

G B A I L L E Y



Fates
OF
Monsters

THE WYERN CLAN SERIES
BOOK FIVE

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FATES OF MONSTERS

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BOOK FIVE

G. BAILEY

Fates of Monsters.

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Trigger Warning: Mentions of SA, feel free to email at gbaileyauthor@gmail.com for more information.

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QUOTE

She will rise. With a spine of steel, and a roar like thunder, she will rise. - Nicole Lyons

MAP



CONTENTS

[Prophecy](#)

[Description](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Other Books by G. Bailey](#)

[Description](#)

18. [Bonus Read](#)

19. [Bonus Read](#)

PROPHECY

“Reborn to mortal life five times over,
Each time, a drop of power taken from the rift.
Monster cursed is her court,
Royalty protected is her fate,
She will be Queen of the Ruined Clan.
When twelve sit the throne,
She will be born at last.
No longer mortal will she be.”

DESCRIPTION



We are the last defense against the Rift and its monsters.

I have to stop them all before they destroy Wyvcelm.

Lost in the Rift, Emerson and I have to find our way back to our world before it's too late. Junepit City is gone, and now Louie has all the power he needs to destroy the rest of our world. But the veil is calling to me, and there is a reason I fell into the Rift world. The goddess left a sword in the Rift, but the price to claim the sword might cost too much.

It's our only hope.

Will the sword's magic be enough to stop Louie?

My name is Calliophe Eveningstar, and I am queen of the Wyerns and fae.

With my king and mate, we will save them all.

Or there will be nothing left.

Fates of Monsters is a full-length Fae Romance with a Beauty and the Beast twist. This is a spicy, slow burn, enemies to lovers romance. This is book five of the series.

PROLOGUE

LORENZO



We were never their monsters, and when it comes down to it, they will take our help. Fae flood through the mirror portals endlessly until I can't see who is going through at all, but it's mostly fae who do not look like they have had a good meal in a while.

Goldway City is one of the most stunning places in this world, all the houses made of pure gold, along with its high walls that block out the sea. Red trees line the pristine streets, and even the stones are dotted with gold flecks in the stonework. All this wealth, but in the end, nothing will save them from the Rift King. Most of the city has completely ignored our warning, and it's getting really, really frustrating to see some of them walking away, back to their homes.

Posy grabs the arm of a fae boy, only about eleven and I step through the portal to help her. "I know your mother said to ignore us and return, but I'm telling you, death is coming. You won't escape it. Get through the portal."

He roughly tugs his arm from her grip. "You're a monster like they are. We don't need your help."

Posy places her hands on her hips as the boy walks back to a group waiting for him. They all follow him away, and Posy looks at me, sensing me watching her. She is broken, much like my own heart. I don't know how either of us is standing right now. Emerson and his fae female, Calli, are gone. The best, pure lights of this dark world are just dead. I didn't know Calliophe all that well, but I find myself grieving her. Maybe she was right about the memories... That means I just lost

more family than I thought. The crown on my head is heavy, and part of me already resents it. I will protect whoever I can, but this crown belongs to my brother. Solandis is doing most of the work, even though she is a shell of herself too. The Rift King has won, and I don't know what I'm fighting for anymore.

A baby's cry fills my ears, and I look down, right into the eyes of a dark-haired fae baby clinging to my arm. Her mother tugs her hands away. "I'm so sorry. She must like you."

I touch her cheek—that shows how thin she is. I'm fighting for them, for people here, who can at least spend the last of their days safe and fed. I can do that. Zurine tells me to put one foot in front of the other and keep going until there is nothing left to give. "Go through the portal. It's okay."

Posy has begun to throw people through the portal with her air magic, ignoring their shouts. She is far more brutal with telling them to get into the portal, and I'm almost tempted to smile. She is inspiring.

