

“I don’t think I can do that,” Livarius says sheepishly.

“Why not?” My gut turns sour. I thought he would want to help protect me.

“I can’t trust myself to not murder everyone on sight. I have things under control now, but the mate bond—”

“You’re one of the strongest fae I know. You can absolutely do it.”

“I don’t know, Arden.”

“Please. For me. I’ll feel much safer with you there above ground with me.”

“Above ground?”

“Everyone except for you, Walden, and one of his men will be below ground to remain undetected.”

“They’ll take too long to get to us that way. No. This is a terrible idea.”

“It was my idea, thank you very much. And it’s going to work. I can’t explain it, but I trust the keepers to keep me safe. I trust *you* to keep me safe.”

“I hate this,” he whispers. “I finally have a mate and she’s in imminent danger. I just want to be able to enjoy time with you and not leave this bed.”

“And I promise we’ll do just that just as soon as we’re back from the exchange. For now, I need to let Lysander back in, and we need to get some sleep.”

I pull a clean nightgown on and grab a towel to wipe up the mess we made. Livarius opens the door to let Lysander

back in.

He scowls at the two of us and says, “No more fucking while I’m in the room.”

“You weren’t technically in the room,” I say with a smirk.

“You want to join next time, big guy?” Livarius asks, shocking the hell out of me.

Lysanders mouth pops open, and his pupils go wide. I’m aroused again. I know Lysander likes men, too. I wonder if it’s just with Emyth. Now I’m thinking about all three of them, their hands roaming over me.

“You need to stop thinking whatever you’re thinking,” Lysander says. “Go the fuck to sleep,” he grumbles.

I lay down, and try to rest, but I can only think about how frustrated I am even though I just had *not* dream sex with Livarius. It’s going to be a long night.

## Chapter 31: Arden



### CHAPTER 31: ARDEN

**W**e wake up and start our day like usual. We have breakfast. It's much quieter, and we have Livarius with us. Then Zorvan leads Livarius and me to the armory to get small weapons and some armor.

"This should protect you against most arrows and daggers. A larger blade could cut through, but it'll help." He hands me a light chain mail shirt to wear under my clothes.

"You'll all be protected too, right?" I ask, worried that they're going to go unarmored into a potential battle.

"Yes. More than you. We'll have full armor on. We just don't want them to suspect that we're coming. If we send you in full armor, they might figure it out. You're just supposed to be a hostage, after all. Put it on."

"Right here?" I ask, my gaze dancing between Zorvan and Livarius.

"Yes, right here." When I don't immediately comply, he rolls his eyes. "We've both seen you naked, just put it on."

"He's seen you naked?" Livarius asks. He's angry.

"Multiple times," Zorvan says with a smirk. "Even shared a bed with her a couple nights ago."

"Stop it, Zorvan! We have shit we need to do today, and you pissing off my mate before we even get on the road isn't going to help!" I turn to Livarius. "Each time he's seen me naked has either been against my will or while I was unconscious. Don't listen to him."

The smile is gone from Zorvan's face, and Livarius relaxes a little.

Zorvan continues explaining the plan, “Livarius, you will be dressed as one of Walden’s men. We have to hope that they don’t know who you are.”

Livarius tenses next to me, and I scowl at Zorvan. “No pressure or anything, right?”

“He has all the pressure on him, actually. If you get taken, I will personally see to it that everyone who failed to protect you suffers.” Zorvan’s eyes are boring into Livarius’.

Livarius doesn’t back down, he actually steps into Zorvan’s space. “I would rather die than let anything happen to her.”

“Well let’s just hope it comes to that,” Zorvan snarks.

I click my tongue and roll my eyes. “Stop being dramatic. Nothing is going to happen to me.”

“You need to be taking this seriously, Arden,” Zorvan says.

For the first time, Livarius agrees with him. “He’s right. These men are dangerous.”

“I know that, but I also know that at least you two and Jarrah will make sure that I’m safe.”

“Well just in case you need something to buy you some time, you’ll have these.”

Zorvan pulls out two daggers and some leather straps with sheaths attached. He crouches down in front of me and reaches around the back of my leg. He wraps the strap around my thigh and secures it tightly, his thumb brushing the apex of my thighs as he does.

“Zorvan!” I gasp.

He chuckles. “Sorry. Accident.”

He doesn’t sound sorry at all. He moves his hands down my leg in a featherlight touch. He moves his hands to the other leg, and slides my boot off of my foot. He straps the second dagger to my ankle, then slides my boot back into

place. He stares up at me from his place on the ground. My heart is thundering in my chest at the look he's giving me. Livarius clears his throat and pulls me away from Zorvan's touch.

Zorvan stands to his feet. "Yes, well, we haven't had time to train you. Just aim for the face, neck, or chest, and that should be enough to delay your attacker long enough that we can get to you."

My heart begins racing for an entirely different reason. Existing as a woman in the mortal realm had prepared me for the possibility that I would one day be attacked. I had taken a few self-defense classes, and owned a small pocket knife and some other self-defense weapons, but the thought of actually being in a situation where I might have to use them makes me anxious.

"Let's go. We've got a few hours to walk before we get to where we need to go." Zorvan leads us out to the front entry of the castle where the others wait for us.

"Ready?" Jarrah asks me, and I nod my head.

"I still don't like this," Lysander says.

"Me either," says Livarius.

"Get over your reservations. We're doing this. Arden, you, Walden, and Livarius will leave through the front. I will escort you out as if I'm staying behind. The others will go into the tunnel one or two at a time. We don't want to all leave at once in case they have someone watching us. Those of us walking in the tunnels will leave through the servant's quarters with the exception of myself.

"Once these three have left," he says gesturing to us, "I will join everyone in the tunnel. Walden has the ability to be in contact with me at all times. If things go south, he will alert me, and we will come up from underneath. Does anyone have any questions?"

The keepers each give me a serious look before leaving as if they're trying to memorize my features. Jarrah kisses me

on the cheek, eliciting a growl from Livarius. Zorvan, Livarius, Walden, and I head outside. The rest head deeper into the castle.

“Okay, then you know what to do?” Zorvan asks Walden.

“Take the girl, exchange her for the fae folks, and return with our people.” Walden says, the way they rehearsed.

“And if they give you any trouble, or don’t hand over our people?”

“Get the girl back immediately under any means necessary,” Walden says. The entire conversation is for the benefit of any Sentinels who may be lurking nearby. They shouldn’t be able to breach the wards, but Zorvan said that stranger things have happened.

We walk down the path and out the front gates. I glance over my shoulder as we pass through them to see Zorvan still staring after us. The last thing I see through the closing gates is his worried face.

We walk for a couple of hours before the guys insist I have a snack and a drink. It’s been fairly uneventful. I’ve seen some trees and plants and wildlife that I don’t recognize from my time exploring the castle grounds with Rupert. Some of the nature here has an uncanny valley vibe to it. They remind me of things in the earth realm, but not quite. I saw a rabbit that had a more elongated face, and a squirrel that had two tails and longer ears.

There are some creatures that are almost exact replicas of the animals back home, but their colors are all wrong. There are some that look nothing like the animals back home whatsoever. The flowers in the forest are sparse, but the ones that do thrive here are huge. The rocks and pebbles shimmer like gold and diamonds in the sun. It’s breathtaking. If I survive this, I’m going to have the guys show me more of the lands outside of the gates.

We finish our snacks and continue moving down the path toward where the wards begin. A short while later we approach a small town. It's more modern looking than I anticipated, but somehow just as rustic as I'd expect too. It has nicely cobblestoned streets lined with houses and shops. The houses are mostly log cabin type homes, but some of them are very ornate. The shops are a variety of businesses from clothing to a butcher to an apothecary.

The town looks well maintained. It's also empty. The shops are closed, there's no movement. It's as if everyone packed up and left. "This is Krean, isn't it?" I ask Livarius.

"Yes. It's so quiet. Normally these streets are bustling."

"They said most of the people here had relocated to the castle for now since it was safer, and they had family that worked within the grounds."

"Most, but not all," A voice sounds from our left. Walden draws his sword.

"Ruby, what are you doing here?" Walden's shoulders relax a little, but he keeps his sword drawn.

"A few of us refused to leave. We didn't want to leave our homes to be looted by bandits or burned down by the militia. So it's true then? You're handing over the girl to them?" Ruby eyes me curiously.

"Yes."

"Yet she's not bound like a captive?"

"Because I made the choice myself to exchange myself for the hostages. I don't want anyone else to die."

Ruby scoffs, "so you're just going to sacrifice yourself? Yeah right. Rumor also has it that you were shacking up with a hunter back in the earth realm. You'll excuse me if I don't believe for one second that you could be so selfless."

Her words cause Livarius to growl next to me. Her eyes narrow on him, and a look of recognition crosses her

face. It's like she knows that she's seen him before, but she can't remember where.

Walden steps in. "It's true. I've sat in on the meetings with the prince and she was insistent that he let her do this."

"Well good riddance. I don't know what the prince was thinking, bringing a human into this realm. You don't belong here." She spits at the ground near my shoes.

Livarius starts to move toward the woman causing her to consider him even more intensely, but I hold my hand out to stop him. "You're right. I don't belong here. Now if you don't mind, we have somewhere we need to be."

I don't want to waste anymore time here. We need this to go smoothly, and if we get there first, we'll have the upper hand. Walden and Livarius don't argue, and we take our leave from the Krean woman. We exit the other end of the town, but I keep having the distinct impression that we're being watched.

I look at Walden and mutter as quietly as possible, "I think we're being followed."

"Nonsense," he says out loud, but his voice sounds in my head, "I already know the position of our stalker and Zorvan has been notified."

It's a bizarre sensation. It's as if I am hearing my own thoughts but in his voice. I respond out loud, "I must just be anxious."

"We'll be there very shortly. Are you ready?"

"Yes." *No, I'm not.*

"Are you scared?"

"No." *Yes, I am.*

Finally, we come to a stop. I don't see anyone around. This spot doesn't look any different than any of the rest of the path. I don't understand how he knows where we are.

"Are you sure we're at the right place?"

“Yes. The edge of the ward is about fifty feet that way,” Livarius points down the path. “You might not be able to see it, but there’s a faint shimmer where the wards are placed. Magic that powerful gives off a signature that can be seen by the fae.

We wait for about twenty minutes when we hear a rustling in the woods. A group of people make their way out of the dense brush to the spot on the path that Walden had pointed to. I count the fae in the group. There are fifteen of them. Six of them are in some sort of cuffs.

We walk toward them, “Nine on three. That hardly seems fair,” I say. That also doesn’t seem like all of the people they’ve taken over the years.

Livarius hangs behind me a bit and glances around as if he’s expecting someone to sneak up on us. I assume he also sensed Ruby following us, and is looking for her. We pause just before the invisible barrier.

A harsh looking man steps up. There’s something familiar about him, but I can’t place it. I try to brush it off.

He says, “Walden. You were supposed to only bring the girl.” He narrows his eyes at Livarius before they widen in slight surprise. Livarius gives a nearly imperceptible shake of his head. His jaw is clenched tight. There’s a familiarity that passes between the two men. My stomach twists in realization.

I slowly reach my left hand out and touch Walden’s elbow and whisper, “We shouldn’t be here.”

Walden tenses, and his eyes glaze over. I know he’s communicating with Zorvan. The ground beneath us begins to shake. The man in charge of The Sentinels shouts an order to his men before he crosses the barrier and grabs my wrist. Another of the men engages with Walden.

“You’ve eluded me long enough. You need to come with me,” the man accosting me says, trying to pull me across into the unwarded area. I dig my heels in as my heartbeat

sounds in my ears. Everything feels like it's slowed down and sped up at the same time.

This doesn't have to last forever. I just need to keep within the wards until Zorvan gets to the surface. I dig my fingernails into the Sentinel's arm. My head starts to feel like it's splitting open. I panic. This is not the time for me to have an attack. "Let go of me!" I scream. "Livarius!"

The man holding me leans in, his scent of pine and earth enveloping me. He whispers, "You're not safe in Feldorn. You need to come with me. Please."

Seeing how much danger I'm in, Livarius moves toward him with a sword drawn, but he hesitates when he gets to where we stand

"Stand down, vampire!" the man holding me yells.

Livarius trying to attack has him distracted enough that he doesn't see me reach for one of my blades. Even though I have no practice, I'm able to slash the blade across his face. He lets go of me abruptly, and I fall backwards to the ground.

I'm so scared that I don't even have time to consider how ridiculous I look as I crabwalk away from my would-be kidnapper. Behind me the ground breaks, and the rest of our forces pour out of the crater they've created. Zorvan sprints to my side and helps me to my feet. "What the fuck happened?"

"I'll tell you later. Just fucking kill them," I say glaring at Livarius who still looks torn.

Zorvan steps forward and begins using some of his magic on the men. Someone collides with my back sending me flying forward toward the man I just escaped. I scream in surprise and manage to stop myself before I'm back in his grasp. I look behind me to see Falmir giving me an evil smile.

In my peripheral I see Tavin and Emyth working together to put up a shield around the hostages on the other side of the wards. One of the militia men is standing too close to the group, and he's caught within the shield. He attempts to

pull the hostages out, but working as a team they hold their ground.

The leader of the group isn't stupid. They're outnumbered. He calls for a retreat. He gives me one last glance with his good eye.

"I promise I'll be seeing you very soon," he says to me, blood pouring down his face where I cut him. I definitely damaged his left eye.

"I look forward to it," I say with a smirk. I hope he's permanently blind in that eye.

He makes it back across the wards and disappears with the rest of his party. I round on Falmir as soon as the threat is neutralized. "You!" I scream holding my dagger toward him.

"Try it little girl. See what happens."

"I will slaughter your whole fucking family," I say the rage of my mate's betrayal building inside of me, "I will rip all three of you limb from fucking limb."

"All three of them?" Zorvan asks moving toward Livarius with an expression I'm sure matches my own.

"Livarius knew them," I hiss, tears streaming down my face as I feel my heart splitting open. "They knew that we were coming and that you would be here. He told them."

"Arden," Livarius pleads, "Let me explain."

"Explain what? How you and your disgusting family plotted to have me killed? Mating with me must have thrown a real big wrench into your plan. Was it all a lie? Get close to the human girl, learn her secrets, and sell her to the highest bidder? For what? Your father's approval? I never thought I would regret saving someone's life!"

Falmir scoffs. "Seems like he finally did something right, but he was not working with me."

"Right. He acted all on his own accord. It was just happenstance that you barreled into me and shoved me toward

that bastard that tried to take me,” I bite back sarcastically.

“I tripped,” Falmir shrugs.

At this point, Zorvan has Livarius by the scruff of the neck, “Can I kill him for real now?” he asks me through gritted teeth.

I’m shocked he’s leaving the choice up to me.

“Arden, please,” Livarius begs while shedding his own tears. They’re honest tears, but I can’t tell if they’re for me or for himself. I reach up and rub my temples and try to clear my head.

“Leave him alive until this headache resolves. I can’t think straight.” I sigh. When I open my eyes, I see Ruby slinking off into the woods. I choose not to say anything. I’ll discuss it with Zorvan later when there are less untrustworthy people around.

Zorvan takes charge, and tells the keepers and the guard, “make sure everyone gets back to the castle. Secure both Falmir and Livarius. They’ll remain in the dungeons until we can administer truth serum. Take the hostages straight to the infirmary. No one speaks to them except Airen to assess their injuries. Got it?”

There is a resounding ‘yes’ from everyone in the group. He grabs my hand and pulls me away from the crowd. “Stand back, Princess,” he mutters. “We could teleport back, but I need to let my dragon out or he’ll take full control.”

I nod and back away from him slowly. He strips his clothing and equipment and tosses it to Walden. Initially I try not to look, but my curiosity wins out. *Is hung like a dragon the phrase they use in Sangaris?*

His perfect naked body shifts and expands in front of me. Within a minute a full-grown dragon is standing where Zorvan once stood. He moves toward me and scoops me up in one of his large front claws. My heart beats thunderously in my chest as he takes to the sky and we head back in the direction of the castle.

## Chapter 32: Tavin



### CHAPTER 32: TAVIN

**Z**orvan flies off with Arden and I curse under my breath. I was on board with this plan, but she almost got taken. Someone almost took my mate from me. My tiger prowls beneath the surface itching to be free.

*This isn't the time.* I take deep calming breaths, then those of us who are left behind get to work assessing the hostages and securing our new prisoners.

I've had nothing but unadulterated rage simmering inside of me since Arden and Livarius mated. It is infuriating that my mate bond is causing me to care so much about this half-blooded girl. She's hurt and heartbroken, and there's nothing I can do to fix it.

"So, what was your plan, Livarius? Fuck her out from under us then have her killed? In what world did that end with you alive and happy?" Jarrah says. He is angrier than I've ever seen him. His eyes are cat-like and I know he's holding it together by a thread.

"It's not like that. Give me the truth serum, and let me explain. I love her. I would never intentionally hurt her."

Jarrah's hand encircles Livarius' throat, "If you loved her, you would have warned her about what was coming. You wouldn't have tried to hand feed her to the wolves."

"Jarrah," I warn quietly as Livarius begins to turn a brilliant shade of purple. "Arden won't forgive you if you take away her chance to know the truth."

I'm angry, but I have my wits about me enough to not piss Arden off when she's already been through so much shit in one day. I saw what she had done to that Sentinel twit. She has a little bit of badass in her.

Jarrah drops Livarius and pushes him back toward the castle. I scan the people we saved from the militia. Some of the hostages are a tad thin, and not all of them were abducted from Kreaan. This is a meager amount considering how many of ours they've taken over the years. Otherwise, they appear unharmed. Rupert looks incredibly pale, even for him.

"You alright?" I ask him as we walk side by side, bringing up the rear of our convoy.

"Yeah, it's just been a while since I've seen anything that even resembled battle. Arden looked so scared when we first breached the surface."

"She's tough. She'll be fine." I clip out, annoyed at the attention that he gives her. That's just what we need, another shifter to add to her collection of mates.

Rupert lowers his voice, "She seems tough, but she doesn't have access to any of her magic. She's no match for the fae."

I grab his arm and fall back, letting the others get a little way ahead of us. "Wait. How do you know about her magic?"

He gives me a sheepish look, "I assumed Lysander would have told you. I knew she was fae from the moment I met her."

I'm taken aback. There are very few ways he could know that Arden is fae. Arden herself doesn't even know. "How did you know? You're not...are you mated to her?"

"No! Absolutely not. But I've met Millie. The resemblance is uncanny."

His use of Millie's nickname only heightens my suspicions of him. Staff and lesser fae were to refer to her as Lady Millandra at all times. If Lysander has the same concerns I did then it's no surprise that he attacked him at practice the other day. I decide to just keep watch of the gardener for now, and bring my concerns up to Zorvan later.

“Yes, they certainly are very similar,” I agree, hoping that I sound casual about it. That’s the last we say on the matter as we continue on our journey.

The rest of the walk is uneventful. We take the freed hostages to the infirmary. While we’re there we gather the truth serum from Airen, then we head down to the dungeons with Falmir and Livarius. After about twenty minutes Iona storms into the dungeons shouting demands at the guards.

“What in all the realm do you think you’re doing?” She screeches when she sees her father and brother in a cell with cuffs on. “This is absolutely the most pigheaded thing Zorvan has ever done. Grandmother will be hearing about this as soon as my father is out of there!”

“He may not be getting out,” Emyth says, mockingly.

“Of course he will. Zorvan will come to his senses. This is going to ruin his accord with Solardin.”

“Your father may have disobeyed a direct order from the prince. We’ll be administering the truth serum as soon as Zorvan shows himself,” Jarrah says with a smirk.

If Falmir did attack Arden, then he may be able to get out of his engagement with Iona since Falmir will be banished from the kingdom, and it will take a while to find a replacement.

“I’m gonna go grab Zorvan. This bitch’s voice is giving me a headache.” I leave the room and head to Zorvan’s quarters. When I arrive I hear raised voices coming from inside.

“I don’t care, Zorvan. He’s my mate, and I will not let you kill him without giving him the opportunity to explain. I put my life on the line to get your people back. I deserve at least that much.”

“He nearly got you killed, Arden. It was a betrayal of your trust, and he went against a direct order!”

“You don’t know his motives. Neither do I, but the Livarius I have come to know wouldn’t do anything like this without very good reason. I care about him. Despite everything, I believe there is good in him, and I don’t think this was done for malicious reasons. We have access to truth serum. Why are you pushing against this so hard?”

“Because you were almost taken from me!” Zorvan roars. “Do you know what we suspect is happening to the female fae that The Sentinels are abducting?”

There’s a long pause and I imagine Arden is just staring at Zorvan defiantly.

Zorvan answers, “Sex slavery. We suspect that they’re using them as sex slaves. I don’t want that for any of my people, but least of all for you! The fae would quite literally eat you alive.”

There’s another period of silence. I should go in, but I want to give Arden time to make her case. I agree with her that we need to know Livarius’ motivations, and how much he’s told The Sentinels about Feldorn. He didn’t have access to much information officially, but there’s a chance he got it elsewhere.

Finally, Arden speaks. Her voice is much more soft this time. “I need to know what he feels for me, and what drove him to betray me. I didn’t want to hear it at first, but now that I’ve had time to clear my head I can’t let this go. If you execute him without giving him a chance to explain, I will never forgive you.”

“The mate bond is what’s making you care for him. It’s not real, Arden. None of it is real!” His words make me wince. Arden probably already feels used, and Zorvan’s words are only making things worse. “The truth serum is extremely hard to come by. Regardless of his motives he still committed treason and I cannot let that stand. As far as your forgiveness, it is not something that I require. He is my prisoner to do with as I please and I believe that putting him to death is the best option.”

Zorvan's motives are tainted. He doesn't want Arden to be mated to anyone else. He hates that Livarius mated her before he did, and his obsession with the girl has gotten out of hand. It's best if I interrupt before Zorvan says something he can't come back from. He is and always will be his own worst enemy.

I open the door slowly in case either of them is standing too close to it. They're by Zorvan's desk and standing way too close to each other, and Zorvan is breathing heavily, his eyes glowing.

I clear my throat and say, "I hope I'm not interrupting, but we're back with the prisoners and Iona is getting cunty by the second. Shall we proceed?"

Zorvan hesitates before pulling his angry stare away from Arden, "Fine. Let's go."

Arden brushes tears off her face as she walks past me out the door. One part of me wants to challenge Zorvan for making her cry. The other part of me is glad he's making her hate us. If she hates us, it'll be easier to stay away. I hope.

"That was a little cruel don't you think?" I whisper to Zorvan as he locks his door.

Arden walks ahead of us. She's never been to the dungeons before, but she knows about where they are.

"Eavesdropping is a nasty habit, Tay. Don't do it again."

He hasn't called me Tay in centuries. Not since he had to take on all the responsibilities of the kingdom. I let Arden get a little further ahead and say, "I'm just saying that if your goal is to win her over, you're doing a piss poor job of it. If you're trying to make sure you can never mate her, then you're doing fantastic. Keep it up."

"Once he's dead, the mate bond will be broken and she'll realize that she didn't care about him. She'll realize it was all the bond."

“Right, and what if that’s not true? What if what she feels is real? What if killing the one person brave enough to actually mate her makes her hate you for the rest of eternity?”

Zorvan clenches and unclenches his fists as we descend the stairs to the front room. “I don’t want them to be mated anymore,” he growls.

“I know, but this isn’t the way.” The part of me that is hopeful that we have some sort of future with Arden is currently winning in the constant internal battle I have to push her away or make her mine.

Arden pauses at the bottom of the stairs and gestures for us to lead the way. We walk in silence since she’s right behind us as we begin the descent to the dungeon. I can tell Zorvan’s still considering killing Livarius without an explanation.

We hit the last step. Zorvan lets out a sigh and rounds on Arden who has to come to an abrupt stop to not collide with us. Zorvan has to stare up at her since she’s a couple steps above him. He never lets anyone stand above him.

“We’ll use the truth serum. I reserve the right to execute him if I don’t like what he has to say. Even if he has a good excuse he’ll spend some time down in the dungeons, and you will not be permitted to visit him. Mates are not given special privileges. That’s the best I can do.”

“Okay.” She sniffs. “Thank you.”

Zorvan turns on his heel and opens the main door to the dungeon. We enter the corridor with the cells. Iona is sitting on the floor scowling at Jarrah. Falmir is glaring at Zorvan. Livarius has his head cradled in his hands. As soon as he feels his mate enter the vicinity, his head snaps up. He rushes to the bars and reaches for Arden.

“I’m not ready to forgive you yet,” she says coldly. “I’m not sure if I’ll forgive you at all. But I will hear your side of things.”

“We’ll interrogate Falmir first,” Zorvan says.

Walden opens that cell door and Lysander pulls Falmir out aggressively. We move into a soundproof room we use for interrogations. If someone does something particularly egregious, we frequently choose torture over truth serum, so the soundproofing is necessary.

The door slams shut behind us. I hold Falmir still, and Emyth pries open his mouth. Falmir's fangs are extended, and I'm sure if he could he would bite Emyth's hand off. Jarrah pours the dose of truth serum in his mouth. He then holds his mouth and nose shut to make sure he swallows. Lysander opens the door and yells down the hall, "Iona, get in here."

When I give him a confused look he shrugs and says, "I want to make sure she's here for this so she knows exactly what went down."

"That's smart," Arden says flatly. She's clearly struggling with all the emotions she's been exposed to the last thirty-six hours, and she's bordering on catatonic.

Iona shoves her way into the room and shoots a dirty look at Arden as she does. "Let's get this over with." She sighs. "Tell them what happened, daddy."

"Did you know what your son was up to?" Zorvan asks.

"I had no idea. I'm shocked the kid even had the spine to attempt it. He's always been such a disappointment."

A low growl comes from Arden whose apathy has been replaced with anger. "Why did you attack me?"

"I didn't attack you."

"Yes you did!" Arden yells.

"You're not asking the right question," Lysander says softly. "You have to avoid loopholes because while he can't lie, he can omit information based on technicalities."

Arden nods, calmness falling over her once again. "Why did you push me toward the Sentinel leader?"

“I tripped.” Falmir shrugs, looking smug.

“On purpose?” Zorvan cuts in, clearly sick of this game already.

“Yes,” Falmir hisses.

“Why?” Arden asks.

“I saw an opportunity to remove you from the equation and ensure my daughter married a keeper. I took it.”

“Daddy! I had it handled,” Iona whines.

“Enough!” Zorvan shouts. “I’ll deal with you later. Keep your mouth shut for the rest of the interrogation or you’ll join your family in a holding cell.”

“Why is it so important for Iona to marry a keeper?” Arden asks. I take a moment to appreciate how smart it is of her to ask that question. Many would feel that Falmir’s answer was sufficient and not take advantage of the use of the truth serum.

“Because my mother wants to infiltrate Feldorn, and the position of council member wasn’t doing it fast enough.”

“Woah,” Arden whispers, clearly expecting a much more benign answer.

“What?!” Iona shouts at the same time.

“What was the plan after we were married?” Jarrah asks.

“Iona would provide access to you and the other keepers, and we would be able to take you out. The girls would then take over your positions. Since they have no desire to keep that responsibility, myself and the other fathers would act on their behalf.”

“You were going to kill my husband?” Iona shrieks.

“Oh please. You don’t love him. You don’t love anyone but yourself. You would have had all the power of being his

wife without the actual commitment. You would have gotten over it real fast.”

“Why does Cyndair even care about Feldorn that much?” Arden asks.

I decide that we need her in every interrogation. Normally the prisoners are dead by now. Fae, especially the males, are led by their pride and act out of violence in nearly every possible circumstance.

“Because she thinks the lost Kildaran girl is somewhere in this kingdom. She thinks she never left.”

“Lost Kildaran girl?” Arden asks. Zorvan swoops in and knocks Falmir unconscious with the hilt of his blade.

“What the fuck, Zorvan. We weren’t done with him!” Arden shouts.

“We are now. Take him and Iona both to the holding cell and bring Livarius back with you,” Zorvan instructs Walden and one of his men.

“Why me?” Iona asks in a panicked tone.

“I told you not to speak until the interrogation was over. You disobeyed a direct order,” Zorvan retorts.

I know he’s just using it as an excuse to keep her and Falmir away from Arden. He still hasn’t broached the subject of her grandmother with her, and I know he wants it to come from him. It’s a missed opportunity, though. Why would Cyndair care about Millie?

Once the room is cleared, Livarius is brought in. He rushes forward and reaches his cuffed hands for Arden who winces away from him as Jarrah and Lysander hold him back from her.

“You don’t get to touch her, you leech,” Lysander growls. His wolf is threatening to push to the surface.

“You better have a really good explanation for what you did,” Arden says. There’s so much pain in her eyes. I can’t

bring myself to comfort her, and my tiger is furious. Until I know if she plans on sticking around, I won't let myself get attached to her. If I let myself hold her, there's no going back.