Goldway City spreads out in front of me, and it's shaped almost like a giant crown with its high barricaded walls on the edges, with spiked towers in a circle around the entire city. We're on a slightly raised hill just outside it, after their populous leader agreed to let us evacuate whoever we could. They've done evacuations themselves to the sea and islands in the distance, but that was for the rich only. The poor fae and mortal slaves have been left behind like they aren't people at all. They never stood a chance, and it was a good idea to come here and give them one. My soldiers stand at the edges of the path to the portals, pushing more people along. It makes me sick to my stomach to think how many they would just leave here to die.

I walk over to Posy, needing to be near her. Not that she wants me anywhere near her, but sometimes, I find her staring at me. Sometimes I let hope dig its traitorous claws into my heart. It doesn't matter to me if she never chooses to accept our mating, to be with me at all. Her safety is important and, while I'm still breathing, I will make sure she survives this war. She's all I have left. She and my sister, but Emerson is

gone. My brother is dead. My heart clenches. I can't think of him for more than a second without wanting to break apart.

"The idiots are still refusing to believe what happened in Junepit City," Posy growls. "The idiots will die in their disbelief."

My hand itches to stroke her back, just to comfort her. Goddess above, she smells amazing. The wind blows her hair across her shoulder, the strands inches from my cheek. "They are stubborn, and they have made their choice. Maybe they will change their mind before he gets here."

Posy looks up at me. She is tiny, but I have planned every single way I could use that to both our advantages. Fuck, I need to stop looking at her. "You're going to be a king. Can't you just force them through the portals, and then we will deal with it later?"

"I might be next in line to the throne, but I'm not anywhere near as powerful as Emerson's wa—" I pause. I can't talk about him in the past tense. "I can't do that. They wouldn't take it well even if I did."

"They'd be alive," she answers with a bite in her tone, not for me, but for the fact she can't convince them to do what she wants. "I can't watch millions die again. I just can't." She stops moving, her body locking up as we both sense the same thing. A darkness, a sense of something very wrong that floods every warning system in my body. I turn to the coast, and on the glittering seas in the distance is a black line. The Rift army on the seas. It is full of ships, and a single black ship is heading straight towards the city. Louie doesn't need an army to win this city. He is the army. Grey magic spreads out from the ship, like a cloud, wrapping around the front of the city barricades. They explode loudly, the explosion ringing through the air as I step closer to Posy. People scream around us, running for the portals in droves.

A figure appears in the settling dust, and even from here, I can see him. I'd know that evil anywhere. He took my brother. I take a step forward, but Posy grabs my hand, her skin soft

where she touches me. “We need to leave, or we die here. We will get revenge, but not here. Not now.”

I look back at Louie once, gritting my teeth. “Get in the portal now! EVERYONE RUN!” Posy doesn’t resist as I pull her with me, pushing through the crowds and into the portal. Posy stands in front of the portal, her arm stretched out. A heavy wind whips through the air, pulling everyone nearby into the portals with a crash, knocking her over, and I catch her before she can fall. As I hold Posy, we both watch from the other side of the mirror in horror. Grey magic spreads out from Louie, destroying the city bit by bit before it gets to us. The mirror shatters and there is silence... so much silence.

Posy’s bright eyes find mine in the darkness. “He just destroyed the last fae city. That means he’s coming for us next.”

CHAPTER
ONE



I destroyed an entire city. I'm a monster. Everything that happened flashes into my mind until that final moment plays over and over.

Louie leant down. "When everything is dead and gone, I will stop. This world will burn, and you will be the trigger."

I frowned, wondering what he meant as he ripped the crown off his own head and slammed it down on mine. Time paused as a power like I've never known ripped through my soul, burning my skin like fire. I screamed as the power built within me, and it was more than fire or ice. It was darkness. It was shadows, light, and everything this world needs to survive. All of it built in my chest as I fell to my knees, grasping my stomach, and suddenly my power exploded. A flurry of fire, ice, shadow, and darkness all in one, rolled out around me in waves that felt like they are being torn from my soul. I couldn't stop screaming as I lost control of the power, unable to do anything, to control it at all.

Suddenly, there is silence. Too much silence.

"You're stronger than predicted. Thank you for giving me your power to share with the other rulers, blood of the goddess, but now it's time you die." Louie roughly pulled the crown from my head, ripping my hair with it. "The prophecy was right about your power. 'Reborn to mortal life five times over, each time, a drop of power taken from the rift.'" He repeated the first lines of the prophecy about me. I never knew what they meant. "You had so much power from the Rift, more given each time you were reborn. Now that I have your power

in the crown, this world will fall.” I couldn’t hear him, fear him, or see anything but the destruction around me. Ash fell slowly from the sky, right down on my cheeks, and I lifted my hand to brush it away. I screamed in horror as I realized what I had done. What he made me do. Junepit City is gone, and there was nothing left but ash piles, spread in every direction to the sea and thick forest. I had destroyed an entire city and murdered millions.

WARM HANDS CUP my cheeks as I suck in the bitterly cold air. My ears are ringing as I wake up, and all of it feels like it’s a nightmare. I don’t want to open my eyes, because I might see the destruction again and again. See the falling ash, the destructive magic that exploded out of me and Louie. Goddess, Louie. He claimed to have stolen my power, and with that power, he could destroy the whole world so easily. It would be all my fault just like Junepit City is. The city is gone. It was me. I destroyed an entire city. Whether Louie made me do it, whether it was me completely losing control of my power, whatever happened, I killed millions. Millions are dead because of me and that crown. I can see their blood, so much of it, devouring my soul. I destroyed the city. The city of the goddess. The one place I wanted to see for so many years, and it’s gone because of me. A sob crawls out of my throat. “It’s my fault.”

“IT’S NOT, Callioppe. Open your eyes.” Emerson’s firm, deep voice cuts through my thoughts, and I blink against the dark night. Emerson is lying on the ground next to me, both of us on our sides, and the first thing I see are his moonless purple eyes. His wings are in tatters, falling over his body, and there is so much blood on him. He doesn’t move much, only enough to grab my hip and tug me against him with a grunt.

I WRAP my arms around his neck as he rests his forehead on mine. His breaths are shaky, and he feels cold. Too cold. “How injured are you? We need—”

“I’M FINE,” he grumbles, but each word is laced with a sharp pain that no one could miss. I lift my head back, blowing out a breath. He is alive and arguing with me. That’s good, that’s normal. I can see from his eyes alone that he’s in so much pain, but he cups my face once more. He runs his thumbs under my eyes to wipe away the tears. “You destroyed and killed no one in that city. Junepit fell to him, and he used you as a tool, but it is he who destroyed that city. You were the sword, but he was the one who killed with you. In battles, we don’t blame our weapons for death.”

I KNOW he is making a good point, but all I can see is that horrid, uncontrollable power that exploded out of me. “But if I wasn’t there...”

EMERSON GRUNTS. “Whether you use that power or whether it was him and his monster army, the city would have been destroyed either way. No one was going to survive him there. They had no army, no defense, and they didn’t leave in time.” He tells me softly. “You couldn’t have known.”

“Emerson,” I breathe out. I need his comfort, but not him like this.

“I remember you, Doe,” he whispers as he leans forward. My heart pounds as he kisses me so softly, so gently, and more tears fall down my face. “My soul and heart never forgot, but I’m glad my mind has finally caught up. I’m sorry... for everything. You shouldn’t have made that deal, Callioppe. He could have taken you as his; he could have killed you. I’m glad it was only my memories, and fucking goddess above, I’m glad they are back. If I wasn’t—” He pauses with a wince of pain, the color leaching from his skin. “I’d take you here and now in the mud wherever the fuck we are.”

I break down into tears, tightening my arms around him, hearing him wince, but he hugs me tightly back. “I’ve missed you so much, Emerson. It’s like you were a shadow.”

“But always yours,” he whispers in my ear. “I’m yours. With no memories, body, or life, I’d still find my way back to you. My soul breathes for you, and it will until we are nothing but stars in the sky.”