“I do. I swear I do. Just give me the serum. I'll tell you everything. Please.” Tears are streaming down Livarius' face. I've never seen him express a single emotion other than feigned happiness until today. He's clearly breaking apart inside.

Walden administers the potion, and we give it a few seconds to kick in then Zorvan says, “Okay, start from the beginning.”

## Chapter 33: Livarius



### CHAPTER 33: LIVARIUS

I feel the truth serum kick in. It's like there's an ethereal snake binding my heart. I think about saying something false and there's a constricting sensation that takes my breath away. It's time for me to put every single piece of me out on the table for not only my mate, but the Prince of Feldorn and his most trusted men.

I inhale sharply and start my story, "As you all know, Falmir is my father, but Iona is only my half-sister. She's the first of three legitimate children my father had with his wife, Malina. I am one of many *many* bastard children that he has had with commoners and servants. What no one knows is that not all of those bastard children were created with willing partners."

"You mean..." Arden starts but seems unable to complete the sentence.

"He raped my mother, yes."

"Livarius," she whispers.

"Please let me tell the story. I don't know how long it's going to take, and I want to get it all out before the serum wears off."

She nods so I continue. "After my mother had me, she worked tirelessly to provide for us. She was a barmaid at a tavern. She met several men there. She rarely brought them home, but she would frequently have sex with them in exchange for extra money, or food, or favors.

"After about five years of that she met a man who wanted more than just the occasional paid rendezvous with her. He would come and see her every night and would frequently tip her extra to make sure that she didn't go home

with anyone else. She was so taken with him that it didn't take much for him to convince her to move in together. He was very kind to me." I smile as memories of Cre'van flash through my mind. "He brought me gifts, he played with me, he watched me while my mom worked. He even taught me how to hunt when my fangs first came in.

"He was well off and could have provided for all three of us easily, but my mother wanted to keep working. She was home every night shortly after dark, and we lived that way for a while. Around thirty years later, my mom fell pregnant with my sister, Stacia.

"The year Stacia turned six, our town was attacked by The Sentinels. I wasn't home when they got there. I heard the attacks and I ran back to the house. Inside, my mother and sister were being held hostage. My mother began apologizing and I couldn't figure out why. Turns out she had told them who my biological father was. I don't fault her. They were going to kill her and my sister. She did what she did to protect them. Cre'van, her husband, didn't make it out alive.

"The Sentinels told me that the rest of my family wouldn't be harmed if I promised to help get them access to Feldorn and my father. They came up with and funded a plan for me to get in his good graces. The plan was simple. Go to Feldorn, get an audience with the prince and my father, tell them who I was, have the prince verify our blood relation, and use that leverage to get a position here in the castle."

"To what end?" Prince Zorvan asks.

"Just to watch for anything out of the ordinary."

"Like what?" Arden asks softly.

"If there were any other bastard children that they could exploit, if any of the keepers or the prince were courting anyone..."

"If there was a random new human in the castle?" Arden asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Specifically, if there was anyone not from around here that any of the five of you took an interest in. The second you showed up I thought that was my only real chance to get my sister and mother away from them, safely. It was my intention—at least in the beginning—to help them get to you. I’m so sorry Arden.”

I take a deep breath, trying to hold back the tears over betraying my mate. “But once I got to know you, I knew I could never hurt you. That I couldn’t hand you over to them. The only reason I was okay going today is because I knew that between myself and Prince Zorvan, we could keep you safe. I thought that my mother and sister would be among those returned. You have to believe me that I didn’t really want anything to happen to you.”

“The truth serum would make it pretty hard for you to lie, so of course I believe you.”

“Oh,” I laugh, “right.” Even without the serum constricting my insides, I know that the best thing for me to do is tell the truth and get the help of the prince and the others.

“How have they been contacting you?” Zorvan asks.

“I don’t know how they do it, but there have been letters showing up randomly in my room. Once I read them, they disappear. I have a raven that I’ve trained to deliver letters to an agreed upon spot for their people to pick up. There’s a sort of code that it’s written in so that if someone finds it, they’ll think it’s just a letter to a parent or a loved one. Until today I hadn’t actually spoken with any of them since I arrived at the castle.”

“That type of summoning magic from that distance? That has to be an incredibly powerful mage.” Emyth says.

“It almost has to be a royal. Or someone using blood magic,” Zorvan muses out loud. “Okay, well this gives me something to go on. I appreciate your honesty,” he says with a wry laugh. “Not that you had a choice.”

“I promise that from this point forward I will do whatever I can to help you catch them. I know it doesn’t help much now, though.”

“Slow down. We haven’t even discussed your punishment. As altruistic as your reasons were, I cannot let blatant treason go unpunished. If you had come to me, maybe I could have helped. Instead, you betrayed myself, this kingdom, and your mate. As you know, the punishment for treason in all three kingdoms is death—”

“Zorvan! You said—”

He speaks over Arden, “but due to the circumstances, it’s understandable why you acted the way you did. I cannot say I wouldn’t have done the same. You will spend a fortnight in the dungeons without your mate. If we can find a way to use you to drive out The Sentinels, that can be your atonement to her. Once you’re released, I will work with you to find your sister and your mother and bring them within the safety of our walls.”

“Thank you. My sincerest apologies for not trusting you with this. I was terrified that they would find out and kill my baby sister, and she doesn’t deserve that.”

“What makes you think they would have found out?” Tavin asks.

“They have information from within the castle that they shouldn’t have,” I say with a shrug.

“There’s another mole?” Jarrah asks, with a frustrated growl.

“Apparently so. I have helped them with some things but because I don’t have many clearances, I couldn’t give them all the information they required. My guess...” I hesitate, glancing around the room. If I’m right, it’s unwise to say anything right now, but I don’t have much of a choice.

“Spit it out,” Zorvan says.

“My guess is that it’s one of the guards or a council member. They don’t seem to have the top clearances of the keepers, but they do have higher clearances than I do.”

“No. None of my men would betray me like that,” Zorvan says confidently.

“I don’t mean any disrespect, but I was passing information to them for more than two years without you knowing...”

“You have been rather distracted, lately,” Tavin mutters to Zorvan.

“What about Rupert?” Lysander asks.

“What do you mean, what about Rupert?” Arden snaps. I’m taken aback by her attitude. “He’s a gardener. He doesn’t have any clearances.”

“He knows things that he shouldn’t,” Tavin says cryptically.

“Such as...?” Zorvan drawls.

“Things that I can’t say in front of present company,” Tavin says and Lysander nods his head in agreement. “For security reasons,” he adds, glancing at me. Arden rolls her eyes and starts to move toward me.

“Don’t touch him,” Zorvan snaps at her. “Walden, take him to the dungeon. Make sure he doesn’t starve, but he is to be treated as any other prisoner for the next two weeks. And maybe put him across from his insufferable father. I might not be able to kill you, Livarius, but by the time I release you, you’ll wish I had.”

“Yes sir.” Walden says and aggressively yanks me to my feet.

I give Arden one last apologetic glance as I’m ushered out the door and to my cell.

Four hours into my sentence, and I have decided that Zorvan is an evil prick. I don’t understand what Arden sees in

him. I can't believe that I have to spend the next two weeks dealing with my father locked up across from me. I didn't even want to live in the same kingdom as him, let alone be stuck with him.

“So you went and got yourself chained to the human whore, then. Just as well. Now Jarrah is freed up for Iona, and I don't have to worry about her losing her spot with the keeper.”

“You're delusional. Jarrah wants nothing to do with Iona. She's a selfish bitch, just like you.”

“My selfishness is the only reason you exist so I guess you can thank me for that whenever you're done playing the victim.”

I sit up and look at him across the way. My own eyes are staring back at me. I hate that I got anything at all from him. Thankfully, I mostly look like my mother.

“If it meant that my mother hadn't had to endure your hands on her body, I would rather not exist. As far as Iona and Jarrah go, you may want to figure something else out. The prince and the keepers are all quite taken with Arden. I don't imagine that my being mated to her will stop that.”

He lets out an evil chuckle. “Yes, and I suppose that even if you wanted to, you're too weak to stop them from putting their hands all over her. You know Jarrah's already had his cock inside of her once. He'll do it again. That's the thing about good pussy. It's hard to give up.”

Rage pumps through me at him talking about Arden like that. If there weren't bars separating us, I would relieve his body of his head like I should have done ages ago.

He continues on, “If they keep giving her attention, she'll grow bored of you. She didn't even want you. She was mated to you by accident. Whores like her always go after the man with the most power.”

“That explains why Iona is the way that she is then,” I snap back. I try to act unbothered, but the same thoughts have

crossed my mind about Arden. I'm a bastard child of a council member and a barmaid. How long could I possibly hope to keep her attention. Especially with the others fawning over her.

I try to remind myself that she chose me. It's possible that power isn't the only thing she's interested in. While she respects Zorvan and the keepers, she doesn't seem to like them very much. Whatever the circumstance, I just have to wait a couple of weeks before I can prove my worth to my mate.

## Chapter 34: Arden



### CHAPTER 34: ARDEN

**A**fter they drag Livarius away we have several conversations about what exactly happened at the meet and how it went south so fast. There are also discussions about Falmir's punishment.

After a few hours I let out a yawn. "I'm exhausted. I would like to go to my room if we're done here."

"You need to eat." Zorvan replies. "Then you may go back to your room. Jarrah, you're on Arden duty tonight. You may stay in her room if that's okay with you. Otherwise, she will stay in yours."

Jarrah hops up and comes to my side. "You and me tonight, Little Dove. What trouble can we get ourselves into?" he asks wagging his eyebrows at me.

I roll my eyes. "None. I've been walking all day, and my mate is being kept in a prison cell. I'll be getting a bath and then going straight to sleep."

"What do you say we share a bath? The tub is big enough for the both of us. Plus Zorvan if he wants to join in again. Be like old times."

"Referring to the night that you took advantage of me, assaulted me, wiped my memories, and stole me from my home as 'old times' is kind of gross. But thanks for the offer."

Jarrah flinches when I reframe the night we met. He might think it was fine, but it certainly wasn't for me. We exit the dungeon, grab some food from the kitchens, and head to my room.

For once I'm glad that the Zorvan is so pushy about me eating. I don't realize how ravenous I am until I have food in front of me. Jarrah gives me a curious look as I wolf down my

meat and potatoes and wash it down with Feldorn's equivalent of iced tea.

My cheeks heat when I realize how fast I was eating. I hate feeling like I'm being scrutinized for my food choices. My mind flashes back to Todd's mother telling me that I should eat slower so that I had time to recognize that I was full and how that would help me lose weight.

"I'm sorry," I mutter. "The last time I ate was a snack before the exchange and I was apparently hungry."

Jarraah's brow furrows. "Stars, don't ever apologize for taking care of yourself. I was just surprised. You've been eating so little at meal times lately. I'm happy to see you have your appetite back, is all."

"I've been eating fine," I say defensively.

"The clothing Blevora made for you is too big. She's a master at her craft. I know she didn't measure you incorrectly."

I stand from the small table and change the subject. "If it works for you, you can sleep on the settee, but Zorvan and Emyth were kind enough to share their beds with me, so I suppose I can offer the same for you. Although I'm not sure how Livarius will handle it. I'm sure it'll be fine. He has a lot of groveling to do. Anyway, the choice is yours."

"How thoughtful," he tosses back sarcastically. "I get to share a bed with you after three other men have done so in as many nights."

"Are you...jealous?"

"Of every man that has ever laid a finger on you." He moves closer so that we're almost touching, and tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. I'm trapped in his gaze for a moment then ground myself once more.

"You're engaged, Jarraah. I'm sure you and Iona have..." I trail off feeling kind of sick at the thought of him touching her. Which is absurd considering my very

complicated relationship status right now. I shake my head trying to clear the jealousy in my brain but it lingers.

“Not since I’ve met you. I tried to end things with her, remember? She doesn’t care about me, and I don’t care about her. It was a marriage of convenience. Thankfully, her father may have just cleared up that pesky engagement issue. If you hadn’t gone and mated yourself to the bloodsucker—”

“It was an accident. And anyway, I like him. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to get a bath and head to bed. Do you mind heating the bath for me? My muscles are incredibly sore.”

After a quick wash, I return to the bedroom. Jarrah bathes quickly after me, and we crawl into bed. He rolls onto his side and faces me, propping himself up on his elbow.

“What is it about Livarius that you like? What does he have that I don’t?” he asks.

A laugh escapes me because I think he’s joking, but his face is serious. Jarrah feeling self-conscious because of me is not something I ever expected.

“I hardly know you,” I say as if that should be obvious.

“You know my name, you’ve seen me shift, you know what my role is in the castle. I flirt and flirt with you and get nothing back. I know you’re attracted to me. What else do you need?”

I let out a sigh and sit up. I face him cross-legged and fold my hands in my lap. He sits up as well, mirroring my movements.

“It takes more than that to know someone, Jarrah. I know some things about you, sure. You hate serious conversations, and always try to turn them into a joke. You eat your food in a particular order, and don’t take cream in your coffee. You look magnificent when you shift. Objectively, you’re attractive. And you smell good. But those things aren’t enough.

“All of that aside, you’re destined to be Iona’s regardless of how you feel about her. I won’t interfere with that. It’s messy. I’ve unknowingly been ‘the other woman’ before and it didn’t go well.”

“So what do you want to know?” he asks, completely ignoring the comments about Iona. “What do you know about Livarius that you don’t know about me?”

“I’m not going to do this tonight. Or at all. Everything that I know about Livarius, I’ve learned organically—through conversation—and that’s how I prefer to learn about people. But you’re ignoring the point. Nothing is ever going to happen with us. I’m mated. You’re destined to Iona. We’re practically going to be in-laws soon.”

“Fae are not always monogamous, Artie; especially not shifters. Just because you’re mated to Livarius doesn’t mean that we can’t still have something. Iona isn’t an issue—or she won’t be much longer—so just take her out of the equation. Do you want to get to know me better?” he asks the question as if he’s scared to know the answer.

I’m still processing the fact that he wants me to be with both him and Livarius, so I don’t answer. I just ask him a question back, “why is it so important to you that I like you?”

He shifts across the bed until he’s in my space. His underwear can barely contain his tree trunk thighs as he sits back on his heels in front of me. He places a large hand on the side of my face and strokes his thumb gently over my cheekbone. I melt into his touch.

His voice is barely above a whisper, “Because you’re incredible. I don’t know how you don’t see that about yourself.”

We sit in silence, and gaze at each other for long seconds. I don’t respond so he asks me again more firmly, “Do you want to know me better?”

“I think so,” I whisper. “But I have to talk to Livarius first.”

Jarrah's face falls, but he nods in understanding. He retreats to his side of the bed, extinguishes the lights, and says, "Goodnight, Artie."

"Goodnight, Jarrah," I respond, and drift off to a dreamless sleep.

When I wake the next morning, I feel Jarrah's breath on the back of my neck. He isn't touching me, but he's so close that I'm not sure how he isn't pressed up against me. I shift out of the bed and go to the bathroom. When I return he's dressed in his day clothes, and sitting on my bed.

"What's the plan for today?" I ask.

"We don't really have anything we have to do until after lunch, so it's up to you."

"I might just want to lounge around in here if that's alright with you. I'm still sore from yesterday. I'm not used to walking that much and then fighting to get away from that man..."

"Would you like me to take you to see Airen?"

"No, no. I wouldn't want to bother her for something so mild. Besides, life's kind of boring without a little pain."

"I could give you a back rub," he says suggestively. "I just request that you be naked when I do."

"Jarrah," I warn.

"I'm kidding. Mostly. I will rub your shoulders for you if you want. No need for anything in return. I just want to make sure you're alright."

I consider for a moment and accept. "I'll sit here," I say plopping a large cushion on the floor in front of the large arm chair in the corner of the room.

He sits behind me in the chair and begins gently rubbing my shoulders, "So what was your life like growing up," he asks.

“Look at you trying to have a normal conversation with me,” I say with a laugh. “Well, I had a pretty normal life for a human. I grew up in the suburbs. We were a multi generation household for most of my upbringing. My grandfather passed away when I was fairly young so my maternal grandmother moved in with us. It was her, my parents, and my sister.”

“What are your parents like?”

“My mom was wonderful. She was eccentric and fun. She loved me and my sister wholly and completely. We hardly ever even argued. My dad and I butted heads a bit, but only on a couple of things. Boys were a big one. No one was ever good enough which I guess is an okay thing to argue about. He was a good man.”

“When you speak about them, it’s always in the past tense.”

“Yeah. My dad died in a hunting accident when I was sixteen. My mom died in a car crash when I was nineteen. My sister too.”

“What about your grandmother?”

“Heart attack when I was eighteen.”

“So you were alone?”

“I met Todd a couple months after my mom and sister died. He was a saint for sticking with me through all of that. If I hadn’t had him, I would have lost myself completely. I always thought I was so lucky for having such a wonderful family, but they all died so young, and I started to feel cursed. I honestly never expected to make it past my twenty-fifth birthday.”

Tears start to silently fall from my eyes. I never admitted that last part to anyone. I didn’t have many plans or aspirations. I think that’s why I was so okay with how mundane things were with Todd. If things were boring, they couldn’t be bad. I snuffle as quietly as possible and try to surreptitiously wipe the tears from my eyes, but Jarrah notices right away.

His hands stop moving, “Hey, I’m sorry. We can talk about something else.”

“It’s fine. I just am worn out after yesterday and struggling a little bit to keep my emotions in check. I also miss Livarius. It’s like a part of my soul is missing without him near.”

“Come here,” he says and pulls me up into his lap and starts stroking my hair. He cradles me in his strong arms. His touch soothes me, and it makes me feel safe and happy here with him. Which immediately makes me feel guilty. Livarius is in a prison cell and I’m seeking comfort in another man.

“I shouldn’t be doing this,” I say and try to walk away.

“Believe me when I tell you that Livarius won’t want you to suffer for his sake. Your safety and happiness are the most important things to him.”

He presses a soft kiss to the side of my head and I melt into him, allowing his warmth and comfort to wash over me. We stay that way in silence for a while before he speaks again.

“Arden?”

“Yeah?”

“I am really sorry about your family. And for bringing you here against your will. I feel like if we had gone about things differently you could have been really happy here.”

I think about his words for a little while. I wasn’t even truly happy back home. The happiest I had felt in years was with Livarius the night we mated. As frustrating as the keepers and Zorvan are, they at least make me feel something. I hadn’t realized how much I had just been drifting back home. That wasn’t a life.

Before I say anything, he continues, “the thing is that we were really selfish to bring you here. You’ve lost so much in your short life and we took everything else from you. I wouldn’t blame you if you never forgave us for that. Just know that whatever it looks like from the outside, I do care about

you. I want you to be happy. I feel like you belong here. With us.”

I tilt my head up to look into his brown eyes. There are so many emotions swirling around in there. I believe every word that he just said to me. I may never forgive them, but I appreciate him being honest with me.

“There’s a part of me that believes I could be happy here. There’s a part of me that *wants* to be happy here. But the fact is that eventually Zorvan will get bored with whatever game he’s playing with Todd, and he’ll get rid of me, and I’ll be adrift again. I’ll have Livarius, but what is he going to want with a human? I’ll grow old much more rapidly than him, and he’ll lose interest. And don’t look at me like you pity me, Jarrah.”

“I don’t pity you. I promise. I wish you hadn’t experienced all the things you have, but they made you strong and brought you here to me. Well, to us. And for that I’m so grateful.”

His words make my stomach do somersaults. He’s being too kind and it almost feels like a trick. “Why do you and the keepers even care about me? I’m just a pawn in Zorvan’s weird agenda.”

“That’s not true. Whatever you think of Zorvan, he won’t ever get rid of you. It may not seem like it at times, but he likes you. He likes that you challenge him.”

A knock sounds at the door and causes me to jump. Zorvan lets himself in, “Are you two…” He stops talking when he sees me sitting in Jarrah’s lap. A muscle jumps in his jaw then he says, “Well apparently you’ll just whore yourself out to anyone in the castle.”

“Zorvan,” Jarrah growls.

“Come to my office, we have things we need to discuss,” Zorvan says before he leaves the room dramatically and slams the door behind him, and yet again, I’m left feeling like a scolded child.

The meeting is short and boring. They do have things to discuss, but nothing that interests me aside from the fact that they let Iona out of the cell because she technically didn't do anything wrong aside from back-talk Zorvan. That and the fact that Falmir was to be held in dungeons for six weeks pending a trial.

I ask if I can see Livarius and Zorvan of course says no. My heart is aching for him. It's torture, and it's been less than twenty-four hours. I had told him that I needed space to forgive him, but I was apparently wrong.

We return to my room. After about an hour, Jarrah says he needs to go to his room for something. He promises that he will be right back, and tells me to keep resting and reading. When he doesn't return after about ten minutes, I poke my head out the door. I'm still feeling anxious after the meet yesterday, and as much as I complain about being babysat, I do feel safer with one of the guys around.

Jarrah is down the hall talking to someone who is just out of my line of sight. His body language says he isn't happy about the conversation he's having. I decide to creep down the hall and see what is going on, and what is keeping him from coming back. I dart across the hall and hug the wall as quietly as possible, keeping myself hidden from Jarrah and the other person by hiding behind a statue.

"Jarrah, please!" It's Iona. I bite down on my tongue to keep from groaning and giving myself away.

"You're never going to be my mate. Your father killed any chance you had of that. What is it that you could possibly want from me?" Jarrah's voice is angry and clipped.

"You know what I want," she purrs at him. I risk a glance at them around the side of the statue. She's running her hands up his chest. Jealousy reaches a boiling point inside of me. I'm about to reveal myself to them when his hand snaps out and grabs her wrist and twists it. I duck back behind the statue so I'm not discovered.

“Touch me again and I’ll break your fingers,” he hisses.

“Jarrah, what the hell has gotten into you? We’re good for each other.”

“You’re nothing to me,” he spits back, “Especially not after you attacked her and your father tried to get her abducted. She’s human. You could have killed her. Why would you attack someone who can’t even adequately fight back?”

I roll my eyes at him. She probably would have won, but I wouldn’t have gone down that easy.

“You’re still mad at me over the human?” Iona asks incredulously. “You have got to be joking. Who cares if the little bitch dies?” She barely has the words out and a loud *crack* echoes through the hall making me jump. Jarrah punched the wall.

“Don’t you ever talk about her like that again. If you ever touch her again, I will strike you down so fast that you won’t know what hit you.”

The barbaric way he’s defending me does something to me. My heart rate quickens and heat floods my core. I have never had anyone to stick up for me the way he is. Todd never went to bat for me. His mother hated me and he just let her say whatever she wanted to me. His father wasn’t much better. The fact that this man who I’ve known less than a month is willing to kill for me sends a delicious shiver through my body.

*What is wrong with me?*

“Get the fuck out of here,” Jarrah growls.

Iona whimpers followed by the sound of retreating footsteps.

Jarrah begins walking down the hall toward our rooms. I hold my breath and hope he doesn’t see me, but my hope fades when he stops and turns toward me.

“Eavesdropping, Arden?” he purrs.

“I, uh, was just...” I stutter as I stand to my full height.

“Admiring the base of the statue?” He moves into my space pinning me up against the wall. He runs his nose down the column of my neck and takes a deep breath. “You know I can smell you?”

“Smell me?” I ask, confused. I don’t think I smell that bad. I thought I had washed the stink from the hike off me last night.

“I can smell the wetness gathering between your thighs,” he says, nipping at my ear causing me to gasp. “What would I find if I were to touch that pretty pussy of yours?”

“What has gotten into you?”

“You know there’s a fire between us. Just give in to it.”

“We talked about this last night. Nothing is going to happen between us.” *Right now.* I add silently. *If Livarius is okay with it, then...maybe.*

“Are you so sure about that?”

I can hear the grin in his voice. I’m not sure at all. I’m not sure what happened to the man I was talking to just a couple of hours ago in my room. He was so sweet and gentle. Now he’s rough and forceful.

His left hand moves to my throat and his right hand trails up my thigh, lifting my dress as he goes. I swallow thickly as my pulse quickens under his thumb. He moves my soaked panties aside and runs a finger up my slit, and my eyes flutter closed.

“Stop,” I say quietly. I won’t do this. I can’t do this. Even though the thought of Todd matters less and less every day, now I’m mated to Livarius.

“You don’t really want me to stop, do you? I can feel how much you want this. How ready you are for me,” he forces a finger inside of me and my pussy betrays me, clenching down as he works it in and out of me.

“Jarrah, don’t,” I beg. My body wants him to keep going, but my brain is shouting at me that this is wrong. The conflict inside of me causes my breath to come in quick pants. He adds another finger making me moan.

“Stars I want to be inside of you right now,” he groans as he places his forehead against mine. His eyes are now glowing and his canines have elongated. He’s turned into a predator and I’m his prey. About to be eaten alive.

“Fuck Zorvan and his rules,” he growls. Zorvan’s name causes me to panic. What will he do if he finds out about this? He slit the throat of the last man that touched me. I can’t save Jarrah with my blood.

My panic quickly dissolves into rage. *Who does Zorvan think he is to try to keep me from the others? He doesn’t control me.* My own thoughts catch me off guard.

What is happening to me?

I try to ground myself but I can’t with Jarrah’s hands on me. “Please stop,” I ask again, this time staring into his beautiful eyes. “I can’t think straight with you touching me.”

“Don’t think. Just enjoy it.”

“Jarrah...”

He responds by tightening his grasp on my throat. Then he moves his thumb to my clit and begins rubbing small circles as he continues to pump his fingers inside of me. My body tenses, preparing for sweet release. Tears start to spill down my cheeks because some part of me is reminding me that I shouldn’t be enjoying this. But I am. I’m enjoying it so much.

“Fuck you’re so pretty when you cry,” he moans. “Look me in the eyes and come for me pretty girl.”

His words send me over the edge, he moves his hand from my throat to cover my mouth as I let out a scream.

“Shhh,” he hushes me with a wicked smile. “We don’t want the others to hear.”

After the last of my orgasm rushes through me, he pulls his fingers out of me and puts them in his mouth, licking them clean and it's the hottest thing I have ever seen.

Despite my continued arousal, tears stream down my face. I try to wipe them away and he grabs my wrist and licks the tears off of my face. "Jarrah," I whisper, "Please let me go."

"Tell me you didn't enjoy that and I'll never touch you again," he challenges.

He knows I enjoyed it. I know I enjoyed it. But I didn't want it. *Did I? Why am I so attracted to him? To all of them?* My mind briefly jumps from Lysander to Tavin to Emyth and lastly to Zorvan. Thinking of all of them touching me. Worshiping me. Another wave of heat courses through me making me weak in the knees. I break out into a sweat.

I don't answer him. I pull away and will myself to walk back to my room. This time he lets me go. I slam the door behind me and curl up on my bed and start to question my sanity.

My door opens and Jarrah comes in and shuts the door behind him. His arousal is clear in his pants. He's large. Very large. The thought of him inside of me makes me squirm and rub my thighs together.

He clocks the action and chuckles. "Enough crying. You obviously wanted it. Look at you, already wanting more."

He prowls toward the bed and looks at me longingly. He rips his shirt over his head and slides his pants to the floor. The heat in his stare is enough to set me on fire and burn me from the inside out. But seeing him naked...*fuck*.

I decide that lying is the best course of action. "No. I don't want more. I want to see Livarius. I want to go back to the earth realm. I don't want to be here right now. It's too much."

All amusement leaves his face and it's replaced by anger, "I just gave you a mind-blowing orgasm and you're

thinking about another man?”

“He’s my mate, and Todd is still waiting for me in the earth realm.” All of my thoughts are so jumbled that I can’t make sense of them.

He chuckles darkly, “You’re never going to see that asshole again. He wasn’t good for you, Arden.” He’s now standing over the bed and he looks like he’s about to pounce on me. “You deserve someone who will worship you. You need more than what he was giving you. Even Livarius could do better than that fuck up, but he’s practically a child. He can’t give you what I can. I know what you need.”

“You know nothing about me,” I snap back at him. “Just because I told you about my family doesn’t mean you know me.”

He grabs me by the ankle and yanks me closer to him. I squeak in surprise. He crawls on to the bed and between my thighs and rubs his hard length against my wet center making me gasp. The only thing separating his body from mine is the thin fabric of my underwear.

“I know I can fuck the memory of Todd out of you,” he growls in my ear before trailing kisses down my neck. He looks absolutely feral and it fills me with need. “I need to mark you. To make you mine, Arden.” Marking is how shifters form mate bonds. I at least read that much in the book on fae mating. He wants to mate me. My heart is pounding in my ears at the thought.