I kiss him softly, enjoying the soft embrace as my heart warms from his words. I love him and we have each other. Everything else, we can fight together from now on, and this is such a relief, like a weight has been taken off my shoulders. I lift my head, looking around where we are, but there is nothing but darkness and mud. It’s just empty here. I don’t sense anyone nearby and there isn’t much we can do until the sun rises. I’m not sure I can move Emerson on my own when he is in this state. He won’t admit it, but I doubt he can even stand. “*How* do you have your memories back? I don’t understand.”

Emerson brushes some of my hair to the side. “I was hit by your power, and it all came back in one go. Something just snapped.” My power broke the sea god’s magic? It must be something to do with the crown and how it made my power change and explode like it did.

“How did you barely manage to hold up against that power?” I question. “I know you’re injured, but everyone else is dead.” I close my eyes. “I wondered why Louie faced us alone. I thought maybe he thought he didn’t need them, but it wasn’t that. He knew what would happen if he put the crown on my head and somehow made that power explode out of me. His army was safe, and he tricked us.”

Emerson kisses me. “My magic protected me, barely. You’re far more powerful than anyone I’ve seen, even me.”

“I destroyed an entire city, Emerson. I killed millions with that power, and now Louie has it,” I all but whisper. “He is going to turn our world into ash with my power. We have to think of a way to stop him before he gets to your cities. Wherever you took us, we—”

He stops me. “I didn’t bring us here. I had no power left after defending myself. It’s why I told you to run.” He softly frowns at me. “Which I meant run away, not to me.”

“I was always going to run to you,” I mutter. Like I’d run away when he was in danger. “But if you didn’t make the portal, who did? And where are we?” The answer comes only a few minutes later as a soft grey light spreads across the empty sky. I stand up, my eyes widening as I realize where we are. “The Rift. This is where I was born...”

My feet sink in the thick mud as I look over the outline of the city in the distance. Emerson grunts as he tries to sit up, but he can’t. I go back to his side. “That’s why my power feels strange. Broken.”

I don’t say it, but I can’t feel my powers at all. No fire. No ice. Just nothing. “There’s a city over there, and I don’t know who lives there or whether they will help us, but we should go that way.”

“You should go,” Emerson suggests. “I can’t walk. I’m pretty sure both my legs are broken, and I’ve lost a lot of blood. My body needs time to heal.” He closes his eyes. “Leave me here.”

“No.” I lower myself down so we are face to face. My pink hair falls around our faces, blocking out the world. “I’m never, ever leaving you. Especially not when you’re injured. We go everywhere together because fate seems to love splitting us up, and I’m done with that shit.”

“Callioppe,” he murmurs, his eyes darkening. “I’m inclined to agree on that, but I’m absolutely fucking useless right now. We’re in danger here. You need to go and I can’t follow right now. Sitting here in the mud is asking for trouble. Where is my sword?”

I find it in the mud nearby and lug the heavy black sword over to his side before sitting down. I’m too tired to argue with him about leaving or not. This world is so strange. There are no birds in the sky or even sounds of bugs chirping. There’s nothing but dark grey shadows, and it’s worse than my dreams. It smells worse too. Louie was dragged here... he must have been so scared. The part of my heart that still thinks of Louie as a little boy crumbles at the thought of what he went through. I promised to protect him and his mum. I failed

them both. Emerson's warm hand tightens in mine, like he can hear my thoughts.

“Doe, pick up my sword,” Emerson growls low. I hear the sound of something coming near, and it's moving fast. I pick up Emerson's sword and move to stand in front of him. I lift the heavy, nearly unusable sword as the sound only gets closer. No one is touching my king.

CHAPTER
TWO



There is nothing I can do to prepare for a fight when Emerson's sword is so heavy and my powers have all but disappeared. I would still fight to the end for him. Emerson is trying to sit up, only for more of his blood to sink into the mud and more color to drain from his face. I can't tell him to stay down, but we both know he can't fight either. My blood feels like it's on fire as I watch the horizon, seeing a dot coming closer, and I can't make out what it is.

Did I make a portal here? I wasn't aware I could even do that. Perhaps I did. But why would I bring us to the Rift? It's hardly somewhere safe. I spot black horses first, two of them, and they are running fast, lugging an old wooden cart behind them. They see us first and the driver turns the horses our way, tugging the reins to slow down. I glance at Emerson, who is watching. When the carriage is close, I see two hooded people sitting on a bench at the front of the carriage. The smaller—a female, I'd guess—jumps off the seat and pushes her hood back, her white hair flashing against the grey sky. Though her white hair would suggest she's old, she looks young, and she frowns at us with her grey eyes. The second person follows, a bulky man who jumps off the other side, and his hood falls off. He has a shaved head, with white painted marks drawn into his dark skin. Both of them have grey eyes, but hers are dark and his are like the moon, bright and light.

“Do you need help, strangers?” the female questions, cautiously looking at the sword in my hand. “We mean you no harm. We don't even carry weapons—”

“Don’t tell them that. They might try to rob us!” the male blurts out.

The female sighs. “One of them is badly injured. I could smell the blood a mile away. The female doesn’t look in great shape either. Stop worrying.”

“Your kindness will get us killed one day, my darling,” he mutters, but he doesn’t stop her from coming closer.

I lower my sword. “What are you doing out here?” she asks. Her accent is so different, so unfamiliar, like the male’s.

Clearing my throat, I glance at Emerson for a second. He is watching them both with nothing but hostility. Emerson doesn’t like strangers. “My mate is injured and we’re kind of stuck here.”

“Poor souls. How’d you even get out here?” she inquires and looks at the male, who I’d guess is her partner. “My husband and I are traveling to the city. We can take your friend if we can carry him into the back. I know a healer who has some power. I’m sure they’ll help with whatever has happened to your mate. I’m not sure about the wings. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a male with wings like that. Where are you from?”

Too many questions. “We keep ourselves hidden.” Lying to them when they are just trying to help feels wrong, but telling her that I’m from another world might not exactly go down well.

“Well, why—” She pauses as she stares at my eyes for a long time. Too long. I start to realize she might be suspicious about who I am. Louie always said people in the Rift would know me, and I forgot that until right now. Fuck, we might be in more trouble. “Fenrith, come here. Look at her eyes.”

My hand grips tightly around the sword as the man comes over, and when he sees my eyes, he immediately drops to his knees and bows his head. “You’re a descendant of the goddess. It is an honor to meet you and be here to help.” His head stays completely bowed. The female does the same, bowing her head low, but she doesn’t kneel in the mud. I’m too shocked to say anything. “We are your servants.”

“Please get out of the mud,” I begin, looking at Emerson, who raises an eyebrow.

He smirks, and even when he looks terribly injured, he is gorgeous when he smiles. “I’ve always been a fan of bowing for you, Doe, but I didn’t know there were others doing the same.”

I roll my eyes at him and turn back to them. “No bowing, and how did you know that I’m a descendant of the goddess?”

Emerson’s eyes widen and his mouth parts, the only sign I’ve surprised him at all. I have a long story to explain to him when we are safe.

“Your eyes,” the female softly tells me, her cheeks bright red. “Your kind are nothing but stories told here and there, but you are royalty to us. There are a few of your family that live in the protection of the veil, but they don’t come here. I’m confused about why you’re here. Did you come to help us?”

The veil. I’ve heard that before. “It’s a long story, but I don’t know how I can help you.” I look down at Emerson. “But we need a healer. Can you help us?”

“It would be an honor,” Fenrith comments, taking a step closer to me, and Emerson growls at him. He steps back.

“What’s your name? My name is Callioppe, and this is Emerson,” I introduce us with a glare at Emerson. We need help, and his possessiveness might make them run away.

“Fenrith and I’m Dollisa.” She looks at her husband. “We should get the door off the back and slide him onto to it before carrying him.”

Fenrith quickly gets to work on the door. It takes all three of us to get Emerson on the board and carry him into the back of their carriage, with Emerson watching them like enemies the entire time. Fenrith heads to the front of the cart to ready the horses, and Dollisa stays in the back with me. Emerson has passed out from blood loss, and I touch his cheek, hating how cold he feels. He must have fought to stay awake. I lug his sword to his side.