He continues on. “I need to fuck that tight pussy and put my seed inside of you until your belly is swollen with my babies.” The talk of babies snaps me out of my lust induced haze. I bring my leg up and knee him in the ribs. Then I swing my arm around and punch him in the side of the head making it snap to the side. “Get off of me!” I yell.

His eyes slowly return to me and instead of the anger I expect to find, there is an absolutely unhinged smile on his face. The sweet Jarrah from this morning is gone. In his place

is a monster and I can't tell if I want him to listen or if I want him to ignore my pleas and take me right now.

"You like to play rough?" he growls.

He pins my hands above my head and holds them there with one hand. He uses his other hand to hike up my dress and expose my breasts. Then he slips his fingers in the string of my underwear and rips them off of me leaving me completely exposed under him.

"Beautiful," he purrs.

"Jarrah, please. Please stop."

"You said that before and then you came all over my hand. How am I supposed to believe that's what you want when your body tells me otherwise?" He bites down on my nipple causing me to gasp in pain then he licks and sucks the sting away.

I can't help but feel like I should just give in. My body is responding to him like nothing I've ever experienced before with anyone else. Everywhere he touches lights up something inside of me.

He rubs his hard length along my slick sex and whispers, "Fuuuuck," as he slides into me causing me to cry out at the girth of him.

He begins slamming into me at an unrelenting pace. Grunting and groaning as he does. I start to come undone, and I can tell he's close too. I start to panic thinking about what will happen if I get pregnant.

Just as tears threaten to spill again my door slams open and Zorvan crosses the room and hauls Jarrah off of me. It's just in time. Jarrah erupts, hot ropes of cum landing on my chest and stomach as Zorvan pulls him off of me.

Jarrah whirls on Zorvan and snarls at him. I scramble up the bed and pull my dress back down and pull my knees up to my chest. Zorvan grabs Jarrah by the throat and squeezes.

Zorvan's nostrils flare and his eyes glow bright and he grimaces. "You've got to be fucking kidding me."

Emyth comes running in with Lysander and Tavin. "What the fuck is happening," Emyth asks angrily.

"The bitch is in heat," Zorvan says.

"Excuse me?" I ask, my face flushing. Is that why I was giving into him? I'm ovulating? I look at the others in the doorway. Their eyes are all alight as well.

"Is your seizure medication the only one you're on?"

"Yes. I mean. I take birth control."

"Which you haven't had access to since...?"

"The last time I took it was in the earth realm. The night before I met you."

"Weeks. You've been off of it for weeks and you didn't think to tell me?"

"I wasn't planning on fucking anyone, Zorvan. Like all the other personal shit in my life, I thought it wasn't any of your business."

"Everything about you is my business, Arden. Everything. Where do you get your birth control from?"

"My family doctor," I'm very confused by his line of questioning. Is he going to hunt down my doctor and get my prescription?

"The same one who prescribes the other medication?"

"Yes. Of course. Why are you asking me these questions?"

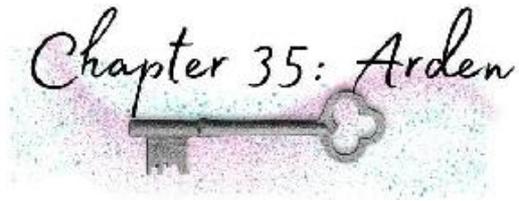
Zorvan sighs. "Everybody out." He drags Jarrah over to the door. "Keep him out. None of the rest of you are to come inside. I need to have a chat with Arden. Emyth, go tell Airen that in addition to the other favor, I also need female reproductive blockers."

“What about you?” Emyth asks, glancing at me his eyes now glowing too. He leans in and whispers something to Zorvan.

“I’ll be fine,” Zorvan responds. He shoves the guys out into the hall and shuts the door after them and locks it.

“We need to talk,” he says and all I can do is nod.

## Chapter 35: Arden



### CHAPTER 35: ARDEN

**Z**orvan sits down in the arm chair across the room where Jarrah was holding me so lovingly this morning. He runs his hands through his hair and scowls at the floor for a moment before looking at me.

“I haven’t been honest with you, Arden. I need to change that.” His face is twisted in regret.

“Okay,” I say cautiously. It almost comes out as a question.

“I’m sure you’ve noticed that the keepers have taken an interest in you. I’m also sure that you have noticed some weird things going on in your body.”

“You’re not about to try to explain sex to me, are you? Cause that ship has sailed. Like fourteen years ago.” I chuckle.

Zorvan looks like he’s about to commit murder. “I know you’re not a virgin. There’s no need to discuss your many conquests. I’m not trying to explain sex to you, but you need to learn about fae mating.”

“Why? I’m not fae.”

Zorvan stands to his feet and moves to the window overlooking the courtyard. He cracks it open and takes a deep breath before saying, “If you would shut up for five seconds and let me explain, you would know why.”

“Fine, continue,” I pout, crossing my arms over my chest and waiting for him to continue.

“Let’s start from the beginning. Do you know how old I am?” I shake my head so he goes on, “I’m over four hundred years old. I have been the prince of this kingdom for the last few centuries.

“As you know, fae age slower than humans. As infants and children, we grow at about the same rate as humans, but we don’t come to full maturity until around thirty years old.”

“Lysander explained some of this to me—”

“We’re all nearly the same age. I’m the oldest, Emyth is the youngest. There are fifteen years between the two of us and the others are scattered between. Tell me, what was your maternal grandmother’s name?”

The question catches me completely off guard, “Why does that matter?”

“Just please answer me,” he pleads. For the first time I notice how tired he looks.

“Her name was Millie.”

He nods as if he expected that. “You had told Jarrah and I when we first arrived that your grandmother had warned you about the fae. What she didn’t warn you—what nobody fucking warned you—is that you are one.”

I close my eyes for a long second to try to absorb what he just said, but it won’t register. My brain doesn’t know what to do with the information so I just start laughing. “I’m sorry I could have sworn you just said that I was fae.”

“Correct. Not just any fae. Royal fae. Your great great grandfather is Ardeth the king of the Kildara kingdom. He is Ashylan fae. Ashylan each hold five elements of power. There are the four standard elements which myself and the keepers have access to. All fae have access to them to some degree. There’s earth, fire, air, and water. The more powerful fae in this kingdom tend to be shifters. The more powerful fae in their kingdom have an extra element that they control.”

“None of this makes sense. I was born in New York. My mother was human. My Granna was human. None of them ever showed any signs of being fae.”

“Was?”

“Yes. They’re dead now.”

Zorvan pales. “That shouldn’t be possible. What about your father? Or your grandfather?”

“Dead. So is my sister. I’m the only one left.” Tears sting my eyes as I discuss my tragic life for the second time today.

“I’m really sorry. We can talk about all of that another time, but we need to hurry this conversation along. I can’t be in here much longer.” He opens another window and takes another gasping breath of fresh air. “I promise that I will tell you more when it’s safer to do so. For now, I will tell you the important parts. Without the hormone blockers, you’ve gone into heat. It only happens about four times a year for shifters. It’s my fault. I should have thought about the fact that you would need them but I was so concerned about your magic blockers.”

“Wait *what?*”

“Your medication that you are taking is a magic suppressant. I’ve been having Airen taper it off.”

Rage bubbles to the surface. “When did you plan on telling me this? Sometime between controlling me and tormenting me?”

He flinches at my words. “I was waiting until your magic began to show. I wasn’t sure that you were going to even have any abilities. I could taste the magic in your blood, but not as strong as it should have been given your lineage on your mother’s side.”

“My *blood?* What the *fuck* Zorvan?”

“This conversation isn’t going well.”

“You think?” I yell.

He yells back at me “That’s the thing, I can’t think straight around you, Artie. Not on a normal day and certainly not while you smell like *that.*” He tugs at his hair and drags his hands down his face. When he looks back up at me, his pupils are blown wide.

“Zorvan,” I say quietly and I move off the bed and walk toward him feeling the same desire crawling under my skin desperate to be free.

He moves toward me then stops and holds his hand up indicating for me to do the same. “I can’t be around you right now. My dragon is about to take over and I won’t be able to control myself. I’ll be just like Jarrah. Worse. I won’t care, and I won’t be gentle. My dragon will mark you and breed you. I will take you again and again until I’m sure that I have put an heir inside of you.

“And until I know more about you and your ancestry, I won’t do that. I’ll tell you more of what I know once you’re out of your heat. It should only be a day or two since it’s your first one. I’ll send someone—a female—up from the kitchens with your meals until it’s done.”

He finishes talking and waltzes out the door, locking it behind him and leaving me feeling so empty and alone. My heart is splitting open in my chest at his words. He won’t touch me unless he knows more about my history. He wants to know if I’m worthy before he’ll even consider reproducing with me. *Why do I care?*

For the fourth time today tears threaten to spill down my cheeks. I blink them away and take a deep breath deciding that I’ve cried enough for one day.

When Tara brings my lunch up, I ask her to light the coals under my tub so I can bathe. I feel filthy after Jarrah had his hands all over me. *But is it filthy in a good way or a bad way?* She obliges, but tells me that she can’t do it again. She was instructed to only drop the food off and leave.

I slide down into the bath water and let it wash away the frenzy of nearly mating with Jarrah. My mind is reeling with all the information and half-truths that I got from Zorvan. I’m an Ashlyan fae. I know the little bits that I’ve read, but that’s not much. The fact that I have to wait *days* to learn more is making me antsy.

My brain connects something that he said. *Shifters* go into heat. My great great grandparents weren't shifters. So who was the shifter in my bloodline? Was it my grandfather? That doesn't make sense. He was friends with Todd's grandfather, and Zorvan said my grandfather was a hunter. My stomach turns sour at the thought of Todd. What did he know? All those years of sleeping in my bed, did he know what I was?

I wash away thoughts of Todd and replace them with thoughts of Jarrah in my bed on top of me; thoughts of Jarrah touching me. I think of the way he absolutely possessed me. The look in his eye as Zorvan pulled him off of me, like he would do anything in that moment to have me. Todd had never looked at me that way. Then again, I'm in heat. It was just a biological response. It was shifter pheromones or some bullshit.

Even still, thinking of the way he had made me come in record time makes a heat coil inside of me. I feel way too hot—like I'm burning from the inside out—and I need to get myself out of the bathtub. I wrap myself in a towel and lay down on my bed. I absently trail my fingers down my stomach and dip them into my wet folds.

All I can think about is Jarrah nipping at my skin, and sinking his impossibly large cock inside of me. I bite down on my lip as I rub rapid circles on my clit. Moments later I'm moaning Jarrah's name as I make myself come.

There's a tiny part of my brain that feels deranged. I'm touching myself to the thought of Jarrah violating me. I had asked him repeatedly to stop, but we both knew that I wanted him to keep going. It was a game of cat and mouse and I was the prey.

The heat returns, and I'm sweating and needy in my bed. I groan and cover my head with a pillow and scream into it. I don't know how I'm going to survive the next few days alone in my room.

I need my mate. I need Livarius, but there's no way for me to get to him. Even if I could get to him, I shouldn't. The whole point of a shifter going into heat is to reproduce. Which I definitely don't want. Do I?

*This is going to be torture.*

As a distraction I pull out the books I still have in my room from the library and decide to try to learn as much as I can. I pour through the book on fae mates. There's a section on shifter heats that is way too short and doesn't give me enough information. The only thing I learn is that future heats will likely be longer and even more uncomfortable than this one if I don't have access to blockers. I have so many questions that are going to have to just wait until it's safe for me to be around the guys again.

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My heat. It's awful. It makes me physically overheat, it makes me hot for my mate, for the keepers, for Zorvan. Hell, even Rupert and Airen have played roles in a couple of my fantasies. It feels like it lasts for ages, and then it finally breaks. The second it does, I know. I feel normal. I can think straight. I take a couple deep breaths, and knock on my door for Elliott to open it.

He's wearing a mask of some sort over his face. A fact that doesn't register right away.

“Please let Zorvan know that I'm ready to talk to him.”

Elliott nods and walks away. I glance in the mirror and notice that the evidence of my heat is written all over my face and body. I need a bath asap. It doesn't take long before Elliott is knocking on my door.

“Arden, I'm sorry, but the prince is busy right now. He said he would summon you whenever he was ready, and requested that you bathe. Is there anything you need while you wait?” His pupils are blown, probably from the scent I left all over my room. It's embarrassing.

“Just... can you heat the bath coals?” I am so tired of relying on others to take a comfortable bath. I haven’t been able to have a hot bath during my heat because Tara refused to break orders a second time. She just opened the door, dropped the food, and left.

I take my time to clean off the stink of the last three days. Once I’m dressed, I sit on my bed and wait for Zorvan. Some time later he knocks gently and enters. I had opened the windows to try to air out the room before he arrived, and it seems that it worked a little bit. He’s at least able to breathe a little in my room.

“Come, Arden. The others are waiting in my chambers to discuss this...unfortunate situation with you.”

*Great. He thinks that being attracted to me is unfortunate. What an ass.*

The others are sitting around Zorvan’s office in large plush armchairs. They all look exhausted.

“You guys look like you’ve seen better days,” I say, trying to lighten the really tense mood in the room.

“We didn’t exactly get much sleep,” Emyth growls at me, and Jarrah elbows him.

“And that’s my fault?” I ask, already annoyed by this conversation.

“Yes, actually, it is,” Jarrah says gently while gesturing for me to take the remaining chair in the room.

I decide it is best for me to sit down, since I too am extremely exhausted. “Okay, how?”

“We could smell you. Even with the door shut. Even staying in our own rooms.” Zorvan says. “But that’s not why we’re here.” He gives a pointed look at Emyth. “I told you the absolute basics. Now I can get into more of the specifics if you’re ready to hear them.”

“I’ve been waiting for three painful and uncomfortable days to hear whatever you have to tell me, so spill.”

Zorvan inhales and nods. “Your grandmother was a royal fae. She was actually engaged to Emyth.”

My eyes snap to Emyth who is now holding his head in his hands with his shoulders slumped. Since arriving in Sangaris, I had been so distracted by trying to get home that I hadn’t bothered to look at the whole picture. My brain is going a million miles a minute, and rapidly puts all of the pieces together. He was engaged to a woman named Millie, who looked just like me. He’s been hostile toward me since I arrived.

But, no, my grandmother wouldn’t have lied to me about who I was. “That’s not possible,” is all I can say.

“Implausible, but entirely possible.”

Another realization dawns on me. “Ew.” I gasp. “You had sex with my grandmother?” I’m not sure why the idea makes me so uncomfortable. “Wait. My grandmother was the Kildaran woman who disappeared.”

“NO!” Emyth yells. “I mean, yes.” He takes a deep breath and starts over. “No, I didn’t have sex with her. Not that it matters. But yes, she was the Kildaran woman who disappeared.”

“Your grandmother was Millandra. I already told you the story of how she went missing. Until we discovered you, we had no idea she was even alive, let alone in the mortal realm. We should have known, though. It makes the most sense,” Lysander says.

“Why would she leave? What did you do to her? I know your...preferences.” I lock my eyes on Emyth’s. He scowls in return.

“I didn’t do anything. I was in love with her. I couldn’t wait to marry her.”

“So why would she leave all of this? Why would she leave you.”

“I have no idea. She was acting a bit strange before she disappeared. She was distant, and she spent a lot of time wandering the gardens. I was so surprised when she...” Emyth pauses takes a deep breath. “Whatever her reasons, we never found out. I’m assuming she began taking magic blockers soon after traveling to the earth realm or else she would have been easier for us to track.”

“Right, and the magic blockers you’re giving me?”

Zorvan says, “Your family doctor is either fae, or privy to our existence. She would have to know how to make the correct dosage. Which she did. I’ve had Airen start to taper it so that you can access your powers.”

“Without warning me that I might start doing weird shit out of nowhere? That’s a bit risky.”

“You’re still on a high enough dose that you shouldn’t be able to access it at all. The dose you were on when you came here was three times what we administer to prisoners.”

“But my magic has been surfacing. I just didn’t know what it was. The other morning in the hallway when Faylin was there, I got angry, and I felt a jolt in my arm like energy was trying to escape. I hurt her.”

“Why were you angry?” Emyth asks.

“I don’t remember,” I lie, a blush creeping up my neck. I just hope he doesn’t remember what the topic of conversation was when I got mad. I don’t need him knowing I was jealous of Faylin.

Zorvan brings us back to the topic at hand, “I was planning to tell you soon, but everything with The Sentinels happened, and it was never a good time. For that I am sorry. You had a right to know who you were. Who you are.”

“So why keep it from me at all? That’s so shitty of you all.”

“I didn’t know how much you knew. I didn’t know if you were just especially weak or if you were on suppressants.

I thought that you maybe had joined the hunters instead of allowing your fae side to show, and you were playing dumb.”

“For what it’s worth, I wanted to tell you.” Jarrah sits back in his chair and crosses his arms over his chest. He glares at Zorvan who glares right back.

“I wanted to tell you, too,” Lysander chimes in.

“I didn’t care either way,” Tavin adds.

I roll my eyes and sigh. “Me being part fae explains a lot. Like why the mortal realm never felt like home. Why I didn’t take the same medication as other people with the seizure disorder I was tricked into thinking I had. What about Todd and me? Was that whole thing a lie?”

“I have my suspicions about that,” Zorvan says. “When you first arrived, we thought you were maybe a quarter fae, but you’re too strong for that. You have Ashylan and shifter blood. Millie wasn’t shifter at all, so one of your parents or grandparents had to be. You’re strong. Todd had to have known at the very least about your Ashylan blood. There’s no way he would have willingly got involved with you. Not unless it benefited him in some way.”

“I need to know why he did it.”

“I don’t think we’ll ever be able to tell you that,” Jarrah says quietly.

“Of course you can’t. But Todd can,” I snap. I’m not in a place where I can be gentle with Jarrah’s feelings.

“What are you suggesting?” Tavin asks.

“That I go talk to him.”

“Right, just let my most prized prisoner go,” Zorvan says sarcastically.

“I’m not asking for you to release me. I’m asking for you to take me back so that I can talk to him and figure out what’s going on. You could stay nearby in case things go south.”

“No,” Lysander says, plainly.

“For the last ten years of my life I’ve been sleeping in the bed of a man who has done nothing but lie to me. It is my right to know why, and there is no other way to find out besides straight from the source. So, unless you’ve got a better plan...”

“What about his mother?” Tavin asks.

“What about her? She’s a raging bitch.”

“Yes, you’ve mentioned that before. I mean, what if we took her and asked what she knew?”

“I want to hear it straight from Todd. Why are you all being so difficult about this?”

“Because he’s a danger to everyone we love and care about and that includes you!” Lysander shouts.

“What?” I ask completely taken aback. “You’ve known me for all of a month. I’m just a prisoner. Why are you so concerned about what happens to me?”

“Because you’re not just a prisoner, Artie,” Jarrah says.

“You’re our mate.” Zorvan chimes in.

I snort out a laugh and realize that he’s not joking, “When you say ‘our’ you mean...”

“The Stars have fated you to all five of us.”

## Chapter 36: Lysander



### CHAPTER 36: LYSANDER

““**A**ll...all five of you?” she asks slowly as if the words don’t make sense. She also looks like she may pass out. “I’ve read enough about shifter mating to know that—”

“This is definitely an odd circumstance. A female fae with multiple fate bound mates hasn’t happened in centuries that we know of. Then there’s the issue of you mating Livarius.” Zorvan says.

“Oh my god. That’s why you killed him,” she says as the color drains from her face, “It was my fault. That’s also why you were fighting with Rupert.” She gestures violently at me.

“I didn’t like the way he was flirting with you,” I say as if I don’t care that it upset her, and that it was a completely acceptable response.

Her cheeks flush as she goes from shame to rage. “That’s why you all act like a bunch of posturing baboons when I’m around other people. That’s why I’m attracted to you all despite the way you’ve been treating me. It’s why Jarrah assaulted me. It’s just biology.”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Zorvan says. “Believe me, if I could strip the mate bond away from us without causing irreparable damage, I would, but I can’t. We’re stuck with each other. Which also means that we have a say as your mates about who you go to see. I do not want you anywhere near that piece of trash hunter.”

“You all have been lying to me for weeks. I don’t think you get a say in anything that has to do with me.”

She crosses her arms over her chest defiantly. I can tell that it's stirring Zorvan up. He loves breaking women of their defiance. We've all just spent the last three days being able to smell our mate in heat, and not being able to act on it. Any second now he's going to snap like a rubber band that's been pulled far too tight.

"I say we let her go talk to him. We haven't solidified the bond yet. If she dies it won't shatter us and we can move on," Tavin says with a shrug.

"The 'I don't give a fuck about my mate' act is getting really old, Tavin" Jarrah says.

"It's not an act. I haven't been following her around like a lost puppy since she arrived. I couldn't care less about the bitch if I tried."

"Thanks, Tavin. You're a real stand-up guy," Arden says sardonically.

"I'm just being logical. If there were ever a time to do it, it would be now before any of these guys loses their cool and decides to actually take you as a mate. Jarrah nearly did without your permission."

Jarrah looks at the ground sheepishly, "I didn't know she'd gone into heat. I can't help that it came on so suddenly. We were fine just minutes before all of that happened."

There's an awkward silence. Arden chews the inside of her lip then says, "I need to know more about my grandfather, and what happened with my grandmother. I have some old journals of my mother's and my grandmother's that I might be able to glean some information from. I never opened them because I couldn't bring myself to, but things are different now. Regardless of what is going on with Todd, I need to get some of my things. Can we at least do that?"

"Only if we can all come with you," I say. I know it's not my place to make demands like this, but over my dead body will she return to the earth realm with insufficient protection.

Arden nods, “I wouldn’t want to go alone anyway. Todd isn’t who I thought he was, and I don’t know what he’s capable of. I know it’s not safe, but I need to know. “

Her voice is soft, and her eyes are full of pain. I want to skin that fucker for making her hurt this way.

Zorvan pinches the bridge of his nose with an exasperated sigh. “We can’t be gone long. I have business to attend to in a couple of days. We’ll leave this evening and be back within twenty-four hours. No exceptions. Now that you’ve been within the castle and the wards can recognize your signature, I can take you in and out via teleportation. Go prepare your things, and be ready before dinner. I’ll have the kitchen pack us some meals.”

“I need to see Livarius before we go,” Arden says. “Just in case I don’t make it back.”

“You’ll make it back just fine,” Zorvan growls.

“Just let her see him,” I say. I know that I’ve messed up when it comes to Rupert, but I’m hoping that I can regain some favor.

Zorvan gives me an angry stare. “Fine. Go see your little boyfriend. Lysander, you can escort her since you’re so keen on the idea. I need to get some things ready. See you all in a few hours.”

Arden and I walk down to the dungeons in silence. It’s clear she’s still upset with me about my behavior the last couple of weeks, and about us all lying to her. I understand it, but I also hate it.

“Arden,” I say softly right before we arrive at the main entrance to the dungeons. I tug on her hand and pull her to a stop.

“What is it, Lysander?” she snaps.

“I’m really sorry about my behavior lately. There’s really no excuse for it. I just don’t like the idea of anyone else touching you.”

“What about Zorvan? Or Jarrah? You don’t seem to have a problem with them.”

“Well, they’re different. They’re my friends, and knowing that you’re fated to them just as you are to me makes it easier. I care about you. Deeply.”

“That’s just the mate bond talking. You wouldn’t even give me a second glance if we didn’t have a biological connection.”

“That’s not true. Not at all. You’re more beautiful than any woman I’ve ever seen.”

Her eyebrows furrow, “Well now I know the bond is in control. I’ve seen the fae women around here. They’re all gorgeous.”

I reach toward her and cup her face in my hand, “you are everything. If you’ll stop being angry with me for a few minutes I could prove it to you. Please let me make up for my mistakes. Now that you know about the bond, I can do things properly.”

Her face softens a bit and she lets out a sigh. “You can start by not getting all possessive and growly in front of Livarius.”

“Okay, let me make up for it after we leave the dungeons,” I joke.

“I mean it, Lysander. Be kind.”

“Fine. I’ll at least pretend to tolerate the vampire. I still can’t believe you mated him.”

“It wasn’t on purpose, but I’m not upset it happened. He is the only one whose feelings I don’t have to question. Before he mated with me, he tried to tell me he loved me.”

“You keep telling us that we haven’t known you long enough to care about you. Why does he get a pass,” I snap. “How can you possibly fall in love with someone in three weeks?”

“We spent a lot of time together during those three weeks. Talked a lot about ourselves. We have a lot of similar interests.”

I consider her words then give a tight nod. “If he’s important to you, then he’s important to me.” I run my fingers through her hair, and stare intently into her eyes.

“Lysander,” she whispers in a halfhearted warning as I lean in to kiss her.

Her lips are soft and supple against mine. Our kiss is passionate but brief. I reluctantly pull away from her and smile. “Let’s go see your boyfriend, then.”

She opens the door to the dungeon. Inside there are two guards waiting. They move to stop Arden, but then see me behind her and let her pass. Walden has been stationed in the dungeon since Falmir and Livarius have been placed here. Higher profile prisoners require the head guard to protect them.

“Arden, Lysander, what are you doing here?”

“We’re here to see Livarius. We have a trek we need to make tonight, and it’s crucial that Arden see him before we leave. Here’s a note from Zorvan on the matter,” I say handing him the sealed paper that Zorvan had scribbled on before we left his office.

Walden nods as he glances over the note. “Right this way.”

He leads us down the long hall of cells. Most of them are empty, but a few contain fae who are being detained for various reasons ranging from theft to murder. There isn’t a lot of crime within Feldorn. There’s almost always a fae more powerful than you so it’s not a good idea to put yourself in a position where you could get caught for doing something illegal.

Livarius lays on a cot in one of the last cells, his arm draped over his eyes. I glance to our right and scowl. Falmir is

in the cell across from him. I'm not sure if that was meant to punish Falmir or Livarius or both.

"There's the whore," Falmir grumbles when he sees Arden. The words cause Livarius to bolt upright. He stares at Arden as if she's an illusion. He realizes that this isn't some cruel trick and moves quickly to the bars on his cell.

"Arden," he whispers. His already pale features look sunken. It's only been three days and he looks like hell.

"Liv. I..." tears start streaming down her cheeks and I want to take her into my arms and hold her but this is their moment. I need to let them have it.

"I know," Livarius says, taking her hand in his. "How are you here right now? Prince Zorvan made it pretty clear that I wouldn't be seeing you until I was released, and while it feels like I've been here for weeks, the number of meals I've had tells me otherwise."

"Things have become...complicated. We have a lot we need to talk about. Some of it can wait until you're out. Some of it I won't say in front of present company."

"Is something wrong?"

"Everything is so messed up. It has been since I arrived in the fae realm, but even more so now. I need to go back to the earth realm to straighten a few things out."

"What?" Livarius yells. "No. You're staying here."

"No. I have to go. There are some things I need to do."

"Oh good. You'll be out of our hair then. Maybe my useless son can join you and then I'll be rid of two problems," Falmir says gleefully.

"Oh no. I'll be back." Arden turns to face Falmir with a smirk. "And when I return I'm going to be the biggest thorn in your side. I've been a mild inconvenience to you, so far." She lets out a dry laugh, "You have no idea what I'm capable of. I am going to ruin your life like you and your daughter tried to ruin mine."

“The human grew a backbone,” Falmir replies haughtily. “Too bad that means nothing. You’re weak. You have no magic. How can you possibly expect to win against me?”

“You’ll find out,” Arden mutters and turns back to Livarius. “I’m still upset with you. I understand why you did what you did, but you should have confided in me. I’ll forgive you in time. There are some things I need your forgiveness for as well. We can discuss that when you’re out. I just needed to tell you that I love you. There will be a letter in Airen’s possession explaining everything. If I don’t return, she’ll be instructed to give it to you.”

“Don’t talk like that. Please. You can’t leave me. I just found you. You mean everything to me, Arden. Everything.”

It’s a little bit pitiful. I sometimes forget that Livarius is still very young. He’s not much older than Arden and that makes him barely an adult in our world.

“You’re pathetic,” Falmir growls. “Pining over a human who clearly doesn’t give a shit about your feelings. I hope the bitch rots in the mortal realm.”

“Fuck off, Falmir.” Arden says over her shoulder not taking her eyes off of Livarius’. She reaches through the bars and cups his cheek. “Think of me while I’m gone.”

“You’re all I think about every minute of every day,” Livarius says, giving Arden a sad smile. Arden leans in and kisses him deeply, the bars preventing them from embracing one another properly.

Livarius pulls back and frowns, his eyes land on mine. “Arden, why do you taste like dog?”

“I told you she’d get bored with you, son. It took less than a week.”

“Can it!” Arden snaps at Falmir. “Like I said, we have a lot to discuss when I get back. It’ll only be a day. Zorvan has important princy things to do,” she says with an eyeroll. “I

promise that it'll all make sense soon." I give him a smug and knowing grin.

"I'll kill you," Livarius says to me with a snarl as he tries to reach me through the bars.

"Whoa there, kid. You may be Arden's mate, and that may have got you out of a death sentence for betraying the kingdom, but it doesn't mean enough to save you from me. I'm nearly as old as your father. You wouldn't stand a chance against me."

"Enough posturing, Lysander. I'm sorry, Livarius, but we really need to go."

"You make sure she comes back unharmed. I don't care how old you are, I will skin you alive and wear your pelt as a cape if she gets hurt while under your charge."

"I won't let any harm come to her," I say seriously.

He reaches out a hand to me. "Swear it."

I consider his hand for a moment knowing exactly what he's asking for, "I swear on the Stars and the Moons that as long as I'm alive I will not allow any harm to come to her."

I shake his hand and a burst of energy flows through me into him. His eyes flash silver for a millisecond, and then return to their normal color.

"What did you just do?" Arden asks and pulls Livarius' hand from mine.

"I made an oath."

"What does that mean?"

"Come Arden, we need to prepare for our departure." I lace my fingers with hers and pull her away from a growling Livarius. Arden glances over her shoulder at him with a newfound concern in her eyes as I pull her along back to her room.

Back in Arden's room I shut the door and lock it. She turns and faces me with her arms crossed over her chest, and

waits.

“You want to know about the oath,” I say and she nods in response. “It’s a fae thing. Similar to a deal. You shouldn’t ever make a deal with the fae, by the way. It’s pretty much the only thing your storybooks got right about us.”

“Get to the point.”

“Right. So it’s a magical connection. I made a promise to Livarius that I will do anything to protect you as long as I’m alive.”

“Anything?”

“Absolutely anything. Even if it means my own death,” I explain. “I would do it anyway because I cannot bear living a life without you. I never expected to find a fated mate. They’re rare, and hard to come by. Then one day you showed up and just flipped my entire world on its head, Arden.”

“Lysander...” She starts and seems unsure of how to continue.

“Tell me you don’t feel anything between us, Arden.”

“I mean, I do, but it’s purely physical at this point. I know you have a good heart, but you’re also hotheaded and I’m not sure I have the patience for that.”

“You’re right. I am hotheaded, and that’s doubly true when it comes to you. The truth is that I didn’t need to make that vow to Livarius. I would have kept you safe without it. My wolf is fiercely protective of you and possessive of you.” I step toward her, hands to the side in an open gesture. “But I did it to show you how much I am willing to set aside for you. I don’t like that you’re mated to him, but I accept it. I will take any part of you you’re willing to offer me, even if it’s just tiny pieces of you.”

She holds her hand up and I stop, waiting for permission to advance further.

“I may be willing to offer larger pieces over time, but I need you to talk to me before flying off the handle at people

for even talking to me.”

“I’ll try to keep my wolf in check.” I nod.

“So your wolf is why you’re so over the top about anyone with a penis being near me?”

“Well, not just my wolf, I guess,” I admit with a smirk and take another step forward.

“I hate to break it to you, but I’m also into women, so your wolf is going to have to adjust his attitude unless he wants to come across as sexist.” She gives me a small smirk to let me know she’s being playful, which is a good sign.

“So I shouldn’t let anyone around you at all? I should just keep you all to myself?” I ask, and take one more step.

Her eyes widen as if she just realized she was alone with me. She’s a mouse, alone with a ravenous cat.

“Lysander,” she warns when I’m less than a couple of feet away.

“Arden,” I say her name back to her in a similar tone.

“What are you doing?”

“What I’ve wanted since I first laid eyes on you. Keeping our mate bond from you was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do. You make me feral with the need to bury myself inside of you; physically and emotionally. “

“I don’t think this is the time—”

I cut her off by swooping in and lifting her legs around my waist. She squeals out in surprise and a laugh escapes her. I wish I could bottle that sound. She places her hands on my chest and looks into my eyes with an adorable look of joy on her face. It fades quickly and is replaced with one of concern with a touch of sadness.

“I have felt so alone these last few days. It’s so good to have some physical touch, but we shouldn’t do this.”

“Why not? You’re meant for me just as you are meant for the others. Just let me in.” I’m hoping I don’t sound as desperate as I feel.

“I—”

I don’t give her the chance to come up with another excuse. She’s always trying to come up with reasons she shouldn’t be with us. I’m tired of it. My mouth crashes onto hers in hopes that she’ll be able to feel exactly what she means to me.

She moans into the kiss and I take the opportunity to slide my tongue into her mouth. She sucks on the tip of my tongue and I groan with need as I harden against her. It’s been a long time since I’ve indulged in a woman’s touch, and even then it never felt this good.

She nips at my bottom lip as she pulls away to look at me. “Don’t think this gets you off the hook for what you did to Rupert.”

“You may feel differently once we’re done,” I say as I lay her back on the bed. I lift her dress up and whisper, “Fuck,” when I realize she’s not wearing any panties. I hold myself above her and slide my finger along her slit. “You’re soaked,” I groan as I place kisses down her belly.

“It’s been a long few days,” Arden whispers, her cheeks flushing that beautiful shade of red.

I start rubbing her clit with my thumb and memorize the way her body arches into my touch. “You’re beautiful.” I tell her as I slide a finger inside of her. She’s so tight around my finger that I can’t wait to see how she feels around my dick.

“Lysander,” She moans as she slides a hand up under her dress to squeeze her breast. The final shred of self-restraint I had snaps. I reach up and grab her dress and tear it down the middle causing her to gasp out in surprise. I tear off my shirt and pants and chuck them to the floor.

Once she's laid bare to me, I settle between her legs and grind myself into her, only the fabric of my boxer briefs separating us. I squeeze her left breast with my hand and suck her right nipple into my mouth. I drag my teeth up her nipple and she gasps at the sting.

"I need to be inside of you more than anything, but I know I won't last long."

"I won't either. Believe me." She pants. Our movements are frantic and fevered. She reaches down my shorts and runs her hand up and down my length as she stares up at me with hooded eyes.

## Chapter 37: Arden



### CHAPTER 37: ARDEN

**Z**orvan throws the door open unceremoniously and finds me pinned beneath Lysander on the bed. “You really need to learn how to fucking knock,” I say pushing Lysander off of me gently and covering myself with a sheet.

“You really need to stop fucking every male in the castle. Then there would be less of a chance of me walking in on you in a compromised position. Are you two ready to go?”

“Yes. Clearly we’re ready. I’m planning to just waltz into my old home wearing exactly zero clothes,” I bite back.

“I thought we were leaving after dinner,” Lysander says, as he collects his clothes from the floor.

“We’re having dinner early. The sooner we leave the sooner we can get back, and I’m done with the things I needed to accomplish.”

“I’m ready. I don’t need anything if we’re only going to be gone for a day,” I say.

“Your pills?” Zorvan asks. “Some clothes that won’t make you stand out in the earth realm?”

I roll my eyes and grab my backpack from my night stand. I drop my sheet as I stand from the bed, and start to pull on my jean shorts.

I give Zorvan a bratty smile noting the heat in his gaze. This asshole thought he could lie to me about what I was to him for weeks and there wouldn’t be any repercussions? Who knows when he would have told me if I hadn’t gone into heat and compromised everything. I’m going to torture him for as long as I can stand it.

I pull my tank top on, not bothering with undergarments. My nipples are still peaked from Lysander toying with them. I bounce on my toes, allowing my boobs to jiggle with the movement.

“You done?” Zorvan growls.

“Yeah, I think so. You ready, Lysander?”

His slate grey eyes are glued to me. I don't think he's heard a word I've said.

“Lysander,” I say, snapping my fingers at him.

“Hmm?” He says, shaking his head, “Yeah. Yeah I'm ready.”

“You're not even wearing clothes,” Zorvan says, sliding his palm down his face.

Lysander rushes to get dressed and we're on our way. After a quick dinner and Jobie and Tara giving us some rations for the road, we stock up on salve from Airen, and some teas for minor issues we might run into. Then the six of us are out the door.

There's no teleportation into or out of the castle directly except for Zorvan. Even the keepers are required to teleport just outside the castle grounds, but at least we don't have to walk the whole way back through the forest.

Just before we walk through the veil Zorvan places a gentle hand on my shoulder. “I need you to listen to me.” His words are soft, and his touch comforting.

“What is it?” I ask with a furrowed brow.

“The Todd that you know is not who Todd really is. I know you know that, now...”

“Just say whatever you need to say.”

“He's dangerous. He's taken out some really powerful fae. We haven't discussed it in detail because it wasn't relevant. He killed my sisters, and I am more powerful than

they were, but not by much. They would have given these idiots a run for their money.” He gestures toward the keepers

“If things start to go south, I will kill him. No questions, no chances. I will not risk losing you or any of these four. They’re—*you’re*—the only family I have left. Do you accept those terms?”

My heart beats erratically in my chest. I’m starting to think he might care for me beyond the mate bond. I take a deep breath in and nod. “Believe me, if I were powerful enough, I would kill him myself.”

He gives me a half smile and releases my shoulder. “Alright. Let’s go.”

We walk through the veil one at a time. The first thing that hits me is the smell. It smells like fumes and chemicals. It smells fake. Everything in the fae realm is fresh and clean. It’s untouched by exhaust fumes and caustic chemicals. I’m flabbergasted that I never noticed how awful it smells here.

“Do you think he’ll still be at your house?” Jarrah asks as we get our bearings.

“I have no idea. Is there a place near the house that we can teleport to then walk the rest of the way? Maybe the park where we met?” I ask Zorvan.

Zorvan gives me a longing look, and I would kill to know what he’s thinking. My stomach flutters when I remember the first time I felt that electric buzz at his touch. So much has happened that it feels like months ago. It’s only been a few weeks, but Sangaris is now my home. I wouldn’t return to this world even if Zorvan gave me the choice.

“We’re actually not far from there. I think we should just walk.”

I nod and gesture for him to lead the way. We make it to the park within fifteen minutes.

“I’m shocked that no one has wandered into the fae realm.”

“It happens every once in a great while,” Emyth says. “But you have to walk into it at just the right angle or you’ll miss it entirely. The chances of someone walking through it this far off of regularly walked paths is highly unlikely.”

“Animals do fairly often though,” Tavin says. “It’s like they’re called to it or something. That’s why we have some animals there from this realm, and some of them have bred with the fae animals causing hybrids.”

“How are you feeling right now?” Jarrah asks, lacing his fingers with mine.

It’s a welcome gesture, and I squeeze his hand to show I appreciate it.

“I’m anxious,” I admit.

“About Todd?” Zorvan scoffs.

“No, actually. Todd can get fucked for all I care. I’m honestly more freaked out about what I’m going to learn about my family.”

Jarrah squeezes my hand back and gives me a sad smile. I take a good look around. Everything here already feels so foreign. The sounds of traffic and cell phones, the asphalt, the construction of the houses. I do miss hot showers, but I can’t really complain about the giant bathtub I have in my quarters. Maybe I can hire someone in the fae realm to build a shower for me.

The sights and sounds of the park are familiar, but not. I used to walk here several times a week because I felt at peace here, but now it’s just a park. It’s not even a pretty one. It makes me miss the gardens back at the castle.

“Artie?!” A voice calls out.

My stomach knots instantly. It’s a friend that Todd and I used to hang out with, Keith. I search for the source of the voice, and the guys form a protective circle around me.

“Hey Keith!” I say as casually as I can manage as I elbow Lysander in the ribs so I can move past him.

Keith wraps me in a tight hug and Lysander snarls, “get your filthy fucking hands off of her!”

“Lysander! Manners!” I clip out as Keith releases me with a wary look.

“Who are these guys? Where have you been? Todd said you had some stuff going on, but Becca has been texting and calling you and not getting any response. She said you ghosted a client she referred to you.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. I’m surprised that Todd didn’t tell you that we broke up. I didn’t handle it well. It was a weird couple of weeks, but I’m finding myself.”

“No, he didn’t mention that,” Keith says, eyeing the guys. “Honestly...” He hesitates, and I can see a battle waging inside of him. “Honestly, we thought he might have killed you. He’s been really weird since you’ve been gone.”

“Things didn’t end on the best of terms. I’m actually just here to pick up a couple of my things, and I’m really hoping to avoid him. I’m just not ready. Please don’t mention you saw me. I’m hoping to sneak into the house, get my stuff, and leave.”

“And you need five enormous scary men to do that?” he asks, skeptically. Something feels off about him today, but I’m guessing it’s the presence of the fae men I have with me. They’re huge, and even with the glamour they put on themselves to hide their pointed ears, they look ethereal.

“Todd was a little weird when I left. These guys are going to stay outside while I run in and get my things. Make sure he doesn’t try anything if he shows up.”

“The hell we are, Arden,” Jarrah says.

I turn and give him a ‘shut up’ look. “Yes, you are. I don’t need the five of you trampling all over the house. I just had that carpet replaced, and even if things ended poorly, I don’t want you muddying it up. Actually, Keith, would you be able to text him and surreptitiously see if he’s home? I just want to know what I’m walking into.”

Keith gives me one last look that tells me he's not one hundred percent sure I'm telling the truth, then instead of texting him, he calls Todd.

"Hey, man! I was just about to go grab a late lunch at the sushi place you like, you wanna come?" He pauses and I can hear a muffled response on the other end. His eyes flick to mine, "Ah yeah, plans with Arden, I get it. I know you said she was really going through it. You guys just hanging at home today, then? Maybe I could drop food off for both of you."

An irritated look crosses his face, "You'll be home around three o'clock? Okay, yeah. If I get done after then I'll bring you a platter. See you later."

He hangs up the phone and gives me a suspicious look. "I don't know which one of you is lying to me, but if it's you, this isn't funny."

"It's not me. I can't believe he's trying to make it seem like we're still together. What an ass. Did he say where he was?"

"At your mom's house."

"He said what?" I ask completely aghast at the audacity.

"Yeah. I thought that was weird. Isn't your mom..."

"Dead. Yes. She is."

"That asshole is not only lying to me about what he's doing and who he's with, but he's also using me to get free double sushi. If he comes home while you're there, give him a swift kick to the nuts for me, would you?"

I let out a laugh. "Sure thing."

"Take care of yourself, Artie," Keith says, and he gives me an awkward hug before we part ways.

It simultaneously feels like forever and less than an instant before we're standing on the doorstep of the house where Todd and I had shared. Memories flood me of house

hunting, and finding this place. It was our dream starter home. My heart aches over the mediocre years I wasted with someone who didn't love me.

I face the guys, "I'm not taking all five of you inside. Only Zorvan is coming with me. The rest of you can watch from the outside and Jarrah can teleport in if you see Todd."

"You can't possibly expect us to wait out here," Lysander says incredulously.

"I do," Zorvan says.

"You sure?" Tavin asks. "What if he's actually home and he made up the thing about not being here?"

"His car's not here. Wherever he is, he isn't home."

"What's the plan when he gets here?" Emyth asks.

"You four will bamf inside and we'll find a way to restrain him and question him."

"Bamf?" Tavin asks.

"Yeah, teleport." When he gives me a confused look I add, "it's from a comic—nevermind," I say deciding it's too much hassle.

"Why is she making all the decisions?" Emyth asks, impatiently.

"Because this is just as personal for her as it is for me." Zorvan says, surprising me. "He took my sisters, but he took ten years of Arden's life that she'll never get back. She deserves to know the truth, and I trust her to be able to get it from him."

"But just in case, I brought this." I hold out a vial of truth serum.

"Where the fuck did you get that?" Jarrah asks.

"Airen." I shrug. "I explained to her what happened with Todd a few weeks back and she gave this to me. Said if I ever saw him again that this would come in handy. Also told

me to tell you that it came from her personal stash,” I say, cutting off whatever Zorvan was about to say.

The clock tower downtown strikes two o’clock. We have about an hour before he gets home for me to fill my suitcase with all the important stuff I want to take with me, and get ready for him.

“Let’s hope he didn’t change the alarm code,” I say as Zorvan and I step up to the door.

We cross the threshold into the foyer. It’s like everything is the same, and nothing is all at once. For the most part, everything is where I left it. But it feels...wrong.

The kitchen counter is cluttered with a bunch of Todd’s things. There are utility bills, dirty plates, and a handful of random items scattered about. I was the only one who did any housework between visits from the cleaning company so I’m not surprised that it’s a mess.

I lead Zorvan down into the basement where we keep our luggage and hope that my packed suitcase from vacation is maybe magically sitting down here. The suitcase is there, but it’s empty. I grab it and start to cart it up the stairs when Zorvan’s hand wraps around mine.

“Let me carry it,” he says gruffly, leaving no room for argument.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“You don’t have to do any of this alone, Arden.”

I nod, unsure how to react to his kindness. He shows me this side so rarely that I don’t respond. We can have that conversation another time.

I find the bedroom in a similar state to the kitchen. The big stuff is all the same, but there are dirty clothes strewn across the floor and a layer of dust has settled on the dressers. The housekeeper obviously hasn’t been here. My side of the bed is untouched. I don’t think he even changed the sheets.

My jewelry box is in the same spot, with the pieces I had selected for vacation returned to their places. All of my clothing is still in the closet; my toothbrush and toiletries are still in the bathroom. I feel like I'm in an episode of the Twilight Zone.

"Are you okay?" Zorvan asks softly.

"Yes and no. I think I expected him to throw all of my stuff away. I actually half expected him to have moved. I don't know what to make of the fact that everything is more or less how I left it. He's been living here, but he hasn't touched my things. The fact that we're here at all is just very surreal, you know?"

Zorvan nods silently and gives me space to untangle the mess of my emotions: bitterness, anger, nostalgia, heartache, betrayal, regret. Each thread is wound so tightly around the next that I can't even start to process everything. *Does Sangaris have therapists?*

I blow out a long breath. "I guess I'll start packing the important things."

In the closet and pull out the box of journals from my mother and grandmother. I set it on the bed and begin gently putting them in the bottom of the large suitcase. It's going to be heavy, but it'll be easier than the paper box I had the journals stored in.

I grab a couple of shirts and comfy pants for when I don't feel like wearing the fancy fae clothes Blevora made for me. I also grab my baby blanket that my mom had given me, and some old family photos.

The last thing I do is go to the safe in the corner of the room and put in the combination. Inside there's a handgun, some cash, and my grandmother's engagement ring. However, there is one thing that I'm not expecting; a note from Todd with my name on it.

I replace my grandmother's engagement ring with my own, grab the letter, and sit down on the bed. My hands

tremble as I open the envelope. I'm not sure what to expect.

*Artie,*

*I'm assuming that if you found this letter then you made it back home, but you aren't planning on sticking around. I need you to know that I never intended for things to go this way. I thought I had taken the necessary precautions to keep you from them, but as it turns out you can't stop fate.*

*My only hope is that you'll stick around long enough for me to tell you my side of the story. If you don't, just know that I hated lying to you, but I was charged with keeping you alive. Hunters take their jobs seriously, and you were the most important job I ever had.*

*Todd.*

"Fuck him," I say as I crumple up the paper and throw it in the trash.

"I would prefer it if you didn't ever do that again," Zorvan says with a smile, clearly trying to lighten the mood.

"You don't ever have to worry about that. Even if I didn't hate him for what he's done to me, and the lies he'd fed me, my mating Livarius made sure that I had zero desire to get back with Todd."

"There's a silver lining to you mating the blood sucker after all."

"I still can't believe you tried to kill him," I say with a soft laugh, plopping down on the bed. This is the first time Zorvan and I have really had to talk about it since it happened.

"I did kill him," he says. "Well, if you hadn't swooped in, he was a goner."

"It was so over the top."

"Well, I don't take kindly to other people touching what is mine."

My heart and body betray me when he calls me his. Thankfully being in my old house has given me clarity. "I

have two problems with that, Zorvan.”

“Oh? Enlighten me,” he says in a patronizing tone.

“You never told me what I was to you, so I never consented to being yours. And even if you had told me that I was fated to you, you’ve made it perfectly clear that you don’t have any desire to take me as a mate. You don’t get to claim me if you don’t want me.”

His face falls for half a second, “Arden, I—”

Jarrah appears in the doorway. “I hate to interrupt, but Todd just pulled into the driveway.”

I nod. “Let’s get this over with.”

## Chapter 38: Arden



### CHAPTER 38: ARDEN

The rest of the guys are waiting downstairs when I clear the last of the steps. Zorvan's behind me with my suitcase.

We wait in silence. The only sounds are the garage door closing and the keypad beeping. The door clicks open, and Todd steps over the threshold. His gaze immediately lands on me before shifting to the guys. If he's surprised, he doesn't show it. He actually looks like he was expecting us, which puts me on edge.

He calmly sets his bag down and closes the door to the garage. "If I had known you were coming, I would have cleaned up a little," Todd says with a wry smile.

"You've never cleaned a day in your life. I didn't expect you to start now," I snark. "We need to have a conversation."

"Only if we can have it alone."

"Try again. We're not leaving her side," Tavin says. I'm shocked by his protectiveness.

"Tavin," I say quietly.

"We're not leaving you. Either he tells you what you need to know willingly or we get it out of him the hard way," Zorvan says.

"They don't trust you. *I* don't trust you. You can have this conversation with them present, or not at all."

I feel a hand on the small of my back. I'm not sure whose it is, but I'm thankful for the contact, and the way it grounds me. Todd takes note of the hand on my back and shoots daggers at me with his gaze. There's a lot of anger

simmering inside of me, and I am struggling to rein it in. One wrong word from Todd and I might just let the guys kill him.

“Let’s go to the living room, then,” Todd says.

“Lead the way,” I say, not wanting him behind us. I don’t trust him at all.

“Forget the layout in your own house?” he asks.

I don’t move or say a word. He hesitates but eventually moves toward the living room.

Todd wisely takes the armchair allowing myself and the guys to sit together on the sofa. I sit in the center. Jarrah and Zorvan take the seats on either side of me. Tavin leans against a wall to our right and Emyth and Lysander each take up a space on the floor in front of me, moving the coffee table to do so.

Zorvan and Jarrah sitting next to me is likely strategic. They were the ones who spirited me away to the fae realm. They were the ones who did god knows what to me the night we met. The thought causes a tingling in my spine. I wonder what they told me that night, and how things happened. Did I believe them? Did I want to be with them? I hate that I’ll probably never know.

“Would you like to start, or should I?” I ask.

Todd glances nervously around the room then nods and says, “I’m assuming that you at least know some things since you’re here.” When I nod in confirmation he continues, “right, so your grandmother was fae. Sent here to avoid certain death in their realm.”

“Who was after her?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care. She never shared that information with any of us. We were just told to be on the lookout for any new fae who came into the area. Like we wouldn’t have anyway.” He rolls his eyes. “As if we don’t have surveillance set up at all the rifts.”

“Surveillance?”

“Yes. Any known rifts have cameras near them that the hunters watch. Kind of like doorbell cameras. We don’t give a fuck about the fae in their own realm. We just don’t want them here.”

“Then why allow my grandmother?” I ask.

“She was a special case. She was willing to not only take the magic suppressants, but she was willing to lie to your mother, you, and your sister about your lineage.”

My fists clench in my lap and I feel Jarrah’s hand close over mine. My grandmother meant the world to me. For her to lie to me about something so important is devastating to me.

“What about my father?” I ask.

“What about him?” Todd says.

“How did my mother find him if she didn’t know who *she* was.”

“I’m not following what you mean.”

*He doesn’t know.*

I discontinue that line of questions with a shake of my head. “How did my grandmother find my grandfather?”

“Her father brought her here. He made some sort of deal with your grandfather. He would provide the supplies to make enough suppressants for her and extras for any fae who came near in exchange for your grandfather keeping your grandmother safe.

“The extra suppressants came in handy when fae wandered into our territory. We would dose them and kill them. They were useless without their magic,” he says with a scoff. “Your grandparents were married and she got pregnant with your mother almost immediately.”

“How did my grandfather die?”

“A battle with some shifter fae that came into the area about twenty-five or so years ago.” His eyes move to the others. “One of yours, I’m assuming?”

“My father and grandfather both came here,” Jarrah says.

“My uncle and brother,” Tavin chimes in.

“Your grandfather killed mine,” Zorvan tells me. “They suspected that Millie may have come to the human realm, but they never found out for sure. Hunters got the jump on them here, and used the element of surprise to eliminate a number of our men. Our men wounded several humans, killed a few. I didn’t know that your grandfather had succumbed to his injuries.”

“They were on the right path. They were nosing around the other fae in the area. Some hunters overheard them asking about your grandmother, and had mentioned that she was engaged to someone in your realm. There aren’t a lot of places in the US where the fae are safe. The few that are allowed here are under very certain circumstances. Usually, some type of asylum and with a deal in place that they’re only allowed to stay if they take suppressants.

“By coming in a group that large, they were asking for trouble. Our men confronted them and told them to leave. They said they weren’t leaving until Millie was in their possession. Of course, it was going to turn into a battle. Millie had established a life here for herself. She didn’t want to go back to whatever was waiting for her in your realm.”

I feel Emyth tense up. Somehow, I can sense that he’s feeling responsible for a lot of bad things right now. I put my hand on his shoulder and squeeze gently. He surprises me by putting his hand over top of mine. Todd’s eyes fall to where our hands are making contact, and he scowls.

“What did you know?” I ask Todd.

His gaze moves back to mine. “When?”

“When we met. How much did you know?”

“Everything.”

I suck on my teeth for a second, considering my words before I ask my next question. I can't decide if I want to know the truth or not.

“Was I ever more than a job to you?”

“Not at first. When I struck up conversation with you in class freshman year, I was determined to make sure that you became mine because that's what I had been ordered to do. You were so depressed and vulnerable after your mother and sister died that you were an easy mark. But you were pretty enough, and nice enough,” he says with a shrug. “But, let's face it, you weren't the person I would have chosen for myself. I always thought I would marry another hunter. Someone I didn't have to hide my life from.”

I feel tears start to fall down my cheeks, but they're not tears of sadness. They're angry tears. Todd mistakes them for hurt.

“Artie, I swear that I never meant to cause you any pain.”

“Shut your mouth,” I snap.

“Artie-”

“I said shut your fucking mouth.”

He stares at me in shock for a moment. I had never even raised my voice at him, let alone swore at him before. I was always the perfect girlfriend, then the perfect fiancée. I was the type of girl that a man should have been proud to introduce to their friends and family.

“Your mother knew? Your whole family?”

“Yes. I wanted to tell you, but they said that—”

“And all those times that your mother made comments about how fat I was, and how boring, plain, and annoying. You just let it happen. You all must have had such a laugh at my expense. ‘Stupid fat Arden, what a clueless twit’.”

My head is starting to hurt. I close my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose to try to stop the pain. “I was a fucking catch, Todd. And I may have been oblivious to what was happening, but at least I wasn’t brainwashed. You just go around murdering the fae because why? Because they’re different from you? *We’re* different from you?”

“No. Because you’re monsters. They’re...*they’re* monsters,” he corrects himself, and glances behind me. I glance back. The only thing there is the cuckoo clock my grandfather left me.

A laugh escapes me. “Of all the people in this room, only one of them is a monster, and it’s you.”

“You don’t know what their kind are capable of.”

“My kind. Don’t try to separate me from them, now. How many of us have you killed?”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. How many fae have you killed?”

“None.” he says sheepishly. He glances nervously around the room again.

“I wish I could believe you, but I know for a fact that you killed Zorvan’s sisters. So do you want to try that again? How. Many?”

“Sisters? I don’t—” His eyes widen in recognition as he looks at Zorvan.

“You didn’t know.” I say in amusement. “You just killed two fae women and you didn’t even know who they were. Are you going to answer the question, now?”

A dark expression crosses his face. A terrifying unfamiliar rage has taken up residence in his eyes. I don’t recognize this man, anymore.

He smirks. “Honestly? I lost count,” he says as if I should be impressed. “Turns out that when you keep a royal fae under lock and key you get a lot of people showing up on

your doorstep to try to take her back. I killed who I had to keep you where you belonged.”

“Everything you did was to keep me weak. You would have been better off killing me and finding someone who shared your bloodlust. Why didn’t you?”

“Leverage.” He says with a shrug.

He glances behind my head for the third time. Something about him is wrong. Maybe it was always there, but now that my eyes are opened, I can see it better. I’ve heard enough, and I would rather just get the rest of my information from my mother and grandmother’s journals.

I reach over and squeeze Zorvan’s knee. He glances at me, brows furrowed. I wonder what he can feel through the mate bond. Does he sense my fear?

I pat my legs and stand up. “Well, this has been enlightening. I do believe we need to be going though. Zorvan has some things he needs to take care of back home.”

“Home? You’re going back with them? *This* is your home.”

“No, Todd, it isn’t. It never was. You can’t build a home on a foundation of lies.”

“Don’t go with them Artie. I know that you’re angry, but I still love you.” It comes out rushed. He’s lying—no—he’s stalling.