“What is he? Your mate?” Dollisa questions after the cart has been moving a while.

It’s so cold that my breaths come out in puffs of smoke, and I curl closer to Emerson. “Wyern.”

The world is silent as she looks at me. “You’re not from here, are you? This world, I mean. You talk very strangely.”

“No, I’m not. I’d prefer if we kept that between each other. I just need to find a healer, and then I’ll be leaving.” I pause. The veil. I remember where I heard it before. With the goddess and part of her visions, she showed me a veil hiding a sword. I have to go there and find the sword, and maybe find some answers to how I even got here. Maybe the powers of the crown wanted me to find the sword if that’s even possible. Another quiet thought trickles into the back of my mind. They said descendants live here. Maybe it’s my parents. Hope burns brightly in my chest, even when I know I shouldn’t feed those flames. They could be dead for all I know, but there is a chance. A slight chance. “The veil. I need to get there. Could you give me directions from the city?”

“Yes, it’s not too far from here,” she explains. “I’ll stay around until your mate is better so I can guide you along.” Dollisa looks out of the open back of the cart where the door used to be. “We weren’t coming this way. It’s a little farther out from the road but, last night, I woke up in a cold sweat with this overwhelming urge to take the far road back to the city. Fenrith trusts my instincts, and now I believe the goddess led me this way to help you. I feel very blessed.”

My skin prickles. “I think you weren’t the only one led here.” The goddess must have left a spell or something on the crown to lead me here when it was used. It’s the only thing that makes sense. She hid the crowns here so the elemental gods couldn’t get them, and it makes sense she hid the sword here too. That’s why Louie had to be taken to this world for the crowns to work. The sword has to be here too, and I hope it’s for me. I can’t go back to fight Louie like this.

“When you leave for the veil, you can take our carriage and horses. We don’t need them once we’re in the city, and the

horses are old. We were going to let them go free,” she offers.

“I can’t—”

She holds her hand up. “You can and will, Calliophe. We’re staying with our family in the city, and they will happily share some supplies for you. The healer will only be able to do so much for your mate, and it will take some time for his natural healing to kick in while he sleeps this off.” She frowns at me. “You should cover up those fae ears and hair, and your eyes, when we’re in the city. There’ll be too many questions already, and people there... not all of them are kind. Most are starving and desperate.” She pulls out a bag and gives me a thick black hooded cloak.

I take the cloak. She even gets out a blanket and covers up Emerson to stop him from shivering. Maybe she knew I was about to put the cloak over him instead. “Thank you. Why are you helping me so much?”

Dollisa smiles slightly. “People in this world were told that the goddess would come back one day and that she would save us all. But we knew that the goddess was gone and magic left this world with her. We always hoped one of her descendants would come back and bring magic back to us. Save us. This world is dying.” Her eyes darken. “Most of us are starving. Food doesn’t grow here. Not much anymore. Many of us have died.” She sucks in a breath. It’s only now I notice how thin her dark-skinned frame is. “There used to be twenty rich, amazing cities around this world, but there are only four left. They’re in terrible states, and any magic left is tiny, useless.” Dollisa looks right into my eyes. “I’m helping you because, I guess if you’re not from here, perhaps you’ll look back at two strangers who helped you in the mud and take us somewhere better than here.”

“My world isn’t dying... not yet,” I whispered. “It is at war, and I don’t know how I got myself here, but if I can open portals, it means that I should be able to get others to my world. I was born here, in the Rift, so I’ve always been between two worlds. I think more than I ever knew.” Five times I’ve been reborn, taking power from the Rift. “Can you tell me everything you know about the Rift and the veil?”

The ride takes several hours to get into the city, and the rickety cart somehow manages to stay together. The healer knew Fenrith well and didn't ask too many questions, even when she saw me and Emerson. The healer only said a prayer to the goddess before healing Emerson in the cart so we didn't have to move him. She asked several questions about what he is, but she covered all of his scars in a thick paste and claimed it would somehow speed up his healing. She set his wings with sickening cracks, which woke him up with roars. I held him down and told him it would be okay, even as she fixed his broken legs next.