“No, you don’t, Todd. That’s just what you told yourself to feel better about lying to me.” I start walking toward the door. He jumps in front of me before I can get out of the living room.

“That’s not true. It started as a job, but I fell for you.”

“When? When you were on ‘work trips’ or when you were laughing at me behind my back with your family? Who else was in on it? Did Keith and Becc...” I trail off and my eyes go wide. *Son of a bitch.*

“What is it?” Zorvan murmurs in my ear.

“We need to go. Now.” I grab a hold of his hand and wait for the pulling sensation that comes with teleporting, but it doesn’t come.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“I can’t teleport out,” Zorvan says. I rush to the window and look outside. Keith is leaning against his car. Becca is with him. There are three other people I don’t recognize, and a black sprinter van. Panic rises inside of me.

“I can’t let you go, Artie,” Todd says. “I won’t. You belong to me.” There’s something in his tone that chills me to the bone.

My heart beats erratically in my chest. “What did you do, Todd?” When he doesn’t answer I move toward him and say louder, “Todd, what the fuck did you do?”

“It was actually what I did.” A feminine voice comes from the hallway making my stomach turn. Iona steps through the doorway followed by Todd’s mother and father.

## Chapter 39: Zorvan



### CHAPTER 39: ZORVAN

“**Y**ou traitorous bitch,” I say and I step toward her.

“Ah ah ah, Zorvan. One more step and I kill the half-human whore,” Iona says.

“I would have your head off your shoulders before you could even scream,” I say.

“And how would you do that? You can’t teleport, you can’t shift, and you didn’t bring any weapons besides a couple of daggers.” She clicks her tongue. “That was a little cocky of you.”

I pull for my dragon, but he doesn’t come. My magic is there, but it’s so faint that I can’t pull on it to get us out. How the fuck had I not noticed what was happening.

“How?”

“I paid one of the girls in the kitchen to make sure that your travel drinks were spiked with magic suppressant.”

Arden gives a dry laugh and stares down the couple behind Todd. “I bet you two just absolutely jumped at the opportunity to work with Iona if it meant getting me away from your son. The fae are only monsters if their actions don’t benefit you.”

The woman behind Iona steps forward. “My father told your grandfather not to marry that fae bitch, but he wouldn’t listen. Then you came along and became *our* problem. You weren’t supposed to be around this long. You’re scum. It makes me sick to think that my son almost had to marry you.” She spits on Arden’s shoes.

Arden moves forward and moves to take a swing at the woman, but Iona flicks her wrist and causes Arden to freeze in place. Todd's mother lets out a cackle. *I'm going to kill every single one of these fuckers.*

Arden snaps, "You're a bunch of fucking hypocrites."

"Mom," Todd says quietly. "She isn't to be harmed."

The woman rolls her eyes, "Iona, don't hurt her."

"What the fuck do you want, Iona?" Emyth growls.

"I want you five to honor your commitments. The four of you," she gestures to the keepers, "to marry me and the other council daughters. And you, Zorvan, make them follow through."

"I was always going to," I say. "I never told them they could get out of their engagements."

"Why then, did Jarrah end things with me?" she snaps.

"Jarrah, didn't I tell you that you were still to marry Iona?" I had changed my mind after Falmir betrayed me, but she didn't need to know that.

"You did," Jarrah grinds out.

"Iona, I told your father weeks ago that the engagement was still on. I told him that who Jarrah fucked was none of my concern, and that fae men, including him, take mistresses all the time so he had nothing to worry about with Arden. I have been nothing but welcoming to you and your family. I think I deserve the benefit of the doubt. I am a man of my word."

"You threw any goodwill you had out the window when you took in his bastard son to watch over the library," Iona hisses.

"Don't talk about my mate that way," Arden says. Her eyes start giving off a faint glow. "I'll rip your fucking throat out."

“Fucking hell, not now,” Emyth says. He moves toward Arden.

“What the—?” Iona says, taking a half step back from Arden.

“You’re a blood fae, and you didn’t bother *tasting* her blood?” I laugh.

“I don’t have to drink it to control her. What the fuck is she?”

“Her father was a shifter.”

“What?! You didn’t tell me that!” Iona shouts at the others.

“We didn’t know,” Todd growls. “We were under the impression that Arden was one fourth fae. Not three quarters.”

“It makes no difference; I can still subdue her.” Iona tosses her hair over her shoulder and flicks her wrist again

Arden hisses in pain, but whatever Iona is doing only seems to piss her off.

“Drop her!” Todd’s mother shrieks with a concerned look on her face.

Iona makes another attempt to put Arden down, but she just keeps advancing on Iona with gritted teeth. “Will you just go down already?” Iona grinds out with a last attempt that forces Arden to her knees.

“What the fuck was that?” Todd asks Iona. “You said you could knock her out.”

I can feel the pull of my dragon inside of me. I must not have ingested too much of the magic suppressant. I can’t shift in here, but if my dragon is surfacing then my magic must not be too far behind. If I have any chance of getting us out of here, I need to stall to give my magic enough time to gain as much strength as possible.

“So, what’s the plan with Arden, anyway?” I ask Todd, “Take her, tie her up, use her for your own pleasure?” Bile

rises in my throat at the thought of him having her under his control.

“Actually, I know some people who would pay a good price to say they’d been with a fae woman.”

Arden’s eyes find mine. Fear flashes across her features. My heart is pounding in my chest. I cannot let these assholes take her. She’s *mine*.

“How could you do this to me? Ten years and this is how you’re treating me?” she asks him, struggling against the magical hold that Iona has put on her.

“How could you do *this* to *me*?” He demands shoving a phone in Arden’s face. On it is a video of her on all fours on her bed, my cock down her throat while Jarrah fucks her from behind.

Her face flushes then pales as she goes through all the emotions of seeing the video. I scent the slightest hint of her arousal in the air which surprises me.

“They had told me that I had been with both of them the night before they took me to Feldorn, but I guess I was able to pretend it didn’t happen until now,” Arden says. She sounds spacey. It’s almost like she’s finally completely broken, or in shock. “They even said that you should check my phone for evidence. I guess I just never expected...”

“Arden...” Jarrah says, trying to bring her back from whatever dark place she’s gone to. “Arden, things have changed so much since then. If I could go back I would never have let Zorvan take those memories from you. I would have never let him record it. You were happy that night, I swear it.”

She was happy, once the shock of what we were telling her wore off. The couple sips of fae wine we had given her probably helped put her at ease, but she wasn’t drunk. I took her memories for selfish reasons, but if I could do it again, I wouldn’t have.

She doesn’t respond. Silent tears trail down her cheeks smudging her eye makeup down her face.

“Dammit Arden, Look at me!” Jarrah shouts. We’re both still afraid to move. Iona’s control over Arden’s body right now could be enough to kill her.

“Arden, I’m so sorry,” I say. “I mean it. I was so angry with you that I—”

“That you fucked me and recorded it to have a good laugh at my expense?” She interrupts with a sob.

Iona smiles at the devastation on Arden’s face and says, “I was so angry when Todd showed me the video. Seeing the evidence of Jarrah stepping out on me almost broke me. But seeing you like this now almost makes it worth it.”

Arden’s eyes flash with rage for a half a second, but then it’s gone; fizzled out to cool indifference. “Well, I hope you enjoy your empty mating with Jarrah, Iona. You know after he told you that he was done with you the other day he finger-fucked me in the hallway when you were barely out of earshot? Then he followed me into my room and tried to put a baby in me. He told me that you repulsed him, now. Good luck making a viable heir when he can’t even get it up for you anymore.”

“You’re disgusting,” Todd snaps, reaching out and backhanding Arden.

Her head snaps to the side and she loses her balance, falling to the floor. My dragon takes the reins, and I can’t pull it back in. Nobody harms my mate. Before I even realize what I’m doing I reach out and grab his hand with mine then land a blow so hard in his forearm that there’s an audible snap. Todd drops to the ground and screams in agony.

The distraction is enough that Arden is able to stand to her feet. She flies across the room at Todd’s mother and stabs her in the chest with a dagger she’d had tucked in her boot. Iona realizes the danger she’s in and attempts to leave, but Jarrah is on her before she’s able to. He hits her in the back of the head with the hilt of his own dagger. With a sickening *thud* she’s rendered unconscious. She’ll heal. Unfortunately.

Todd's father grabs Todd by his good arm and attempts to leave, dragging his injured family members with him. I make a move for him, but Arden grabs my arm.

"We need to get out of here."

"We can't just leave them alive."

"They have back up," she hisses

"How do you know?"

"Keith. That fucker set us up. He and a bunch of others are outside."

"Fine," I snarl. "Are you guys good to go?" I ask the others as I grab Arden's suitcase.

They all nod in affirmation, "I've got Iona," Jarrah says, and we're all teleporting back to the rift.

Back at the castle, we take Iona down to the dungeon.

"I'm sitting in on the interrogation," Arden says.

"Fine by me," I say. There's no point in keeping her out. She knows everything now.

"And when we're done here, you're letting Livarius out. I need him and you will not keep me from him."

"We'll discuss it after we're done here."

"There's nothing to discuss. You're doing what I say."

I'm not going to fight with her about it, so I just open the door and let her into the interrogation room. Walden brings Falmir in and we have Airen heal Iona enough that she wakes up. Her hands are tied behind her back, and Arden slaps her—hard—to wake her up. When Iona is a little more alert, Arden fists the back of her hair and dumps the vial of truth serum down her throat.

My cock stirs in my pants. Arden is really coming into herself. And I'm falling for her. It's not just the mate bond. It's that I can envision a life where she rules by my side, as an

equal. If I have my way, she'll be crowned and have a dragon inside of her at her next heat cycle.

"How long have you been working with Todd?" Arden asks.

"I don't answer to you," Iona spits back. The serum hasn't had time to kick in yet.

"You will," I say, casually leaning back on the desk.

"We'll never take orders from a half-blooded bitch like her," Iona bites back.

"Half-blooded?" Falmir asks, his eyes anxiously darting around the room. "She's part fae?"

That answers that question. Falmir didn't know about Iona's little plan.

"Royal fae," Emyth corrects him.

"And it appears that she's stronger than Iona, even without being full-blooded." Tavin says, staring at Arden with pride in his eyes.

"You *are* Millandra's granddaughter, then?" Falmir asks. "And *you* knew about this?" he demands of me.

Arden and I both ignore Falmir.

"Answer the question," Arden says to Iona. "How long were you working with Todd?"

"I went and tracked him down right after you told Faylin that you were his fiancé."

"Why?"

"You were trying to ruin everything. I knew that if we played our cards right we could get you back to the earth realm and in his possession. You all decided to go before we were ready, though. I had to rush to the human realm and try to help the best that I could."

"How did you know we were there?" I ask.

“One of the guards brought me a message after Arden came down and spoke with Livarius.”

“I knew I shouldn’t have let you down here,” I grumble at Arden.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have put him directly across from his shitty dad to punish him,” she snaps back.

I ball my hands up into fists at her defiance. I move so I’m standing right up against her and drop my mouth to her ear, “We’ll be having a conversation about how you speak to me later.”

She gives me a look that could absolutely kill, then focuses on Iona. “What was the plan, then?”

“I would find a way to get you alone, subdue you, take you to the earth realm, and Todd would have you, and I would be free of you.”

“Why didn’t you do it sooner? I’ve been here for almost a month.”

“We were working together to create a space where Zorvan couldn’t track you, and you couldn’t escape from. Zorvan would have just thought that you had escaped and ran away home.”

“So, you were going to sell me into slavery so you could keep whatever minuscule piece of power you were going to get by marrying Jarrah?”

“He’s mine, you stupid cow!” Iona struggles against her restraints.

“You’ll be put to death for this, you know?” Emyth laughs. “I cannot wait for your execution. Unfortunately, we’ll need your grandmother to come so that we make sure we do it by the books. But you were really willing to die for some dick.” His death magic begins to flare at the thought of taking Iona out.

“Emyth. Rein it in,” Lysander says, quietly.

“That’s all I needed to hear,” Arden says. “I’m going to go see Livarius now. You can either let him out or you can lock me up with him. I will not be without him tonight,” Arden says to me and walks out the door.

“Walden, lock Falmir and Iona up in cells away from each other and away from Livarius,” I instruct, then I head out after Arden.

“Arden, wait!” I say, jogging to catch up to her.

“I’m not in the mood to argue,” she says without stopping or even looking at me.

“You do not brush me off when I speak to you.” I grab her wrist and pin her to the wall by the throat.

“You do not get to tell me what to do, you pompous overbearing rapist prick.” She pounds her fists against my chest as she speaks.

Her words send me reeling. “I did not *rape* you Arden. You were one hundred percent a willing participant.”

“I wouldn’t have done that to Todd. Not before—”

“Before what? You knew I was your mate? I told you! Before we took that video, I told you exactly what you were to me. You knew what I was to you when it happened. You agreed to it. I may have given you a little fae wine to calm you down, but you weren’t drunk. I wooed you and you agreed to all of it.”

“You aren’t the wooing type, Zorvan, and you’re full of shit.” I can feel her pulse under my thumb. I can smell the scent of her arousal and her fear. I can tell how angry she is by the way she looks at me. She may even hate me, but I know she wants me, too.

“Your body betrays you every time, Arden.” I place my forehead against hers and close my eyes, breathing her in. “You smell so fucking sweet. You have no idea what you do to me. I need you like I need air,” I admit.

Her breath hitches as I trail my fingers down her neck. I open my eyes and stare into hers. She's conflicted, and I understand why. I'm done playing games, and I'm done denying myself.

My mouth crashes onto hers and she wastes no time kissing me back, pressing her body into mine. Magical energy passes between us, and the beast under my skin begs to be released. To mark her and make her mine.

I can feel her pulse under my hand where it still rests on her throat. Her heart races in time with mine. A piece of me has been inside of this girl the whole time, and it's finally back where it belongs.

Arden pulls back and looks at the ground, tears spilling down her face.

"Hey, look at me," I say.

She shakes her head 'no', and bites down on her lip.

"I can't do this," she whispers.

"Do what? Kiss me? You were doing that just fine."

"We're not good for each other," she says.

"We're perfect for each other," I say incredulously.

"The Stars made us that way. I need you, Arden."

"I'm going to tell you the same thing that I told Jarrah and Lysander. It's biology. You don't actually want me. You've said it yourself. You don't think I'm a worthy mate. You think I'm fat and weak and not good enough for you. You don't want to create an heir with someone like me. So please get your hands off of me."

I take a step back and pull my hand off her. "What are you talking about?"

"I know that you want nothing to do with me. You've said as much. Believe me, if my hormones weren't fighting my common sense, I would want nothing to do with you either. So please, let's just ignore the mate pull and go back to

being prisoner and keeper. You can even lock me in a cell if you want as long as Livarius is there with me.”

I search her eyes for a lie, but she means every word that she says. There’s nothing more than a biological attraction. She wants that fucking vampire and not me. Something inside of me snaps

“Fine. You just want to be my prisoner and nothing more?” I grab her by the hair and force her down the hallway. The whimper that escapes her makes my dick hard as steel and I wonder for a second what is wrong with me.

“Zorvan let go!” she screams, trying to pull her hair free of my fingers.

“I don’t think so, Princess. Forget being in your nice quarters with your books and your bed. You’ll stay down here until you and your little boyfriend learn some fucking manners.”

I take her to the cell that was previously occupied by Falmir and unlock it. “You don’t get to make demands as a prisoner. And I think you have forgotten who you’re dealing with. I am and always will be your worst nightmare.”

I shove her into the cell and slam the door and lock it. She reaches for me through the bars, trying to grab the keys, but I dodge her hand with ease. Her face is red, and her eyes are puffy from crying. Her lips are swollen from kissing me. She’s beautiful.

“You’re the cruellest man I’ve ever met. No wonder you’re so bitter and alone,” she snaps at me.

Her words haunt me as I make my way back to talk to the others. I don’t want to face them, but there are still matters to attend to. I have to just suck it up and deal with the fact that my fate bound mate has all but rejected me.

Walden is escorting Iona to her cell. She sneers at me as she passes by, and I act before I have time to think. I slam her against the wall causing her to shriek out in pain.

“You’ve made your last mistake in my kingdom. You were so power hungry that you didn’t stop to think what would come of your actions. You tried to get rid of a royal fae, and give her to someone who would sell her body to the highest bidder. You’re scum, and believe me, you will be sentenced to death for this.”

For the first time she has the sense to be scared. “If you hadn’t held a grudge against that fucking hunter for so long, none of this would have happened.”

I forcibly release her. “Unlike you, I care a great deal for my family. Do you realize that you conspired with the hunter who ensured I was the last of my bloodline? Maybe that’s what you wanted. If I die, Jarrah would take over the throne. You’re such a greedy bitch I could see you wanting the throne for yourself.

“The thing is, Iona, you don’t deserve it. You don’t even deserve to see the light of day again. You tried to kill Arden when you still thought she was human. You tried to sell her when she was mated to your brother. Your blood.”

“That bastard isn’t my brother. We may share blood, but he’s a waste of space. And who cares if they’re mated or not? They were chosen by accident. Not true mates. She probably doesn’t even give a fuck about him.”

“You know nothing about her. She cares a great deal for Livarius. More than any chosen or fated mate could hope for. She’s brilliant, and kind, and ten times the fae that you’ll ever be even with her human blood.” I’m surprised that I mean what I’m saying. Regret crashes into my already wounded heart and shatters it into a million pieces.

“I have never once heard you speak kindly of anyone, but you continuously come to her defense. Why is that?”

Because I’ve never met anyone like her before in my life. “Because she has continuously surprised me by taking everything thrown at her in stride. Something I cannot say about you.” I look to Walden, “Take her to her cell. No one

speaks to her. Not even you. And give a wide berth of her cell until the suppressants kick in. And I will be dosing your men to figure out who the fuck thought it was a good idea to take a note about Arden from Falmir to Iona.”

“Yes sir,” Walden says and continues on his way to her cell.

I come to a halt outside of the interrogation room. Two deep breaths allow me to prepare myself for the others. I open the door and stride in as if Arden didn’t just tell me she hates me.

Tavin stands and asks, “So did you let Livarius out?”

“No,” I say without elaboration. “We need to figure out what to do with Todd. He’s a problem that should have been dealt with already.”

“You had the opportunity and you chose to torment him instead of kill him. That’s on you,” Emyth says, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Because I wanted him to suffer like I have suffered! Like I continue to suffer!” I shout at him, slamming my fists on the table. I so rarely lose my cool with them that they’re all startled.

“Okay I think we all need to take a breath,” Lysander says calmly. He’s always trying to be the voice of reason when it comes to the five of us. Normally I appreciate it. In this moment it’s infuriating.

“What happened with Arden?” Jarrah asks, suspiciously.

“She’s in a cell like she asked. What do we do about Todd?” I ask, attempting to change the subject.

“What do you mean in a cell?” Tavin asks indignantly.

“Why do you even care?” I snap at him. “You were fine with her potentially dying in the earth realm and now you’re worried about her spending a little time on her own in a cell?”

A muscle jumps in his jaw, but he holds his tongue on the matter.

“Anyone else want to question me?” I ask looking around the room.

“Yeah. Why are you being such a raging asshole?” Jarrah says.

“I don’t have to answer to you four. Are you going to help me deal with the hunter or not?”

“You can’t just keep treating Arden like shit. She’s here against her will, and she’s been handling this all in stride. You’re being a dick. Let her out, and let her help us deal with Todd.”

“Jarrah, if you don’t shut the fuck up, I will lock you up too. I am not in the mood for any of this.”

He stands and looks me dead in the eye. “When you’re ready to stop acting like a child, I’ll help you.”

He walks out the door. The others stand and follow him.

On his way out the door Lysander places a hand on my shoulder. “It’s really fucked up of you to lock her up after what she’s been through today. I know we can’t change your mind, but you should know that you’re ruining any chance you have with her.”

The door shuts and I’m alone with my thoughts, which is exactly what I was hoping to avoid.

## Chapter 40: Emyth



### CHAPTER 40: EMYTH

**W**e exit the interrogation room, and I immediately go to see Arden. She's still wearing the clothes from the earth realm. She's laying on the cot in her cell with her arm flung over her eyes and her knees bent. The creamy white skin of her thick thighs is on display, and it's been driving me mad all day.

"Arden," I say quietly. The others chose to go back to their rooms. They didn't want to push their luck with Zorvan. I, on the other hand, couldn't let things go.

"What do you want, Emyth?" she asks without even looking at me.

"Why did you tell Faylin about you and Todd?" I ask.

She sits up and stares at me, brows furrowed. "Because she seemed sensible and kind. It was stupid, and I realize now that I made a horrible error. Is that what you want to hear?"

"No. I just wanted to know why. I don't think it was stupid. It was maybe naive, but you're new here. You don't know how things work."

She flops back on the cot, "I do now. Believe me. I won't make that mistake again."

"Please just talk to me for a minute."

"I'm not in the mood. I'm exhausted, and being separated from Liv is killing me. Being able to see him, but not touch him is torture. I just need space from you and the others."

I hate that she wants Livarius more than me. I hate that she doesn't want to talk to me, but that's my own fault. Today was a taxing day. Maybe she'll be in better spirits tomorrow.

She doesn't want to talk to me, and that's fine. Maybe I can fix things another way. I head to the third floor above the library; where the council members and their families are located.

I approach Faylin's room and knock on the door. She opens it, revealing herself, Bravina, and Calliope. With them are a few of male fae from some of the wealthier families in Feldorn. Faylin greets the door wearing a smile that quickly fades when she sees me.

"Emyth," she breathes and her gaze darts nervously to the other occupants of her room.

"Faylin," I say cordially. I give a curt nod to the others, "Ladies, gentlemen."

The males look like they're going to piss their pants, and I laugh internally. They all look very casual and by the state of the room they were playing a drinking game.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" Faylin asks.

"May I have a word with you in private?"

"Oh. Of course. Um...this way." She leads me through the door to her bedroom.

I shut the door behind me and have a seat in a chair next to the window. I fold my hands in my lap and give Faylin an appraising look. She's anxious. And she should be.

"What did you know?"

"I'm sorry, about what?"

"About Arden. What did you know?"

"I'm still not following. I've never even spoken to her aside from that time outside of your room."

"Come now Faylin," I say in a chastising tone. "We both know that's a lie. What I'm trying to figure out is what you knew beyond what she told you."

She swallows hard. “Arden said it would be best if no one knew we had met. I was just following her wishes.”

“Why didn’t she want anyone to know?”

“Because she was trying to escape. That’s how I met her. I tried to help her out of the castle, but Zorvan found out she was gone before we even made it three feet from the door.”

“The day she was missing...Tavin found her.”

“Yes. She told me about Todd and I brought her right back, I swear.”

“You didn’t know about Iona?”

She gives me a confused look. “I knew that she wanted to be rid of Arden, and they had got into an altercation. That’s about it.”

Against my better judgment I believe her. Faylin is much more innocent and more naive than Iona is, and Iona clearly didn’t clue Faylin into her evil plan.

“Why are you asking me about all of this?” she asks.

“A lot has happened today. Iona is imprisoned. I can’t share anything else until Zorvan has had a chance to speak with Queen Cyndair and Iona’s mother.”

She hesitantly places her hand on top of mine. “Is there anything I can do?”

She bats her large brown eyes at me. On almost any other fae her ploy would probably work, but I have absolutely no interest in Faylin. There’s not enough fight in her, and I don’t think she could handle me.

“No, thank you. There is one other thing, though. Our engagement is done. I will not be mating you. I plan to inform your parents tomorrow. They will not lose their place on the council, and you and whatever mate you choose will take over for them once they step down.”

“What?” Faylin whispers and her lip begins to quiver. “Did I do something wrong?”

“This was just never meant to be. You can feel that too or else you wouldn’t have Trezek, Blake, and Renley out there playing salacious card games with you and your friends.”

She pales and begins stuttering in response which confirms my suspicions.

I let out a laugh. “Don’t worry. I don’t care. You aren’t meant for me, Faye. Have fun.” I take my leave, the others staring after me, wide-eyed, as I go.

I go to my quarters, strip down, and lay in my bed. Even though my body is exhausted from the magic use and the adrenaline of my magic not working, it takes a little while to calm my thoughts enough to fall asleep.

I’ve been asleep for maybe three or four hours when a knock at my door wakes me. I grumble and drag my underwear back on and open the door.

Tavin is standing on the other side looking like absolute garbage. Without asking he shoves his way into my room. I raise an eyebrow at him and say, “By all means, come on in. Make yourself at home.”

“I fucked up, Emyth. Somewhere with Arden, I really fucked up. She doesn’t want me. I went to talk to her and she told me that she would be happy to never speak to any of us again.”

A dry laugh escapes me, “Tay, at what point between giving her the cold shoulder, and hazing her, did you expect her to fall in love with you?”

“How do I fix it?”

“Why are you asking me? She won’t talk to me either.”

“You’re right.” The anguish in his face is replaced with the mask of indifference he’s been wearing for the last several years. “This was stupid.” He reaches for the door, but I catch his wrist.

With a softer voice I say, “I’m sorry. I’m just not used to you trying to talk to me anymore. Not since Aurelia.”

He threads his fingers with mine and pulls me in for a hug which surprises me more than him showing up at my door. He hasn’t shared anything this tender with me in years. I let myself melt into him, acutely aware of the fact that I’m mostly naked. I nuzzle into his neck and breathe in deeply.

“I need her, Em. I need to win her over somehow. Make up for all the bullshit I’ve pulled since she got here.”

I pull back and look him in the eyes. “She’s a big fan of the truth it turns out, so maybe start there.”

He pulls back, his bright yellow eyes boring into mine, “I’ve missed you.”

“I didn’t go anywhere,” I whisper. My heart pulls at the fact that he hasn’t been able to look at me this way since I had to execute his girlfriend years earlier.

“It feels like in the short few weeks that Arden has been here, she’s started to fix things between the five of us.”

“You noticed that too?”

Another knock sounds at my door and startles me away from Tavin. This time it’s Zorvan on the other side. He takes in the fact that I’m just wearing my boxers and Tavin’s standing awkwardly in the room.

“Am I...interrupting?” he asks with a cocked brow.

“No, come on in.”

“Actually, I need you two to come to the strategy room. We’re drafting a letter to Cyndair requesting her presence for Iona’s trial.”

“Who’s we?” Tavin asks.

“The four of you and myself. Walden will also be there as he will be assigning the courier.”

“Let me get dressed. This really couldn’t have waited until tomorrow?”

“No, I need to know it will be dealt with, and the longer we wait, the longer Arden has to develop a bleeding heart over the whole thing. Iona needs to die.”

The letter is to be drafted by Jarrah, as the Keeper of the War Court. He looks as tired as the others do, and as tired as I feel. He puts quill to the paper, and transcribes as Zorvan speaks:

*Lady Cyndair, Queen of the Kingdom of Solardin,*

*It is with great regret that I inform you that your granddaughter, Iona, is to be put to trial for the following crimes against The Kingdom of Feldorn:*

*Conspiring with a human against the kingdom of Feldorn;*

*Attempting to aid in the abduction of a royal fae;*

*Attempting to cause physical harm to royal fae;*

*Attempting to cause harm to the mate of a royal;*

*Leaving for the earth realm without proper clearances;*

*Using magic suppressants against the reigning sovereign of the kingdom of Feldorn*

*I understand that you will likely wish to be present for the trial, sentencing, and punishment. Should her trial result in conviction, pursuant to Sangaran law, Iona will be sentenced to death. Please respond in a timely manner to ensure the trial can move forward without delay.*

*Sincerely,*

*Prince Zorvan Mavrosava*

“Do you think she’ll show?” Jarrah asks heavily.

“She won’t let this go without being here. She will see this as a slight against her, personally.”

“Lysander, can you consult the stars?” I ask.

“I can, but you know death related paths tend to be unclear.”

“Just send it out, and hope she responds quickly,” Zorvan says, applying his seal and giving the envelope to Walden who leaves the room.

“Are we going to talk about Arden being in a cell?” I ask once the five of us are alone.

“She can handle some time alone,” Zorvan grumbles.

“You swooped in and derailed her life. She has not only handled it with dignity, but with strength. She attempted to give herself up for the sake of Feldornites that she’s never even met. Why would you lock her up?”

Zorvan clenches his fists, then runs them wildly through his hair leaving it disheveled. He looks feral. “She. Wants. Livarius.”

Tavin shakes his head as if he just heard Zorvan wrong, “I’m sorry. What?”

Lysander jumps in, “You locked her up because she bruised your ego?”

“I locked her up because I needed time to think straight, and I couldn’t do that with her around.”

“Go let her out,” Tavin says.

“Livarius, too,” I add. The rest of them look at me like I’ve lost my mind. “He’s spent enough time there. She needs him right now more than she needs us. Let him out.”

Zorvan takes a deep breath. “Fine. Tavin, you and Emyth can go down. I need to talk to Lysander and Jarrah for a few minutes.”

Tavin nods and we both head down to the dungeon to get our girl...and her mate.

## Chapter 41: Tavin



### CHAPTER 41: TAVIN

**E**myth and I open the doors to Arden and Livarius' cells. Arden looks at us both skeptically like we're pulling some sort of prank on her. I don't blame her.

"Let's go get something to eat," Emyth says, reaching for her hand to help her up off of her cot. She takes it hesitantly.

"Why is Zorvan letting me out?" Livarius asks.

"Emyth here talked him into it," I say, clapping him on the back.

"Why would you do that?" Arden asks, her brows furrowed in suspicion.

"Because you've had a very long twenty-four hours and I think him providing you comfort is more important than him staying locked up."

"You...don't seem to be on the same page as Zorvan," Arden says.

"Believe it or not, we don't always agree with him just to fan his ego."

"Oh, so you just pretend to lick his asshole. Got it. Well, I won't look a gift horse in the mouth," Arden says as she steps out, leading us to the dining hall.

"Look a gift...what?" Livarius asks.

"It's just a saying back in the human realm."

"Huh." Livarius muses and Emyth chuckles.

Emyth falls back with me and we let Arden and Livarius walk together. He threads his fingers through hers and

she rests her head on his shoulder. My heart pangs at the fact that she seems so at ease with him.

“I broke things off with Faylin,” Emyth says quietly.

“When did you have time for that?” I ask in surprise.

“Right after we left here earlier. I needed to know if she helped Iona with the plan to get rid of Arden.”

“And?”

“I believe she didn’t even know about it. Did you know that they had spoken? The day Arden went missing from her room.”

“Yes. I didn’t think it was important.”

“Don’t keep stuff like that from us, please,” Emyth asks.

“I won’t in the future. If it has to do with Arden’s safety, anyway,” I promise.

“She was trying to escape. Did you know that?” he asks.

“I suspected, but at the time I was trying to pretend that I didn’t care.”

A lot has changed since I found her trying to escape the castle that day. At the time I thought it was for the best if she got away and ran back to her life in the human realm.

Even as recently as yesterday, I was holding back and not wanting to engage with her. But then I saw the way she fought against Iona’s blood magic, and I realized that I was fighting a losing battle.

Arden is tenacious and brilliant. I’m not sure how any of this is going to play out, but I know I want to be by her side while it does.

We walk in silence to breakfast. The others don’t join us, and I wonder what Zorvan has them working on. I finish my food and lean back in my chair. Arden hasn’t eaten much,

and is just pushing her food around her plate nervously. Livarius also takes note.

“What’s wrong, Artie?” he asks.

“I have something I need to tell you, and I need you to not get mad at me,” Arden says, setting her fork down.

“Should we go wait in the hallway?” Emyth asks her.

“No. It involves you. You can stay.”

“Oh,” Emyth says in a knowing tone.

“What’s going on?” Livarius asks, looking between the three of us.

“First, none of what I’m about to say changes what you and I have.” She takes his hands in hers and looks at him. “It turns out that before you and I mated, I was fate bound to someone else. Well, five someones.”

Livarius laughs, clearly thinking it’s a joke. When none of us smile at him, he looks back to Arden. “Wait. Who?”

She looks up at him through her long lashes, and yet again I find myself jealous of Livarius. He searches her eyes for a second before realization blooms on his face.

“No. You don’t mean...”

She nods slowly, and he closes his eyes and tips his head to the ceiling.

“That’s why you smelled like the wolf when you came to me before you went to the earth realm. Stars, that’s why Zorvan killed me. It all makes sense,” He says as if this is all very reasonable.

“I didn’t know. Not until just before I left yesterday. Anyway, I was just as surprised as you are.”

“Why would the Stars destine you to five fae men? A human? I was surprised our mating even took.”

Arden gives him a look, waiting for him to puzzle it out.

“Of course you are. I should have known. Your blood didn’t taste human, but I was so out of it, I thought I was imagining it. What kind are you?”

“We still don’t know for sure,” I say. “She’s part shifter, part Ashylan. We don’t even know what kind of shifter she is or what her fifth element is. Or if she even bears either or both of those traits.”

“I have to say that this is a relief,” Livarius says with a sigh.

“What part of me being fated to the five biggest meatheads in this realm is a relief?” Arden asks incredulously, pulling her hands away from him.

“Well, not so much that part, but you being fae. I was thrilled to be mated to you, Arden, but I was really struggling with the fact that I would get so few years with you. Now we can spend centuries together.”

Arden pales and looks like she might be sick. It causes me to spit out my water into my cup. She shoots a glare at me, and I bite my lip to try to stop smiling. “Centuries is a long time to be stuck with someone,” I say in an attempt to stifle a laugh.

“Yes, and I’m happy to spend it with Livarius, but you five are a different story. I also...” she trails off and looks embarrassed.

“What?” Emyth asks.

“What do I do with all that time? I was already feeling kind of bored with life, and I wasn’t even middle aged for a human.”

“What do you mean you were ‘bored with life’?” I ask.

“Well, I had my wedding with Todd to look forward to, but I didn’t have many friends, and my family was all gone. I really just didn’t have much going on. Todd didn’t want children. My career was okay, but I was kind of bored with that too. Now I have centuries. It feels...daunting.”

“Well, you’re not with Todd, anymore,” Livarius says. “And I will give you all the babies that you want. That will keep you plenty busy.”

He kisses her deeply. She pulls away and gives him a shy smile. My heart tugs again. I need her so much that it’s painful.

“Arden,” I say softly.

“Hmm?” she asks.

“Have you made any decisions about your mate bonds with the rest of us?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you going to seal the bond with the five of us or reject it?”

“That’s an option? Zorvan had hinted at it, but made it sound like it wasn’t actually a choice that could be made,” she says, and Emyth smacks me in the back of the head.

“What?” I ask him. “She would be pissed if we forced the bond on her without letting her know she had a choice.”

“Yes, she would.” Arden gives Emyth a dirty look. “I didn’t know I had a choice. I thought I had to just deal with the pull or accept it. I’ll have to think about it. Why?”

“I was just going to ask that you not reject it until you’ve had the chance to get to know us all a little better, is all.”

Her eyebrows go up in surprise, “You mean you want to be mated to me? If given the choice, that’s what you want?”

“I’ve been thinking about it a lot the last few days, and I think that I would be remiss to deny a gift from the Stars.” I stare at my hands, folded on the table, as I talk. I have never once felt shy or uncertain around a female before today.

“What changed your mind?” Arden asks. “A few days ago you seemed pretty certain that I wasn’t what you wanted.”

“If it’s okay with you, that’s a conversation I would like to have in private,” I say, still not daring to make eye contact with her.

“Sure. Okay.” She says barely above a whisper. When I finally dare to look at her, her eyes are sympathetic and kind. And that is something I don’t deserve from her.

I offer a half smile, “Okay, well I think I need a little bit more rest before I tackle the remainder of my day. Can I escort the two of you back to your quarters? Zorvan is okay with you being out, but he doesn’t want you unattended, yet.”

“Of course he doesn’t.” Arden rolls her eyes. “Lead the way.”

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The four of us are sprawled out around Arden’s room. She and Livarius are cuddled up on her bed reading. I’m lying on a cot I dragged into the room to sleep on. I’m pretending to sleep, but I keep stealing glances at the two love birds curled up in their little nest.

He’s so gentle with her. He presses soft kisses to her hair every now and again causing her to look up at him with such love and tenderness. I haven’t had that with a fae woman ever. Not even with Aurelia.

“What’s wrong,” Livarius asks her when she gets a particularly serious look on her face while she’s reading.

“I’m just reading about multiple mate bonds. Did you know it’s so rare that they’ve been able to record each instance of it happening in an appendix in this one book?”

“Yes. It’s been so long since it’s happened in Sangaris that I honestly don’t even remember the names of the bonded. The Stars are very particular about their gifts, and multi-mate bonds typically only happen in times of great tribulation among the fae.”

Arden nods her head and shoots a worried glance at Emyth who is sitting in the arm chair across the room.

Eventually her eyes land on me. She pulls her bottom lip in between her teeth, something I've noticed she does when she's concerned about something. I want to cross the room and soothe her worries away, but I stay planted where I am, not wanting to force the issue.

“Why would the stars bond five powerful fae to me? I'm part human. It doesn't make any sense.”

“You might not be,” Emyth chimes in.

“What?” Arden and I ask at the same time.

She sits up and scoots to the end of the bed. “What do you mean? My grandfather was a hunter. Even if both of my paternal grandparents were shifters, my mom was only half fae.”

“I wonder if your grandmother wasn't pregnant before she left Sangaris.”

“But you said that you and her didn't...” Arden looks like she may be sick, and I stifle a laugh.

“Stars, Arden. No. We didn't. Millie was acting really strange right before she left. She kept disappearing; wouldn't come to meals. She spent copious amounts of time in her room, and was constantly avoiding me. It was just really odd behavior for her. I had wondered at the time if she was seeing someone, secretly.”

“Oh,” Arden's voice is a soft gasp. “That doesn't sound like my grandmother at all.”

“No, if she did sleep with someone else, it was almost assuredly her fate bound mate.”

Realization hits me like a ton of bricks. “Oh my Stars,” I whisper. “It was Rupert.”

“What was Rupert?” Arden asks.

“Arden, if Emyth is right...Rupert might be your grandfather.”

“The gardener?” Livarius asks. “You're serious?”

“I want to talk to him!” Arden says.

“Right now?” I ask.

“Yes, right now!”

“I think this is a conversation that should be had with the others present...” Emyth says.

“No. I want to talk to him alone. I don’t even want you three there.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, love.” Livarius says. “What if Tavin is right, and there’s a more nefarious reason that he didn’t tell you?”

“I don’t think there is. I’m guessing that he just thought he would get in trouble since Emyth was engaged to my grandmother. Rupert has tried so hard to get to know me since I came to Feldorn, but I only ever felt a platonic love from him. Multiple people told me how weird it was that he had befriended me so fast. This has to be why.”

“Slow down, Arden. It’s just a theory. I don’t want you to be disappointed if it turns out we’re wrong and he isn’t your grandfather.”

“My expectations are low, but you have to agree that it makes sense. Please, take me to see him.”

Emyth and I share a worried look. “Okay,” I concede, “but we’re coming with you. We can leave the others out of it for now, but once we confirm it, Zorvan needs to know. No exceptions. Keeping secrets hasn’t been good for us these last few weeks.”

Arden nods and hops off the bed and tackles me down onto the cot to give me a hug. I hesitantly hug her back and breathe in the sweet scent of her skin. My tiger begins purring loudly at the contact. She places her hand to my chest and smiles at the rumbling within.

“Arden, if you don’t get off of him, we won’t be going anywhere,” Emyth says with a heated look between the two of us.

“I’m sorry!” she squeaks and jumps off of me.

I grab her hand gently. “Please don’t ever apologize for showing me affection.”

She nods and runs into her closet. She grabs a dress to change into and shouts, “I’ll be right back!” as she runs into the bathroom and closes the door behind her. I smile after her.

“She’s something, isn’t she?” Livarius asks with a smirk.

“Shut up blood sucker,” I say half-heartedly, chucking a pillow at his head.

Arden reappears looking absolutely radiant in a deep blue sundress. She bounces on her toes in excitement. I reach for her hand, and she smiles at me and accepts it. Then we head out to see the gardener.

## Chapter 42: Arden



### CHAPTER 42: ARDEN

I'm practically skipping down the hall on our way out of the castle. The thought of meeting my grandfather—of having at least one family member left—makes a happy warmth bubble through me.

We make it to the gardens and I immediately begin searching around for him, calling his name. After a few moments he appears from behind some hedges with a book in his hand.

“Arden? What’s wrong?” he asks before he takes in the fact that I’m not alone. “Is everything alright?”

“Well, sort of. It’s been a wild couple of days. Can we sit?” I ask gesturing to a set of large stone benches in the garden. It’s the same place Lysander and I had been sitting when Rupert and I first met.

Rupert hesitantly and nervously glances around the four of us before accepting. We sit in an awkward silence for a few moments. Now that he’s in front of me, the words won’t come out.

“Arden, you’re scaring me. Tell me what’s wrong,” he urges.

I clear my throat, “Well, there’s really no good way to ask what I’m about to ask, so I guess I’ll just dive feet first into it.” I say ringing my hands. “Are you...are you my grandfather?”

Rupert’s already pale features go even paler. His eyes immediately go to Emyth and that tells me exactly what I need to know.

“You’re not in trouble,” Emyth reassures him, waving his hand dismissively.

Tears threaten to spill from his eyes. “Stars. I wanted to tell you. I really did. I just didn’t know how to find the words. You weren’t ever supposed to find your way here. None of you were.”

“Why?” I ask. “Didn’t you want to be with Granna?”

“Of course I did,” he gasps. The tears finally fall, and when they do they fall steadily. He grasps my hands in his. “More than anything, but it wasn’t safe for us to be together. Your great grandfather secured her a spot in the human world. She was protected from the hunters, and away from her threats here. but only if she agreed to marry that bastard Mayweather. I agreed to stay here, out of sight.”

“Who was she running from?” Emyth asks.

“Someone in Solardin.” He shrugs then looks back at me. “Knowing you and your mother and your sister were in that shit hole...” A sob escapes him, and I lean in for a hug. “Those bloody hunters wouldn’t let you come back even if it had been safe. And your grandmother was terrified that you would be found by whoever was after her.”

“Why would they want me?” I ask.

“Millie was a very powerful Ashylan. Her parents had strong fifth elements. My guess is the fear of how strong you girls would be.”

Tavin snorts, “You’re just a gardener. It doesn’t really matter how powerful Millandra was, if you and Arden’s father aren’t terribly powerful.”

“Tavin!” I snap, and he wipes the smile off his face.

“Sorry,” he says sheepishly. “What I mean is, it’s not like she’s royal all the way around. If she were, it would matter, but she’s not.”

“Do you know who her father was? The name he gave her sounded human, so I’m assuming it wasn’t real.” Emyth says.

Rupert clenches his jaw before saying, “Is. Who her father *is*.”

For a second all the blood rushes to my ears. “No. No if he were alive...”

“He is. The hunters have him locked up somewhere. My contact on the outside hasn’t been able to find out where, but he’s out there.”

“Who is he?” Emyth presses.

A dark look passes over Rupert’s face, and he doesn’t answer.

“If you know, you need to tell me,” I plead.

His face softens, and he nods. Then he looks back to Emyth and Tavin. “You have to protect her from Zorvan.”

“Zorvan wouldn’t hurt me,” I say.

“There are things that your father did...” Rupert says cryptically

“We’ll protect her,” Emyth promises.

“Her father is Nuvian Elamar.”

“Son of a bitch,” Tavin whispers, his mouth dropping open. He looks like he’s going to be sick.

“What?” I ask glancing around at all of the guys. They all look haunted. “What does that mean?”

“We need to talk to Zorvan. Right fucking now.” Emyth says.

“Tell me what’s happening!” I say as he hauls me to my feet and begins dragging me back to the castle. The rest of them follow.

As soon as we’re inside the castle Emyth starts yelling at the top of his lungs, “ZORVAN!” Glancing around at the guards he shouts, “Find Zorvan! Send him to the strategy room if you find him. Lysander and Jarrah, too.”

Emyth drags me along to the strategy room. I struggle to keep up after him with his long strides. “Emyth slow down and tell me what is going on.”

Once we’re all inside he starts pacing frantically. Tavin tries to calm him down. “Em, just breathe. It’ll work itself out.”

“Tay,” Emyth looks at Tavin and then to me. I’ve never seen Emyth look so scared.

Zorvan storms into the room. He makes eye contact with me, and scowls, then quickly diverts his gaze. He looks absolutely terrible. He stands at the head of the table where he sits for strategy meetings. Jarrah and Lysander file in behind him, closing the door after they’re inside.

“What is so urgent that you needed to call a meeting. Where is Walden? Why is the gardener here?”

I jump in before the others can tell him. I feel that it’ll be less weird coming from me. “Rupert isn’t just the gardener. He’s actually my grandfather.”

Zorvan laughs harder than I’ve ever seen. For a second I think I’ve finally broken him, but then I realize he thinks this is an elaborate prank.

“She’s telling the truth,” Tavin says, causing the laughter to stop. Lysander, Jarrah, and Zorvan all look to Rupert.

“Explain yourself,” Zorvan growls.

“Millie was my mate,” Rupert explains. “My fate bound mate. We had just begun exploring our mate bond, and we were going to tell you and the court to dissolve the mating arrangements with Lord Emyth before she disappeared.”

“Did you have something to do with her going to the human realm?” Zorvan asks, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I knew about it, yes,” he says, then he recounts the rest of what he told us outside.

“Okay, so Rupert is your grandfather. I appreciate you telling me, but why was that so emergent?” Zorvan asks.

“The issue isn’t who her grandfather is. It’s who her father is,” Emyth says. Zorvan waits, his eyes moving between the five of us. Jarrah and Lysander shift forward in their seats. “Zorvan, you should really sit down.”

“Just tell me who it is, Emyth.”

“It’s Nu. Nuvian is her father.”

Zorvan’s face hardens. His murderous gaze settles on me. If I thought he hated me before, that was nothing compared to the pure loathing I find lurking in the depths of his ocean blue eyes.

“Why would the Stars curse me with you?” He says and his words cut me to my core. I knew he didn’t really want me before, but hearing him say that he thinks I’m a curse...it nearly breaks me.

“Can someone please tell me what this means?” My voice is a hoarse whisper. My throat is so dry.

“It means that you are the last person I want to be mated to. Villainy runs in your blood. The fact that you’re still alive is a testament to my self-control.”

“That doesn’t answer my question, Zorvan,” I say, louder and more assertive.

Jarrah attempts to come to my rescue. “Zorvan, maybe you should calm down for a second. Arden didn’t even know who she was before she—”

“Enough!” Zorvan interrupts. “All of you out! I need time to think. Arden, straight to your room.” He looks to Tavin, “She doesn’t leave her room tonight. Am I clear?”

“Zorvan, please talk to me,” I beg while Livarius tries to get me out of the room.

He slams his fists down on the table, “Another word out of your wretched mouth and I will execute you on

principle. Get. Out!”

Tears fall unrestrained. His rage is so forceful that I can feel it through our incomplete bond. My heart is breaking because I don't think there's any coming back from this. Whoever my father was, he is not someone who can be forgiven by The Cruel Prince of Feldorn.

“I'm going to give you some space to process, but I'll be in the gardens if you need me,” Rupert says, planting a gentle kiss on my cheek.

“Thank you.”

“Come on,” Livarius says, threading his fingers through mine and urging me back to my bedroom. “Let's go get a little rest.”

I nod. The rest of the guys follow, and I don't try to stop them. I don't want to be alone right now. We file into my room and Livarius pulls me into his lap on the bed. He strokes my hair while I cry silently into his chest. I'm not even sure why I'm crying. A few hours ago I was so angry at Zorvan that I didn't care if he broke the bond with me.

Now, my stomach churns at the thought that Zorvan might reject our mate bond over this. I'm not sure I meant what I said to him in the dungeons. I was angry, tired, and sore, but I don't want to discard our bond without really evaluating it.

Lysander is pacing, Jarrah is sitting at the foot of the bed with his head in his hands. Tavin and Emyth are both sitting down and processing what just happened.

After some time, Jarrah comes over and kneels by the bed and brushes my hair away from my face. “Hey Little Dove. Would you like some hot chocolate?”

I nod. He gives me a sad smile and leaves the room to go retrieve the drinks from the kitchen. Lysander accompanies him. I tilt my head up and make eye contact with Livarius. His hazel eyes searching mine.

“You ready to talk?” he whispers, and kisses my forehead.

“Why does Zorvan hate my dad so much? There are a lot of words I would use to describe my father, but ‘villainous’ isn’t one of them.”

“The others can fill you in better than I can. Nuvian was gone long before my time, and I only ever heard rumors from other staff members.”

I sit up and scoot to the foot of the bed. Tavin is laying back on the cot staring at the ceiling, deep in thought. Emyth is sitting with his hands folded in front of his face staring at the floor.

Livarius moves behind me and puts a leg on either side of me. He gently starts rubbing my shoulders. I groan softly, some of the tension releasing as he rubs my back. I glance over my shoulder at him, and he nods in encouragement. The keepers don’t seem as angry as Zorvan, but I won’t know for sure unless I ask them.

I clear my throat. “Can either of you two tell me why Zorvan is so angry?”

Their gazes settle on me and Livarius, Tavin sits up on the cot and blows out a long breath. “It’s a long story, but I can tell you the most important parts.”

“That’s fine. I just want to know what I’m dealing with.”

Tavin sighs and nods. “A little over fifteen hundred years ago, Nuvian’s father, Othorion, and Zorvan’s father, Belroth, were best friends. They did everything together from the time they were young boys. Belroth, was born first, but they were born during the same Belrain moon cycle, so they were only weeks apart.

“Belroth was the first-born prince to Zorvan’s grandparents, and Othorion was the destined Keeper of the War Court; set to take his father’s spot when he was old enough and experienced enough. Training starts young, but

typically new monarchs won't take over the throne until around two thousand years old.

“When they got older, Belroth and Othorion had a healthy rivalry with one another. They both participated in the warrior competitions, and one or the other would always take first place. They were incredible to watch. Othorion never had any interest in being king, so Belroth never felt threatened by their competitions.”

“Why does that matter?” I ask.

Emyth answers, “If someone other than the heir to the throne wants to take it, they have to challenge the reigning king or queen. Or in some situations, both.”

“That's how your grandfather died, wasn't it?” I ask Livarius.

“Yes. I never knew him, though. He died before I was born.”

Tavin returns to his story, “Belroth and Othorion both met their fated mates around the same time. Belroth was training to become king, and he wasn't permitted to court any females just so he could focus on his responsibilities.

“Even after he found his mate, Rinella, he wasn't permitted to solidify the bond until his academia was complete. Othorion's responsibilities were lighter, and he was permitted to mate and reproduce immediately. Once he met Osania, they chose to immediately start a family. So Nuvian was born about seventy years before Zorvan.”

I interrupt, “My grandparents were also fated?”

“Yes, and they were so in love with one another.” Tavin's face turns sorrowful as he continues his story. “Just around the time I turned fifteen, your grandmother, Osania, fell ill. It's really rare for fae to get sick, and the healers couldn't figure out what was wrong with her. Belroth enlisted the help of the seers to try to find answers on behalf of his friend.”

The door clicks open and Jarrah and Lysander return bearing gifts of hot chocolate and cookies. I hold the warm mug in my cold hands and give Jarrah a warm smile that he returns.

“What are we talking about?” Lysander asks.

“Seers, actually,” Emyth says. “Specifically, how they tried to get answers about Osania when she got sick.”

Lysander nods solemnly. “When death is involved, the seers can’t always see the future. Even if they can, it takes a lot of magic to ask for direct answers, and the Stars won’t always give them. Most seers rely primarily on visions granted freely to them by the Stars rather than attempt to use magic to learn more. If the Stars want us to know, they will tell us.”

“You get visions, right? Jarrah told me that when I first arrived...”

“Yes. Frequently. The Stars are cryptic about their information though. My visions tend to come in flashes of random objects, not full scenes. If I’m attempting divination, they’re more complete. But I only use those abilities if Zorvan needs me to.”

“I’ve had dreams a few times,” Tavin says, earning him a surprised look from the rest of the keepers.

“What?” Jarrah asks. “Since when?”

“Since Aurelia.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Emyth asks.

Tavin shrugs. “They weren’t all that important. Simple things, like that meteor that landed in the forest a couple of years back. I also had one about Millie just before Zorvan and Jarrah went to the earth realm.”

“What about her?” Emyth asks.

“She just said ‘take care of her’. Which I obviously didn’t understand until Arden showed up. Then I had one...”

I gasp. “The night you came to my room.”

He nods.

“What was it about?” I ask. “You refused to tell me.”

A dark chuckle escapes him. “It was you ripping my heart from my chest.”

“Is that why you’ve kept yourself so walled off from me?”

“Part of it,” he says with a shameful look. “I’ll explain the rest of it later, but I think we should finish telling you about your father.”

“Right. Where were we?” I ask.

“The seers,” Jarrah supplies.

Lysander picks back up where he left off. “Yes. So, there are a number of things that seers can do to divine information if they have enough power. Even the weakest of seers can divine the weather, or the likelihood of a decent food crop. But the Stars are fickle things, and won’t willingly give answers they don’t think are important. They also sometimes withhold information they deem *too* important. If it could change the course of the future too much, they won’t show us.”

Jarrah nods. “And in the instance of Osonia, they wouldn’t grant answers beyond needing to seek help from Solardin.”

Tavin continues on, “Relations with Solardin have always been tenuous, at best. Esrend’s father, Rethelomir, was king at the time. He and Belroth were at odds over something petty, and Belroth wouldn’t look beyond his pride and consult with Rethelomir.”

“Even for his best friend?” I ask knowing where this part of the story is headed.

“Even for his best friend,” Lysander confirms. “Your grandmother, Osonia, died from the mysterious illness. Othorion couldn’t handle the loss. He became hateful toward Belroth. He spiraled. He stopped taking care of himself, and

his children. Your father was the oldest of the four, and he had to take over caring for them since your grandfather wouldn't.

“Othorion refused to attend strategy meetings. Then one day he challenged Belroth's place as king. He said that if Belroth couldn't get over his own pride and seek help for a member of his kingdom, then he didn't deserve the throne.”

“I'm inclined to agree,” I mutter under my breath. My grandmother suffered and died because of Zorvan's father. My anger is burning me from the inside out. Apparently all of Zorvan's family were stubborn mules.

“Well, unfortunately for your grandfather, he wasn't strong enough to overpower Belroth. Belroth spared him, though. Which is rare in a challenge for the throne. He couldn't bring himself to kill his best friend. Instead, he put him in the dungeons for a month. When he was released, he was banished from the kingdom. Your father and aunt and two uncles were permitted to stay, but your grandfather had to leave.”

I chew the inside of my lip, trying not to scream about the injustice of all of this. Emyth takes note of my change in demeanor, and moves to the bed.

He places a hand on my knee and squeezes. “Arden, I know that none of this makes sense to you, but the fae live very differently than humans. The strongest among us have a duty to protect the weaker, but if someone acts out of line, they are punished.”

“Where was that duty when my grandmother was dying?” I ask bitterly.

“Belroth was wrong to let her die, but it doesn't make up for what Othorion did.” Tavin says in a matter-of-fact way. “May I continue?” he asks. He's making sure this isn't all too much for me and I appreciate him for that.

“Yes. I just want to understand Zorvan's side of things.”

“Othorion was gone for a while. Things had started to get back to normal, and Nuvian took over Othorion’s post as Keeper of the War Court. Zorvan was just thirty or forty years old and Nuvian was around one hundred and ten. He was the youngest keeper in over a millennia, but he was one of the best Feldorn has ever seen. He had a knack for strategy, and he was able to quickly extinguish any battles that cropped up while he was at his post.” Tavin sighs and I know this story gets worse, but I let him go on.

“Around five years after his banishment, Othorion returned, but it was in the dead of night. He sneaked into the castle, made his way into Belroth’s chambers, and attempted to assassinate both Belroth and Zorvan’s mother, Rinella.

“He was intoxicated at the time, so Stars only know how he made it into the castle undetected. Belroth woke before Othorion was able to complete his mission. Othorion was tried and executed for attempted assassination. Belroth claimed that letting him live the first time was a mistake.”

The anger continues to build within me. Not only had Zorvan’s father let my grandmother die, but he also killed my grandfather. “So where does Zorvan get off being mad at my father?” I demand.

“I’m getting there, Artie, just let me finish,” Tavin says. There’s a weariness about his face that softens my heart.

“I’m sorry. I know this isn’t your fault. I’m not upset with you. Continue please,” I say.

“Your father was infuriated. And rightfully so in my opinion. If Belroth had acted accordingly, your grandparents would still be alive. I’m not surprised in the slightest that Othorion acted the way he did. If you were sick and Zorvan did nothing to help you...” He stops himself, looking sick at the thought, then his cheeks turn the lightest shade of pink but he doesn’t finish his sentence. “Anyway, despite his anger at Belroth, Nuvian began spending more and more time with the five of us.”

“Even Jarrah?” I ask, wondering how he fit into all of this if his family weren’t Keepers.

“My family was on the council and I was around the same age, so even though I wasn’t being groomed to be a keeper, I was around a lot,” Jarrah explains.

Emyth adds, “And Nuvian became really close with Zorvan. Closer than the rest of us are now. Even Jarrah who is arguably his best friend. But Nuvian’s friendship with Zorvan was all a part of his plot. He used it to distract from the big picture.”

“Which was?” I ask my stomach churning.

Tavin picks back up on the story, “Nu had been friends with us for most of our lives. We went to balls as a group. We trained together. He helped us with our academic lessons. I dated your aunt.”

“Ew,” I say. “From now on, can you all just...not tell me if you’ve been engaged to or slept with my relatives?”

“You need to get over your discomfort with that,” Livarius chuckles behind me.

“Why?” I ask in horror. “Who have you slept with that I’m related to?”

Emyth snorts and Livarius says, “NO! I just mean that it’s not *that* unusual for blood relations to end up together. Especially when it comes to maintaining certain bloodlines. Like the dragons very frequently mate incestuously in hopes of producing another dragon. Since there aren’t many left, it’s basically a requirement.”

“How many are left?” I ask.

“That we know for sure? Two,” Emyth says.

“Zorvan and...” I ask

“Your father.” Tavin answers.

I balk at the information. “If my father was a dragon shifter, what would that make me?”

“There’s a possibility that you’re also a dragon, but it’s unlikely since your grandmother wasn’t even a shifter. Though, we should ask Rupert what he shifts into. That might give us an idea of what to expect.”

I make a mental note to ask him next time I see him. “So, what happened with my father and Zorvan?”

“Nuvian finished what his father started,” Tavin answers.

My stomach drops and I whisper, “He what?”

“He somehow managed to get a hold of the wine that Belroth and Rinella had set aside for their mating anniversary celebration. It was the year after Othorion was executed. He dosed it with a blightroot tincture, which in large quantities...”

Tavin takes a deep breath before he continues. “We were all in the ballroom for the celebration. Nuvian called for a toast. He gave a speech about how much he appreciated their hospitality after what his father had done, and the opportunity to fill the seat of keeper. Then he took a large swig of his drink, and Belroth and Rinella followed suit.”

“No,” I say quietly.

“They didn’t stand a chance. The moment it touched their tongues, they began convulsing. Blood poured from every orifice. Panic ensued. Some people rushed to their side to help; others ran from the room. Rinella was wearing a beautiful ivory colored ball gown for the occasion and it was covered in blood. By the time anyone thought to question what had happened, Nuvian had disappeared. Zorvan’s been hunting him down ever since.”

Jarrah speaks up, “Todd’s just been a distraction. We all kind of assumed Nu was dead. Even if he was still alive, Todd had a shorter life span, so he took priority.”

“What about my aunt and uncles?”

“Your aunt, Naevys, was only around thirty or so at the time. She was given the opportunity to go to one of the other

kingdoms, so she took it, and she took her baby brothers with her. They're twins, and they were only around ten years old when Nu killed Belroth and Rinella. Their shifter forms hadn't even surfaced yet, so it's possible they're also dragons."

"They're still alive?"

"I honestly don't know. We didn't exactly keep in touch. There were too many painful memories there. But I suspect that they're still around somewhere. I believe they headed to Solardin when they were given the choice of where to go, but I don't remember for certain."

"Well, that's something at least," I mumble. "As upsetting as all of this is..." I consider whether I want to finish my thought.

"What is it?" Emyth asks, squeezing my knee.

"I went from having no family to having a grandfather, my dad still being alive, and having an aunt and two uncles out there somewhere."

"I'm happy for you, but maybe don't mention that to Zorvan. Your family and your ex are the reason he's the last of his bloodline."

There's a pang in my heart for the big dragon. I hate that he doesn't have any family. I hate that my family was involved and that his dad couldn't get past his own bullshit. "So much unnecessary death. The Stars really are cruel. I'm not sure how this is all going to play out. Zorvan is impulsive, and I'm just glad that he's giving it some thought. I hope he doesn't do anything too rash."

Tavin sighs. "Only time will tell."

## Chapter 43: Tavin



### CHAPTER 43: TAVIN

**W**e finish telling Arden about her father. She looks worn, like she's aged ten years in the last couple of hours. I don't want to add anything else to her plate, so I attempt to excuse myself.

"Where are you going?" she asks.

"I was just going to give you a little bit of space."

"No."

"No?" I laugh.

"No. You had something you needed to tell me."

I exchange a look with Emyth, but neither of us says anything.

"Who's Aurelia?" she asks.

Lysander, Livarius, and Jarrah all stand around uncomfortably.

Arden grimaces. "I don't need to know," she says, giving me the chance to back out.

"No. You should know," I say, but I don't carry on. I don't know where to start.

"Do you want to tell her, or do you want me to?" Emyth asks, placing his hand on my thigh.

I tense at his touch. "I'll tell her."

"I think it's best if we leave the three of you alone," Livarius says, and ushers Lysander and Jarrah to the door.

I'm starting to really appreciate the vampire. He's so young, but he is far more level-headed than the rest of us. I

give him an appreciative look. "I'll come get you when we're done."

The three of them leave. I'm alone with Arden and Emyth. This is even more uncomfortable than I expected.

"You really don't have to tell me," Arden says, her voice full of understanding.

"I need to. No more secrets," I say. If I want her to trust me and accept me as her mate, then I need to act like it. Even with the hard stuff.

She climbs into the bed and sits cross-legged. Leaning back on the palms of her hands, her gaze finds mine. I have her undivided attention.

"Aurelia was my first and only love," I say.

Arden's eyes widen and she grinds her teeth together in an attempt to keep a neutral expression on her face.

"It's okay for you to be angry and jealous. You're wired that way," I say. "There were times I had to bite my tongue until it bled while I watched you spend time with Rupert and Livarius," I admit.

Embarrassment washes over her. "Don't worry about my feelings. Just tell me about her."

"She came here from Solardin, along with a few others who were given as options for us to mate with to unify the kingdoms. Only she wasn't one of the chosen females, she was a chambermaid. The second I laid eyes on her, I was obsessed. I had had my fair share of the female fae around here and none of them kept my attention. I actually believed that Aurelia was fated to me."

A growl rumbles in Arden's chest, taking all three of us by surprise. Her face turns bright pink, and she hugs herself. "I'm starting to understand how you all felt for the last month," she says with a laugh, trying to brush it off.

"I think your shifted form is starting to break the restraints from the suppressants. We should be safe, but maybe

we should skip some of the more intimate details?” Emyth suggests.

I nod in agreement. I want to see her shifted form, but if by some wild chance, she is a dragon, like Nuvian, we shouldn't push it. She would break the castle, and crush us if she shifted right now.

“Aurelia and I spent a few days getting to know one another. By the fourth day, I approached Zorvan and asked him to allow me to take her as my mate. Initially he said ‘no’, but I talked him into it. Cyndair was in charge of the matchmaking between the kingdoms, Zorvan sent her a letter and got her approval, which shocked the hell out of us. Turns out that Aurelia was one of Esrends bastards, and Cyndair wanted her out of the kingdom. She considered our union a ‘favor’.”

“You speak about her in past tense. I'm assuming she's...dead,” Arden says the last word apologetically. “What happened to her?”

“I killed her,” Emyth says, his voice barely above a whisper.

He says it quickly, as if he wanted to make sure he's the one to tell her. I wouldn't have taken that from him. Emyth and I have never discussed what happened that day. In the long run I was thankful for what he did, but it didn't make it hurt any less. Aurelia's relationship with me is my story to tell, but her death is Emyth's.

Arden stays silent, her face unreadable. Eventually she says, “I assume you had a good reason.”

“Rupert was actually the one who exposed Aurelia for who she was. He overheard her speaking with another chambermaid in the garden about how she had used blood magic to make me infatuated with her.”

“They can do that?” Arden gasps.

“It takes a very powerful blood mage. Iona is powerful, but Aurelia was something else, entirely. I suspect she got that

ability from Esrend if he did sire her.

“Most blood magic is used for good. You can use it to heal other fae, track them if they’re lost, determine lineage, and a number of other things. It’s horrifying when it’s used for evil, though. Iona could have killed you by using your blood. She could have snapped every bone in your body, frozen your blood, or boiled it. She could have sent it all to your heart or your brain.”

Arden pales. “Where did she even get my blood?”

“Likely from when you saved Livarius. You were pretty out of it, and you bled a lot. We were all so concerned about getting Livarius to Airen, that we didn’t clean up before we left.”

“So how can they make you feel things?”

“The way it’s been described to us, is they’re able to affect the brain so it hallucinates sensations. Some can even cause visions. All vampires have at least some amounts of blood magic. A number of shifters are able to determine lineage, but very few full-blooded shifters are able to do more than that.

“Aurelia was able to affect my sense of smell to make herself seem more alluring to me. She also altered the way her face and body appeared to me.”

Emyth laughs. “Aurelia was not his type at all. It’s not like she was unattractive, but he usually went after curvier fae. Aurelia had the figure of a vampire. She was very lean. She was also unusually short for a vampire.”

“Why would she go through all of that trouble? Was it just because you were in a position of power?”

“She believed that Zorvan had something to do with her mother’s death. She wanted to try to bring Feldorn to its knees from the inside. We administered a truth serum to find out what was going on,” I tell her.

“Once we confirmed all of that, we held a trial. She was found guilty of treason, and was set for execution. Tavin...”

“I still believed that she was my mate when Emyth carried out her sentence,” I explain. “It was painful and almost destroyed me. But as soon as she was dead, I realized the spell I had been under.

“When I first met you, I felt the pull, but I wouldn’t let myself believe that it was real after what had happened with Aurelia.”

“It also had me on edge. I was worried that the hunters had figured out a way to do something similar to what Aurelia did,” Emyth says, sheepishly.

“Is that why you’ve been so cold toward Arden?” I ask in surprise.

Emyth nods his head.

I knew he had his suspicions about Arden, but I didn’t know why. It’s been years since we discussed anything deeper than The Sentinel attacks. We’ve never even really talked about Aurelia’s execution. I didn’t know how much it had traumatized him. Zorvan could have had someone else do it, but he insisted that it be Emyth so that it was done correctly.

Arden unfolds her legs and slides off the end of the bed. She crosses the room to where the cot is, and stands between my knees. She runs her fingers through my hair and my tiger pushes to the surface, leaning into her touch. She reaches out for Emyth’s hand. He hesitates but eventually he takes it.

“I promise you both that I am exactly who and what I say I am. I get, now, why it was so hard for you to trust me, but you *can* trust me.”

I can’t resist touching her any longer. I wrap my arms around her waist the pull her into me, pressing my face to her body and breathing in her scent.

I have never felt this calm in my life.

“Executions don’t bother me, you know?” Emyth says, his voice barely above a whisper. “But Aurelia? I hated Zorvan for making me do it.”

I pull back from Arden, just a couple of inches. My gaze settles on Emyth who is staring at the floor.

He continues, “The spell she had over Tavin wasn’t broken until after she died. I had to watch him—you—” his eyes find mine “I had to watch you break, and—”

“I forgave you a long time ago,” I tell him.

Relief washes over his features. He puts his hand on the back of my neck and presses his forehead to mine. He draws in a long shaky breath. “I thought you hated me.”

“I could never hate you, Em.”

There’s a short pause before Arden says, “I’m gonna let you two talk.”

She tries to walk away, but I grab her hand and stand to my feet and pull her into me. A small gasp escapes her when her body collides with mine.

“Please stay,” I whisper.

Arden’s questioning eyes find Emyth’s, silently seeking permission. He gives her a small smile and nods his head.

“I don’t want to talk about Aurelia anymore. She’s robbed me of enough of my happiness over the years,” I say. “Are you okay with that?” I ask Emyth.

“If you’re content with that, then I am,” he says.

My gaze is pulled back to Arden. She looks up at me and smiles, but it quickly fades. She chews on her lip and she looks away.

“What’s wrong?”

“Zorvan. He was so angry,” she says. “I can’t stop thinking about the hatred in his eyes.”

“He’ll get over it,” I tell her. “He’s stubborn, but not that stubborn.”

“I don’t think he will,” she says with a sigh. She pulls away from me and returns to her spot on the bed. She presses the palms of her hands to her eyes. “I felt his rage through the bond. He doesn’t want me anymore. At least...he doesn’t want to want me.”

I climb onto the bed and sit on my knees in front of her. I tilt her face up so she can see that I mean it when I say, “No matter what happens, you have me and the other keepers.”

“And Livarius,” Emyth chimes in, crossing the room to join us. He sits on the edge of the bed, keeping a little extra space between himself and Arden.

“And Livarius,” I add with a chuckle. “He’s growing on me,” I say.

“Really?” Arden asks, hopefully.

“He’s a good man; despite who his father is.”

“He is,” Arden says with a happy sigh.

“Do you want me to go get him, or do you want to keep pining over him?” I ask with a smirk.

Her cheeks turn pink. “I just haven’t had the chance to see him much since we mated. And the more we taper off the magic suppressants, the more I want to be around all of you. And...”

“And what?” I probe.

“And the more I want to touch you,” she murmurs.

“Your animal is surfacing. You don’t ever have to feel embarrassed with us. We all know exactly what you’re going through. Well...except Emyth. Basilisks aren’t really touchy-

feely. They are insanely possessive, though,” I say giving Emyth a heated look.

I scent arousal coming from Arden. She’s chewing the inside of her cheek...hard.

Emyth’s gaze snaps to hers, and he looks like he may devour her. He cocks an eyebrow, “What has you so worked up?”

Arden doesn’t answer, and drops her gaze to the bed.

Emyth’s last shred of self-restraint snaps. He moves faster than lightning wrapping a large hand around Arden’s neck. He slams her back onto the bed, and demands, “Tell me what you’re thinking about that has you smelling like that.”

A needy whimper escapes Arden, and I crawl up next to her, “It’s best to answer him, Kitten. He tends to get a bit stabby if he doesn’t get what he wants.”

Arden’s pleading eyes land on Emyth. “I told him I wouldn’t say anything.”

Emyth cocks his head to the side in confusion. It only lasts a second before a knowing look falls over his face. “Oh you dirty little thing,” he says with a chuckle.

## Chapter 44: Emyth



### CHAPTER 44: EMYTH

““**W**hy on earth are you thinking about that right now?” I ask with a laugh.

“That was the day I found out just how possessive you could be,” Arden admits.

I hum in response. “And it would seem that you liked what you saw. Do you want me to possess you that way?”

“Care to fill me in?” Tavin asks, a playful glint in his eyes.

“Arden walked in on Lysander and I having a moment,” I say.

“Hmm. Lysander does like it when Em takes control,” Tavin says to Arden.

“I didn’t walk in on anything. You were out in the open—in the gardens!”

I squeeze her throat a little tighter in warning about her attitude. Her eyes go wide.

“Fuck!” I say and pull my hand away from her.  
“Arden, I’m so sorry.”

She sits up and places a gentle hand on my forearm.  
“Why are you apologizing?”

“We haven’t talked in depth about how I operate. I shouldn’t have grabbed you like that. Especially not after I attacked you in my sleep.”

“I appreciate your concern, but I’m not fragile. There’s also a big difference between you being in control right now, and the way you were acting that night. That being said, I don’t think any of us are in the head-space for this to go any further tonight. And...”

“And what?” Tavin asks, running his fingers up and down her thigh, leaving goosebumps in their wake.

Arden takes a deep breath, “I feel so selfish saying this, but I need the others.”

“It’s not selfish,” I reassure her.

“I’ll go get them,” Tavin offers, and leaves to retrieve them.

Arden’s face is pensive as she stares at the bedspread and picks at her fingers. I’m about to ask her what’s wrong when she makes eye contact with me, and opens her mouth like she’s about to speak. Instead, she shuts her mouth and straddles me. My breath hitches at the contact.

“I thought you said—”

She takes my face in her hands. “This isn’t going any further. I just need to make sure that you hear me.”

I nod. I never give up control to women, but I guess there’s a first time for everything. I allow my hands to roam up her thighs, not stopping until my hands are resting on her perfectly round ass. I give it a gentle squeeze and stifle a groan.

“Emyth,” she warns.

“It’s really hard to focus when you’re on me like this,” I say with a smile.

“Well try harder,” she says, playfully.

“Yes, ma’am. What did you want to tell me?”

“I understand why you didn’t trust me. I didn’t trust any of you in the beginning either.”

“Reasonably so.”

“But I want a chance to get to know you. Every part of you—even your darkness—if you’ll let me.”

“I don’t know if you can handle my darkness,” I say with a flirty tone. I’m trying to sound playful, but I’m scared. I

need her to accept all of me.

“I think I can handle a lot more than any of you give me credit for.”

I decide to test the waters. I let my reaper magic dance along the surface of my skin. Arden lets out a small gasp, but it's not in fear; just surprise. Her lips part, and I wonder what it would be like to bite into her supple bottom lip. Instead, I release just enough of my magic that she feels it. She whimpers as it takes hold, rendering her unable to control her own body.

I spin her around and lay her back on the bed. We really should have discussed this before I started, but I'm not going to stop now. The guys will be back any second, but I want to give her a taste of me—of who I am. I move her legs apart and settle between them, supporting my weight so I hover above her. I expect to scent fear on her, but all I can smell is arousal. *Fuck! This girl will be the end of me.*

“All these years I thought the Stars wouldn't dare mate me to someone because of my proclivities. I'm glad that not only was I wrong, but that they mated me to someone who enjoys that side of me. I scented arousal on you the day I sneaked into your room and held a knife to you.

“I like the fight. I really do. But sometimes I want full control to do whatever I want. Did you know that even though you can't move, I can still make you come for me?” To illustrate my point, I grind my erection against the apex of her thighs. Her pupils go wide at the contact.

“You'll still feel every last sensation when in this state. You just can't fight against me.” I pull back on my magic. I need to stop myself before I push too far. “I'm a plague, Arden, and I will consume you if you let me.”

After about thirty seconds her fingers start to twitch as she regains control of her body. She sucks in a deep breath, and reaches for me. I expect her to yell at me, or hit me, or even push me off of her. Instead she grabs my face and pulls

me down to her, kissing me frantically. I take her bottom lip between my teeth and she moans softly.

The door to her room clicks open, and several sets of footsteps come to an abrupt halt in the doorway.

I pull back, gaze into Arden's eyes, and whisper, "That's probably for the best."

She nods, and turns her attention to the door. Her face turns bright red. I climb off of the bed and return to my spot in the chair in the corner of the room, adjusting my pants as I go.

"I leave and you guys continue without me? That's kind of rude," Tavin says playfully and jumps onto the bed.

"I have to admit that I didn't expect to find you two dry humping when we came back," Lysander says, giving me a look that says he's sorry he missed it.

"We were just getting to know each other better," I say with a smirk.

Livarius climbs into the bed and gives Arden a bruising kiss as if laying his claim. He's still adjusting to sharing her, and that's okay.

"We should probably all get some rest," Jarrah says, stripping down to his underwear and joining the others in the bed.

Arden has a distant look in her eyes. She looks like she's in pain and I worry that I pushed too hard with my magic.

Her eyes find mine, as if she sensed me staring at her. She gives me a sad smile before she looks around the room at the others.

She inhales deeply and says, "I think we all need to prepare for Zorvan to reject the bond. And maybe he's right to. I don't know how we can put everything behind us."

Jarrah pulls her into him and presses a kiss to her hair. "Whatever happens, we'll figure it out. Together."

She looks up into his eyes and nods. “Okay.”

We all get ready for sleep. I’m not sure what tomorrow holds. I don’t want to have to choose between Arden and Zorvan, but it’s not really a competition. The Stars blessed me with someone who is willing to care for me the way I need. I’m not going to throw that away. I just have to hope that Zorvan makes the right choice—for all of us.

## Chapter 45: Zorvan



### CHAPTER 45: ZORVAN

**S**oaring through the sky over Feldorn, I release a frustrated roar. From the moment I laid eyes on Arden, I struggled with our bond. The fact that she had been with one of the two men I hated most made me want to destroy her just as much as I wanted to make her mine.

If I had known then that she was also Nuvian's daughter, I probably would have killed her on sight. Now that she's been in the castle, she's started to get under my skin. I've started to actually care for her.

She's infuriating, but she challenges me. She's proven time and again that she's smart, brave, and kind. The staff of the castle love her even if the higher fae don't respect her. I think that given time, once they know she's not human, they'd like her too. She would rule this kingdom with ease.

None of that matters now. I can't continue on this path with her. I glide back to the castle and land on the training field. I shift back into my human form and pull on the pants I had left on the ground.

I'm headed to Arden's room with a purpose when Rupert steps into my path. I intend to walk past him, but he plants himself in front of me.

"What do you want?" I growl.

"Whatever your plan is right now, I ask that you take some time to think it over before you do anything rash."

"There's nothing to think about. I cannot be bound to Arden."

"So you reject your bond and then what?" he asks, raising an eyebrow at me.

“I hadn’t gotten that far,” I say, surprising myself with my honesty. “Probably send her back to the earth realm.”

“Her other mates will never allow that.”

“They will obey orders from me. They are my keepers. They do as they’re told.”

“You underestimate the power of the bond. I know that you don’t know me particularly well, but I am a lot older than you are, Prince Zorvan. I’ve seen a lot of bonds come and go in my lifetime. The one time that I saw a rejection, it ended in death. Just make sure you know what you’re doing.”

“You’re only saying that because she’s your blood.”

“I’m saying that because I know that a fae without their fate bound mate is weaker for it. I also know that even though I’ve only had a few weeks to get to know my granddaughter, a force to be reckoned with, and she doesn’t even have her magic yet.” He gives me a knowing look.

“I can’t be with her; no matter what she is to me.”

He nods. A disappointed look flashes across his face. “There’s no point in trying to change your mind, then. Go do what needs to be done. Should she return to the earth realm, I’ll be going with her. You’ll need to find yourself a new gardener.”

“Why would you give up Sangaris. It’s not like you couldn’t occasionally visit her.”

“She has no one else. Nuvian may still be alive, but he’s been locked up for years, and that no good ex-fiancé of hers will still be after her. She’ll need help.”

My stomach twists in knots. First at leaving Arden just as alone as I am, and then at the thought of Todd getting his hands on her. I shrug it off. It’s just the mate bond talking. Once I break it, it should go away. At least that’s what I’ll keep telling myself.

My dragon knows what I’m about to do and he’s fighting me for control. I can’t waste any more time.

“I appreciate the advice, and the notice. I’ll send Arden to you when we’ve finished speaking.”

“Thank you,” he says and steps out of my way.

I move past him and he calls to me causing me to pause, but I refuse to look at him.

“I really hope you understand what you’re doing, discarding the gift the Stars have granted you. They won’t look kindly upon you abandoning your mate. You need to prepare for your life to fall into ruin.”

I don’t respond. Instead, I make my way into the castle to see Arden for the last time.

I don’t bother knocking when I reach her room. I open the door to find her sandwiched between Jarrah and Livarius on the bed. She’s asleep, but even in the dim light I can see her eyes are puffy from crying.

Tavin is spooning Livarius. I forget my reason for coming here, and smirk at them. Emyth is in a chair in the corner, sleeping with his chin resting on his fist. I find it odd that Lysander isn’t here. As if my thoughts summoned him, he walks out of the bathroom.

The second his eyes land on me, they go cold. “What are you doing here?” he asks in a hushed voice, trying not to wake the others.

“What I need to,” I say.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean? I think you’ve done enough damage for one day.”

I wordlessly shut the door behind me and cross the room to the bed.

I clear my throat. “Arden,” I say loudly. She begins to stir. She rubs the sleep from her eyes and looks up at me, confused by the disturbance.

Finally, recognition crosses her face, then hurt, and finally anger. “What do you want, Zorvan?”

The others start to wake up around her. All of them are giving me looks that vary in levels of rage.

“We need to have a conversation.”

“Oh, now you want to talk?” She asks, bitterly. “Of course, you think it’s appropriate to banish me from the strategy room and refuse to talk to me, only to interrupt my sleep hours later because it’s convenient for you. You’re a real piece of work, you know that?”

“Enough. I needed time to think, and now that I’ve had it, I’ve come to a decision.”

“About what?” she snaps.

“About us,” I say.

“Zorvan,” Jarrah warns.

“It has to be done,” I say. My heart is beating wildly in my chest. I just need to rip the bandage off.

“You’re rejecting our bond, aren’t you?” Arden asks.

I swallow hard, but I can’t bring myself to say the words. I’m having second thoughts.

“It’s for the best,” she whispers when I don’t respond.

“What?” I ask in disbelief. I expected her to beg me not to end it.

“You’re right. Our bond is cursed. Why the stars destined me for you is beyond me. We don’t work. We can’t. So, it’s for the best that we break it.”

“Arden,” Jarrah says, reaching for her. He’s practically naked. A growl rumbles deep in my chest.

“I can handle it,” Arden says over her shoulder to him.

“You want to break our bond?” I ask just to be sure that I’m hearing her correctly.

“No. I never wanted that. But it’s the only thing that makes sense, isn’t it? You can’t let yourself be happy with me. You deserve to find someone who will be what you need.”

I search deep in my mind for the words to express how I'm feeling, but they don't come. My aching heart begs to be ripped from my chest so this feeling will stop.

"This isn't a good idea," Emyth says. "Emotions are all really high. This isn't a decision that needs to be made right away."

"I've already made it," Arden says. "I just need to know how to break it."

The keepers all exchange concerned looks then move a little closer to her. They're not concerned for me, their friend of over four hundred years. They're concerned for Arden. For their mate.

Anger bubbles inside of me again, "It's simple. You just—"

"Zorvan!" Tavin interrupts. "Don't do this. Let us all have a discussion about it. This affects all of us. It affects the entire kingdom, and your bloodline." He's trying to appeal to my baser instincts—the need to reproduce—but it won't work.

"No. Arden has clearly made her choice. Like she said. It's for the best. I won't give up seeing her father's head on a stick, and she would never forgive me if I killed him. We simply cannot be."

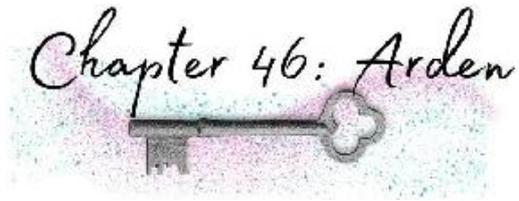
"Your father was no saint, either." Arden spits at me. "He couldn't even stand up for his best friend. He didn't deserve to die, but he was a coward."

I'm on her before I can consider what I'm doing, squeezing her throat hard enough that I know that she can't breathe. She barely flinches, just stares at me with a vengeful defiance in her eyes. "By the choice of free will granted to me by the Stars I reject the gift of a fate bound mate that they have given me, and accept the consequences of refusing the honor that comes with the bond."

The second the words leave my mouth I know I've made a horrible mistake. Arden whimpers in pain, but it's not from the grip I have on her. I know she's experiencing the

same searing burn in her chest that I am. I release her and storm out of her room to give myself privacy to feel the anguish that I've just sentenced myself to.

## Chapter 46: Arden



### CHAPTER 46: ARDEN

I can't breathe.

My lungs are on fire.

There's a horrific pain in my skull.

My heart feels like it's shattered into a million pieces.

I didn't really want to sever the bond, but I knew that Zorvan was going to anyway. I was trying to act brave, and now it's cost me.

I drop to my knees and scream out. The others surround me, but I don't want them near me right now. "Don't touch me. Nobody fucking touch me," I hiss. I can't even look to see if I've hurt their feelings. I can't think past the pain.

The Stars are evil.

I begin to understand that everything that had happened—my grandparents, Zorvan's parents, Todd—it all led to me being here. If my father hadn't been on the run, he never would have met my mother. I wouldn't exist.

If my grandmother hadn't been on the run from whoever was after her, I never would have met Todd. If I hadn't met Todd, Zorvan never would have found me.

What game were the Stars playing at?

My mind is racing. What have we done? I let out a sob. I push to my feet and run out of my room, weaving through the others. They all wear concerned faces. Livarius reaches for me, but I brush him off. I know that I have to get to Zorvan. There has to be a way to fix this.

I don't knock. I just barrel into his room. He's not in his office or his bedroom. I throw the door to his bathroom

open. He's in the bathtub fully clothed with his knees pulled up to his chest. I've never seen him look so vulnerable.

His bright blue eyes meet mine. "Get out," he hisses.

"No." I shake my head. "This was a mistake," I say as I fumble my way into his enormous bathtub, not bothering to take my clothes off. The water is freezing.

"No, it wasn't. We cannot be together, and we both know it. The Stars are the ones that made the mistake. You need to go."

I forcefully climb into his lap and place my hands on either side of his face. "The Stars knew exactly what they were doing." I say as I thread my fingers into his hair. "Every single terrible thing that has happened to either of us—it brought us together."

"Well, it doesn't fucking matter now, does it? The bond is severed." The muscle in his jaw jumps. "You need to go, Arden. You were right in the dungeon. It was all biology. Now that the bond is gone, I can see that clearly."

"You don't mean that," I say. The bond may be severed, but I'm surer than ever that I need him.

"Yes, I do. Get out before I make you."

"You're going to have to, because I'm not leaving until we talk this out."

"Talk this out?!" he roars.

He places a large palm on my face and pushes me back until my head is submerged under the water. I claw at Zorvan's wrist trying to get him off of me, but he's too strong. My lungs start to burn as the seconds tick on and he continues to hold me under.

My vision starts to turn black. I stop struggling against him accepting my fate. I only hope that the others don't kill him for it. Zorvan's eyes widen in realization, and he pulls me from the water.

“You just tried to kill me,” I gasp.

His face hardens. “Get out of my quarters. Go to your room and pack your things. You and your grandfather leave for Kildara tomorrow.”

“Fine. I’ll leave. But Livarius is coming with me. And you better be prepared to lose some of your keepers. I don’t know about Tavin and Emyth, but Jarrah and Lysander will not go without me for long. Hell, expect Airen and Helena to come with me too.”

He doesn’t respond. He jerks his head toward the door. I climb out of the tub and walk soaking wet back to my room.

The guys are all arguing when I enter, but they hush when they take in my disheveled soaking wet appearance.

“What happened?” Livarius asks, wrapping me in his arms.

“Zorvan is banishing me and Rupert from Feldorn. We leave for Kildara tomorrow.”

“What?!” Lysander asks.

“It was either that or kill me, so I guess I’ll take going to Kildara.”

“You can’t leave us, Little Dove,” Jarrah says. “I’ll talk some sense into him.”

“It won’t work. He hates me. I need to pack my things. I understand that you all have a responsibility to him and to the throne. It might be easier if we just break our bonds as well.”

My heart leaps in my chest as I say it. Breaking any more of my bonds might physically kill me, but I can’t ask them to choose.

“Absolutely not!” Lysander says. “I’m coming with you. I waited centuries to find you. I’m not losing you now. The only responsibility I had was to my friend, and that person doesn’t exist anymore.”

“I’m obviously coming too,” says Livarius. “We’re stronger together, love.”

“My brother can take my spot,” Tavin says. “The only reason I wanted the position of keeper in the first place was because of my love for Zorvan. It’s a love that is not reciprocated. If he cared at all about us, he wouldn’t have ended the bond with you.”

“He does care for you, but his need for revenge is stronger than the love he has for anyone. He’s been blinded by it for so long that he can’t fathom any other choice,” I say.

“I can’t leave,” Emyth says softly. “My duty is to Feldorn, and my death magic is rare. I have to stay. At least until I can figure out a replacement.”

“I can’t leave either,” Jarrah says.

My sweet War Keeper. I was expecting Emyth and Tavin to stay. Jarrah staying is unexpected, and hurtful.

“I understand. I hate it, but I understand.” I let out a sigh. “I guess I should get ready to go, and go let Rupert know.”

I rub absently at my chest. I had felt the attraction to Zorvan and the others, but I hadn’t realized how big of a piece of me was occupied by the bonds. The piece of me that was reserved for Zorvan is gone, and in its place is a gaping black hole.

Livarius and Emyth come with me to talk to Rupert. Jarrah insists that he can talk some sense into Zorvan, but I know it’s futile. The others go to their quarters to begin packing.

We reach the small cottage that Rupert lives in and knock on the door. The lights are still on despite the late hour. He opens it and says, “I figured I would be seeing you tonight. Zorvan rejected the bond, didn’t he?” There’s a knowing sadness in his eyes. “When do we leave for the earth realm?”

“Earth realm?” I ask.

“Yes. Isn’t that where we’re going?”

“No. He didn’t banish us from Sangaris. Just from Feldorn. We leave tomorrow for Kildara.”

“Kildara? Wh—” Rupert grinds his teeth. “Because Millie was Kildaran. Right. Oh my Stars. Emyth, does Ardeth know about Arden?”

“Shit. No. We’ll send word ahead of you.”

“Are you not coming with us?” Rupert asks.

“I can’t.” Emyth replies.

“I understand,” Rupert says. “Just don’t sever the bond like that big scaly idiot did. You’ll both be all the worse for it.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” Emyth says, giving me a longing look.

“Well, I have my bag packed, but...” Rupert pauses, brows knitted together. “I may have to come a day or two behind you. I’ve got a couple of things I need to do including contacting my go-between for the mortal realm. Who is escorting you to Kildara?”

“I’ll be with her,” Livarius says.

“Tavin and Lysander are also coming with us, so I won’t be alone.”

“Are you okay going without me?” Rupert asks.

I wave my hand dismissively. “I’ll be fine. Lysander made some stupid oath to Livarius that he would protect me, even if he died doing it, so—”

“*What?*” Emyth asks.

I roll my eyes. “He was making some big show about how much he cared about me before we went to the human realm.”

“He needs to learn how to think before he acts,” Emyth says with a sigh.

I turn my attention back to Rupert. “Send a letter if you get delayed more than a day or two, just so I’m not worrying about you.”

“I will,” he says and gives me a kiss on the cheek and a sad smile. “Be safe. I’ll be with you soon.”

Back in the castle we make the rest of our preparations including getting some rations and my suppressants. I only have about a week and a half until I can stop taking them altogether.

Airen comes to the door of her room in a night dress, grumpily wiping the sleep from her eyes. She takes in the sight of me, “Arden, what’s wrong?”

I rip the band-aid off, “I’m leaving. I need the rest of my taper regimen if you have it ready for me.”

“What? No. You can’t leave. I won’t allow it.”

“You’ll have to take that up with the Cruel Prince himself. I’m afraid we don’t have a choice in the matter.” My heart aches as the faun I’ve come to call my friend pulls me into a tight hug.

“Where will you go?”

“Kildara. You can come visit. I’m afraid I’ve been banished so I won’t be permitted to come back, but I won’t be as far as the earth realm.”

“He’s such an impetuous man. Come on. Let’s get your suppressants. Do you want heat suppressants too?” Her eyes flick to Livarius and my face goes scarlet.

“Probably should, shouldn’t I? Don’t need any little vampire babies running around.”

“Not yet anyway, but someday soon I’ll put a baby inside of you,” Livarius says with a slap to my ass. The thought gives me butterflies. The idea of having a baby is so new, but Stars do I want them with my mates.

“Stop. Not in front of other people,” I say and playfully slap his shoulder.

Emyth has a look on his face that I can't decipher. I want to reach out and touch him, but something stops me. Airen gets me what I need, and we say our goodbyes. We both shed quiet tears as I hug her tightly.

“I'll miss you,” I say with a sad smile.

“I'll miss you too, sweet girl. Don't let the Kildarans give you too much of a hard time.”

“I wouldn't dream of it,” I say with a laugh. “And if you get sick of being here, you should move to Kildara. I'm sure they could use your skills there.”

She smiles broadly. “A change of scenery sounds great. I'll think about it.”

We make our way to the kitchens. Helena is there. She's been popping in periodically to keep busy and keep her mind off of her sister's death. She's already up and prepping food for the coming day. She looks up at me with surprise in her eyes.

“Arden, it's so early in the morning. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Emyth answers her, “Arden, Livarius, Tavin, and Lysander are leaving for Kildara in a few hours. They'll need enough food for around six days' travel. They should only need three days' worth, but just to be safe.”

“Right away, Lord Emyth,” she says as she sets to work. She looks up at me and asks, “When will you return?”

“I won't be back. My relocation is permanent,”

She sets down the knife she's holding with force. “What did that bullheaded man do?” She asks.

“It doesn't matter. All that matters is that I can't be here anymore.”

“I’ve known Prince Zorvan since he was born. He always sabotages his own happiness. Bloody fool if I’ve ever met one.”

“Better not let the Cruel Prince hear you say that,” Zorvan’s voice comes from the doorway causing me to jump. He’s leaning against the door frame with his arms crossed over his chest. He has a smile for Helena that fades when he makes eye contact with me.

“I’ll say it again to your face. You’re a bloody fool, Zorvan. What do you want?”

“I need to talk to Arden for a moment.”

I hope against hope that he’s changed his mind, but I know he hasn’t. “What do you need? I’m trying to get things handled so I can leave as soon as possible.”

“Please come here.”

It’s a request, not a command. I shuffle over to the door.

“What do you need?” I ask, my voice softer this time.

He stares into my eyes. His eyes are soft as he brushes the pad of his thumb over my cheek. Butterflies dance in my belly from the contact. *Maybe he did change his mind.*

His face goes cold again. “It’s really important that you don’t tell anyone about our bond even though it’s severed.”

*Ouch.* “Of course. Wouldn’t want to embarrass you like that. If there’s nothing else, I need to go pack.”

“No. There’s nothing else.”

“Good.” I turn my back on him. “Helena, I’m going to miss you. If you ever find yourself in Kildara, come visit me. And if you find yourself wanting a new boss, come join me.” I give her a hug, then shoulder past Zorvan and head to my room to get my stuff together.

Packing up my room is bittersweet. All of the guys are there with me, helping me decide which clothing items I

should take. We have to take a carriage from the outskirts of Feldorn to the capital city of Kildara, so I have to be choosy, and I still have my suitcase from my human life to take with me.

It feels like I'm taking small pieces of my old lives with me as I go on to new ones. I've only been in Feldorn for about a month, but it feels like home. In fact, it feels even more like home than New York ever did. I had been fighting against that feeling since I arrived, but now I realize that this is where I was always meant to be. I can only hope that I feel the same way about Kildara.

"Have any of you met King Ardeth?" I ask while I'm folding a dress and putting it in my bag.

"Many times. Always diplomatically. I haven't seen him in years though," Jarrah answers.

"What is he like?"

"Before Millie disappeared, he was always kind. That sort of faded when he thought we had something to do with her going missing. But he's cunning, handsome, and powerful. Basically, he's everything I would expect a relative of yours to be."

"Are you sure I can't convince you to come with me?" I ask, taking Jarrah's hand in mine.

"Come with you? Two hours ago, you said that I should break the bond," he laughs.

"I know, but I'm allowed to change my mind. Anyway, I knew that I could ask you. You would never leave Zorvan like that, and he needs someone by his side."

"Never say never," he says bitterly. "Zorvan is still my friend, but he broke my trust. My plan is to train my brother to take my spot, then head to Kildara to be with you. Assuming you'll still have me."

"Of course, I will," I say with a smile. He pulls me into him and kisses me hard, nipping at my bottom lip as he pulls

away.

“I, for one, am excited to have you more to myself for a while,” Lysander says pulling me into his lap.”

“Don’t forget you still have to share her with me,” Livarius says.

“And maybe me?” Tavin questions. He’s been acting so bashful ever since we came back from the earth realm. It’s adorable to see this softer side of him.

“No mating her without us,” Jarrah says to Tavin and Lysander.

“Well, I think that’s up to Arden,” Tavin argues.

“Tay, come on, I wanna be there for it,” Jarrah complains.

“We could just do it, now.” Lysander plants kisses down the column of my neck.

I let out a soft whimper as he squeezes my thigh. I really consider it for a second. “No, I think that would be in poor taste,” I say.

“Why?”

“You don’t have a Zorvan sized wound in your chest as a reminder that you’re missing a piece of you. Regardless of what his feelings were before, I can almost guarantee that Zorvan wouldn’t handle it well. I don’t want to hurt him. It’ll have to wait til you all can come see me. Are we able to write letters to one another?”

I never thought I would miss constantly having my phone available to me, but I’m finding that I miss the convenience of it in this moment.

“Yes, and Zorvan doesn’t need us all the time. We can come and visit pretty often.” Jarrah pulls me into his arms once again. He’s always been very touchy, but I think my leaving has him feeling extra affectionate. “You can’t keep me away for long, Little Dove. I’ve never needed anything as

much as I need you.” He grabs my chin and kisses me like it’s his last night on the planet.

Emyth pulls me away into his arms. He rests his chin on my head. With my ear pressed to his chest, I can hear his strong steady heartbeat. His embrace is comforting.

“I know we’ve not had the time to get to know one another properly, but there’s nothing I regret more than having to stay here. I’ll see you soon.” He plants a kiss on the top of my head and releases me.

“Are you ready to go?” Lysander asks.

“I don’t think I could ever be ready, but I’m prepared.” We walk out the front doors together and pause just outside the castle grounds. Lysander holds his luggage with one hand and takes my hand in the other. Tavin and Livarius each have their luggage in one hand and my luggage in their free hand. I give Jarrah and Emyth each one last smile before I’m spinning through the air with Lysander, teleporting to the outskirts of Feldorn, to make our way to our new home.

We land outside a decent sized village about the size of Krean. It’s early in the morning, so people are just starting to mill about.

We step into the dark interior of the local tavern and allow our eyes to adjust. Behind the bar is a male fae. he reminds me a bit of Airen, but different. He’s stockier in build, and his horns are rounded like rams’ horns, and they’re surrounded by shaggy brown hair.

Tavin approaches the bar and exclaims, “Tirphal! Good to see you! How’s the family?”

“Oh, they’re well,” he says with a bright smile. His eyes meet mine before landing on my rounded ears, and his smile falters. He quickly plasters it back on and asks “Who is this lovely thing?”

“Oh, just a friend of ours,” Tavin says. “We need to get her to Kildara. Ardeth will be expecting us. We need a carriage. Do you have anything available?”

“Not for a few hours I’m afraid. One just came in, but it has stock to unload. I can offer you a suite to wait in, if you’d like.”

“Sounds great,” Lysander says with a smile.

Something about the barkeep is making me uneasy. I lean into Livarius’ side, and he wraps a comforting arm around me. Tirphal shows us to a large room with a king-sized bed.

We eat some breakfast then agree we should to try to get a quick nap while we wait since we didn’t sleep more than a few hours last night. I plop down on the enormous bed and stretch out.

“Who knew random villages in the middle of nowhere would have such nice places to stay.”

“When your village is one of the few along the borders between kingdoms, you make sure to have proper accommodations for the wealthy fae that travel through. No matter how rare,” Tavin explains.

I hum in response then sit up and look at the guys. “Did anyone else notice how weird that tavern keep was?”

“Tirphal? No he’s been here for ages. He just doesn’t care about much of anything.” Lysander laughs.

“Oh.” I say quietly. I’m a little embarrassed that I said anything.

The guys lay in the bed with me. Livarius is behind me. I’ve come to learn that being the big spoon is his favorite thing. Lysander is in front of me, and Tavin behind him. I love how comfortable they are with one another. The majority of human men I knew would never snuggle with a guy friend. Then again, most of them wouldn’t share a girlfriend either.

Lysander looks in my eyes and strokes my cheek, his locs falling haphazardly onto the pillow. I can only offer him a soft smile. My heart is aching for the others. Even Zorvan. We’ve only been gone an hour and I’m already feeling the loss of not having them nearby. *How long would I have lasted in*

*the human realm before I realized that Sangaris is where I belong?*

“What’s going on in that pretty head of yours?”  
Lysander asks.

“I was just thinking how ridiculous it was to think that I could ever return to the human realm. Especially if it meant leaving any of you.”

“We would have never let that happen. Even if you had made it back, I would have followed you to the ends of the universe to bring you home. You don’t belong with the mortals.”

“That’s comforting to know,” I say with a chuckle.

“Don’t forget the vow you made to me, wolf,” Livarius says, propping up on his elbow to look at Lysander.

“I didn’t need to make that deal, Livarius. Arden is my top priority now. She has been since we met.”

Lysander kisses the tip of my nose and I snuggle against him, tucking my head into the crook of his neck. Livarius absently toys with the hem of my shirt, brushing his thumb along the sliver of exposed skin. It causes me to shiver. I think about how comfortable I am with the three of them. How easy this is. How easy it would be with the other three, too.

My mind pours through everything that’s happened in the last five days. Working backwards to how we got here. I land on Jarrah, nearly marking me in a heat induced frenzy. Of him nearly—

“What are you thinking about, Little Fawn?” Lysander asks in a mischievous voice.

I bring my hands to my cheeks to try to hide, but he pulls them back down.

“Don’t ever be embarrassed. Especially not when you smell like that. Tell me what you were thinking about.” His big grey eyes are pleading.

“Promise you won’t be mad?”

“Well now I don’t know if I want to know...”

“I was thinking about Jarrah. When he nearly marked me.”

I can now feel both Livarius and Lysander pressing against me. There’s a part of me that is desperate to feel them both inside of me. Tavin too.

“You need to calm down or we’re gonna have a problem,” Livarius purrs in my ear. I bite my lip and turn to look at Livarius. I’m about to kiss him when a knock sounds at the door. Tavin groans and gets out of bed and answers the door, adjusting his pants as he goes.

It’s Tirphal.

“Sorry to disturb you,” he says, glancing at the bed where I’m sandwiched between Livarius and Lysander. A dark look crosses his face. He says something quietly to Tavin who nods and shuts the door.

“Tirphal said that he has a carriage that can be ready sooner, but he needs some help getting it unloaded.”

“They don’t have people to do that?” I ask. I feel selfish wanting someone else to do that hard labor, but I just want to be with my mates.

“He’s just shorthanded at the moment.” Tavin says with a shrug.

“I don’t like this. I don’t trust him.”

“Artie, he’s fine.”

“Just be careful, please. And leave me a knife or something,” I grumble.

“What is it about him that you don’t like?” Livarius asks.

“I don’t know. I can’t explain it. This weird thing has been happening where I get these impressions about people. I

thought I was just noticing body language, but it's more than that. It happened with that member of The Sentinels. Then with Keith and with Todd. Now with this guy."

"How do we play this?" Lysander asks.

"I think we stick together," Tavin says.

"You guys believe me?" I ask.

"Of course, we do. If you say you don't trust him, then neither do I," Lysander says.

I expected them to tell me I was overreacting, or being hysterical. Every time I told Todd that I didn't like the way someone treated me, he said that I was being ridiculous. Having people actually care about my feelings makes my heart soar.

"Alright, let's go deal with this mess so we can get going."

We leave for the barns where the carriage is waiting to be unloaded. There is one man aside from Tirphal. Tirphal is just standing there while the other man works to unload the cart. We start picking up and moving boxes.

Tirphal approaches me and says, "Now, a lady shouldn't be doing such hard work."

"It's no trouble," I say. "I would really just like to get going so that we can hit the road."

Tirphal holds his hands up in mock surrender. His face is placid, but there's something else hiding there. "Well, then I guess I'll go ahead and start bringing your things down," he says.

"No that's okay," I say a little too quickly. "Just, I have some fragile items in my bags. I would rather I do it myself once we're done unloading."

"If you're sure." He studies me for a moment. "You look familiar. Where do I know you from?"

“I’m actually new here. I doubt you know me from anywhere,” I say with a half-hearted chuckle. “You know, human and everything...” I say pointing to my ears.

“I see,” Tirphal says. “Well, you all seem to be making quick work of the cart. I’m going to go back to serving the bar. Let me know before you depart.”

“Of course, Tir,” Lysander flashes a smile.

I don’t feel comfortable with Tirphal not being in sight. Something is seriously off, and I’m worried he’s going to go look through our stuff, or poison our food. I wait a couple of minutes so it doesn’t seem weird that I’m leaving.

“I need a drink. I’ll be right back,” I say and walk back out onto the street toward the tavern door.

The sun is shining brightly now, and there are many more people on the streets. I walk past a shop that has crystals and other divination items inside. I make a note to ask the guys if we can stop before we leave.

I’m just about to the front of the tavern when I notice that a lot of the people on the street are staring at me. Some of them are whispering with others while looking and pointing at me. My intuition is screaming at me that I’m in danger and that I should run back to the guys as quickly as possible.

Trying not to be obvious about it, I turn on my heel to return to my mates—to safety. I’m about eight feet from the door when a man places a hand over my mouth. With his other hand he grabs around my waist and pulls me against him.

“If you make a single sound, I will gut you and leave your insides for your boyfriends to find.” His breath is hot on my ear. A familiar scent of pine and earth hits my nose.

I realize that the man holding me is the one from the failed hostage exchange. My heart jumps in my throat, and the world starts to go black. The last thought that skips through my mind is that my mates will burn the world to the ground to make sure that I’m found.

## Chapter 47: Livarius



### CHAPTER 47: LIVARIUS

“Have you ever been to Kildara,” Lysander asks me as we’re moving the boxes down an assembly line to unload the cart as fast as possible.

“No. I haven’t had any reason to. Growing up as a villager in poverty also didn’t provide many opportunities to travel.”

“I keep forgetting that even though you have royal blood, you weren’t afforded the same benefits.”

“Honestly, after seeing what it did to my sister, and what a miserable ass Zorvan is, I don’t see any benefit in being a royal. Despite how I came into existence, my mother loves me so much. She would have done absolutely anything for me.”

“Falmir is such a disgusting pig,” Lysander says. “For what it’s worth, once things have settled, we’ll work as hard as we can to make sure your mother and sister come back safely.”

My stomach churns. The thought has crossed my mind that The Sentinels would kill my mother in retaliation for the failed attempt to take Arden.

I shake the thought away, not willing to think about it anymore. “I’m honestly surprised it took Falmir this long to end up in a cell. But I guess toeing the line and being the son of a queen will keep you out of trouble for most things.”

“If Zorvan had known...” Tavin says.

“He wouldn’t have done anything. Of all the crimes that could be committed, raping a poor barmaid isn’t really a priority for prosecution.”

“Zorvan is different,” Lysander says.

“Doesn’t seem like it to me. He doesn’t see Arden as having any value, so he discarded her.”

Tavin smacks my arm and gestures toward the employee who’s helping us.

“Right,” I grumble and get back to passing boxes.

A shock of fear goes through me, but it isn’t mine. A second passes before I realize that it’s Arden’s. *We shouldn’t have let her go alone.*

“I’m going to go check on Arden,” I say as casually as possible, with my heart pounding in my ears.

I find my way to the front of the tavern, and fling open the door and enter, my eyes take a few seconds to adjust to the dim light. I scan every corner of the bar, but she’s not here. Tirphal is at the bar washing some glasses.

“Tirphal! Where’s my mate?” I ask.

“The human? Haven’t seen her since I left you lot in the barn.”

My stomach twists. I run back out and into the barn, “Arden is gone!” I shout.

“What?” Lysander asks, throwing his box on the ground.

“She was scared for a second. I felt it down the mate bond. I went to look for her in the tavern, and she wasn’t there.”

“Maybe she’s back in the room,” Tavin suggests.

We rush back to our room to see if we can find her. Why would she go all the way back to our room without letting us know? We throw open the door and search the bathroom, the sitting room, and even the closet. She’s not there.

Then I see it. A note with my name on it sitting on one of the pillows on the bed.

*Livarius,*

*Sorry to do this to you. You've been such a good help. Your girlfriend is worth more to me than any information you could provide. In exchange and as a sign of good faith, I'll release your little sister and your mother. They're of no use to me since you've become even further estranged from your father, and he got himself locked up.*

*Don't come looking for me. It won't end well for you.*

*Nev*

“No!” I say sitting on the bed. “No no no. This can't be happening.”

I hand the letter to Tavin and tug at my hair. *I have to get her back. I can't go without her.* Tavin reads the letter out loud and crumples it into a ball and whips it at the door. Lysander is not so restrained. He punches a hole in the wall.

“She told us something was wrong. Why did we let her go alone?”

“She was getting a drink, not running off to battle,” Tavin says.

“We need to talk to the fucking satyr,” I growl.

“I'll go get him,” Lysander says walking out the door and slamming it behind him

“Zorvan is going to kill us,” Tavin says.

“Zorvan?” I say with a dry laugh. “I'm going to kill us.”

After three or four minutes, Lysander returns with Tirphal in tow. He looks much more nervous than he did earlier.

“Grab our shit,” Lysander commands. “We're going back to the capital.”

We hadn't got anything out of any of our bags, so it doesn't take long to make sure we have all our stuff.

“Please, I don’t know what’s going on,” Tirphal says.

“If we find out you’re lying, I’ll cut off your head myself,” Lysander snarls. Then we’re teleporting back to the edge of the castle grounds.

Once we’re inside I’m about to go get Zorvan, but he’s already descending down the front hall steps.

“Where is she?!” he bellows.

“Taken,” I say.

He’s barely containing his dragon. They may have severed their bond, but his dragon doesn’t care. Arden is *his*.

“And you, barkeep, are you responsible?” he demands.

“N-No, of course not. I don’t know where she went.”

“Dungeons. Now. Get Airen, and the council. I’ll torture him first and if that doesn’t work then we’ll administer the truth serum.”

“No! Wait!” Tirphal yells. “I know who has her.”

“So do we. We just need to know why, and how they knew where to find her,” I say.

Tirphal begins to tremble under Zorvan’s gaze. He looks as though he might piss his pants. A whimper escapes him, but he doesn’t offer any more information.

“Okay, then we do this the hard way,” Zorvan says.

He grabs Tirphal by one of his horns and begins dragging him beneath the castle to the dungeons. A large crowd has gathered in the foyer and they watch us leave with curious and concerned looks. They don’t even bother to hide their gawking.

Down in the dungeon, we’re joined by the other keepers, and the remaining council members. Jarrah and Emyth are struggling to keep it together. Emyth’s reaper magic is radiating off of him. I place a hand on his shoulder. I

instantly feel ill from his magic. “Hey. Don’t kill the satyr before we get answers. Okay?”

“Sorry,” he grumbles.

It’s going to be a long night of getting information. And I’m not sure how long any of us will survive if anything happens to Arden.

## Epilogue: Zorvan



Jarrah throws open the door to my chambers and plops down unceremoniously in the chair across from me.

“Well, she’s gone to Kildara.”

“Good. She’s better off with her family.”

“Look. I know your pride tends to get in the way, but you need to realize you made a huge mistake.”

“The only mistake I made was not killing Arden as soon as I met her.”

A growl erupts from Jarrah. He takes a deep breath, reining in his lion. “You couldn’t have gone through with it even if you wanted to.”

I pretend to return to my paperwork. “Nuvian slaughtered my parents. I will not be tied to his spawn. This is for the best. For both of us.”

“You’re an idiot. I hoped I could talk some sense into you, but there’s no one left in that thick skull of yours except for an angry, bitter, old man. You’ll die alone. I will start training Jandar to take my place tomorrow. Once he’s up to speed, I’m joining my mate in Kildara. I love her, Zor. I won’t be without her.”

“If that’s how you feel, then so be it. I thought our friendship meant more than that, but I cannot stop you. If there’s nothing else, I need to get some work done.”

“Do not try to turn this on me. You have been testing the strength of our friendship since the moment you wiped her memories and dragged her away from her home. You’re selfish. I always thought that the denizens who called you cruel just didn’t know you like I did. Now I know that they had it all right. I feel sorry for you. I hope that you don’t grow to regret your decisions.”

I don't say another word, I just gesture to the door. He's right about one thing. I am selfish. I always have been. But what he doesn't understand is that I already regret every choice I've made when it comes to Arden, and I'll regret them for the rest of my life. But what's done is done, and I can't take it back now.

After I finish up the most pressing matters of my work, I creep down the hall to Arden's room. It's a mess. The staff haven't been in to clean it.

I step into her closet. She left all the formal gowns that she never got to wear. Blevora outdid herself with the ball gown. Arden would have looked absolutely stunning in it. The bodice is sheer silver with emerald green beading to cover her breasts. The skirt of the dress and the bolero match the beading and have silver beads embroidered on them that match my crown. Blevora knew exactly what she was doing when she made this dress.

I walk back to her bedroom and lay on her bed and inhale the scent of strawberries and sugar. Along with it are the distinct scents of my brothers. I have no family left, save for them. They may not be blood, but they're everything to me, and now half of them are gone, and it's only a matter of time until the others join them. If Jarrah is leaving, then Emyth will find any reason he can to go, too.

I'm not much different than my father. I've betrayed the people who mean the most to me because of my pride. I can't let go of what Nuvian did, but severing the bond...

I wonder how long I can make the staff leave this room the way it is. I suspect not long. I wrap myself in her sheets, and try to block out the fact that I'll never see her again.

I must drift off to sleep, because a few hours later I wake to the sound of Walden running through the halls, shouting, searching for me.

"ZORVAN!" He's right outside the room.

I exit and his eyes widen then he shakes his head,  
“your men are back. Arden is not with them. They brought the  
tavernkeep from Belridge.”

I immediately feel sick to my stomach. I rush down the  
stairs to find my keepers, Livarius, and the satyr from the  
tavern.

“Where is she?” I roar.

But I know the answer. She’s gone. But the question  
is...who has her? *It doesn’t matter.* I will not stop until she has  
safely returned to her rightful place. By my side as the  
reigning queen of Feldorn.

To be continued...

# *ABOUT THE AUTHOR*

## **KD Fraser**

KD Fraser is a stay at home parent to three boys who loves drinking too much coffee and reading entirely too much smut. She lives with her three kids, three cats, and dog in central Pennsylvania.

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