Dollisa drops a bag into the back next to Emerson and nods at me once as I climb into the seat, looking in the direction of the veil as I grab the reins. The horses' neighs fill the silent world. "Good luck, Calliophe. May the goddess ride with you to the veil, and be careful. Not everyone is welcome in the veil, and many do not come back. Ever."

CHAPTER
THREE



I jump out of my skin as someone lands right next to me on the flat rock. “Emerson!”

Emerson grabs my chin and kisses me, his lips feverishly pressing against my own. I gasp, letting him deepen the kiss, and I sink into him, relaxing into his arms. Emerson pulls back, and he frowns, looking me over for any injuries, I suspect. I do the same to him, and thankfully, it looks like his wings are fine now and his legs, too. He also doesn't look so pale now. “How long have I been asleep? Are you well?” He sits straight up, blinking into the dim darkness of the night, but he doesn't stop holding me. I'm glad he doesn't. I don't want him to ever stop holding me. Emerson looks around, back at the horses tied to a dead tree and the rock shade where I left the cart. He was asleep when I last checked on him and grabbed some food. I just found somewhere relatively safe, a big rock that hides us well under it, to stop the cart and let the horses have a drink.

Horses neigh and dig their hooves into the ground as I lean my head on his shoulder, offering him my drink and some of my food. “I'm fine. Drink and eat.” He does as I ask. A first for everything. “The healer said you were near death. It's been three days since then.”

His eyes tighten and I swear the shadows crawl to him. “No one hurt you?”

“No. They knew I was a descendant of the goddess, and they decided to be kind to us. They gave me directions to the veil, where I suspect the sword is, and that's...” I drift off

when he looks confused. “Shit, I forgot you don’t know this part.”

“Doe, start at the beginning,” he suggests. I smile before filling him in on everything I’ve learnt, all the visions and everything else. When I’m done, he picks me up and pulls me onto his lap before taking a bite out of the bars that I was given. Emerson pulls a face as he swallows the barely edible bars. And I don’t blame him. This food is disgusting, but I’m extremely thankful for it, especially when I learned that they’re starving here.

“I don’t think the veil is too far off now.” I take a bite of the bar when he offers it to me. “Dollisa told me it was about three and a half days’ ride.”

“We could fly the last part,” Emerson offers. “My magic is back, so it doesn’t matter either way, as I can defend us both.”

My eyes drift to the distant light that appeared only a day ago. “I don’t know what we’re walking into in the veil, but flying in might be a bad idea. We should try to fit in. As much as I think Dollisa and her husband were helping, they could have been lying to us for all I know. The goddess’s vision showed me a veil, the sword hidden behind it, but nothing else about this place.”

“You’re hoping to find your parents there?”

I nod, leaning on his chest. He tucks me into him, and his scent wraps around me. I let myself relax for the first time in days. “I’m happy you’re awake and healed. I can’t do this on my own.”

He lifts my head with his finger under my chin until I’m looking into his eyes. He leans down, passionately kissing me until I’m breathless when he pulls away. “You never needed me, Calli. Together, we are stronger, but you are a fucking amazing female all on your own.” He nudges my nose, and I can’t help but smile. “I know you’re still lost in your head about everything that’s happened, but imagine a future where we don’t have to fight every single day.”

“What do you see for our future, Emerson?”

His thumb runs down my neck. “I want to travel the world with you, show you what makes the world special. I want my people to cheer and celebrate the change of having a fae queen, and for them to celebrate when we have children. If you want them. I want a future where we laugh every single day, we have fun and just enjoy each other. We have never had that, and fuck, I can’t wait for it. A future with you is worth the wars.”

“And the Conquest of the Sea?” I breathe. “I would love a lifetime of never dealing with the elemental gods again. I can see why the goddess locked them away.”

“Fucking bastard sea god,” Emerson growls. “He will pay for taking my memories. One day, he will pay.” The vow sends shivers down my spine.

“I met the air goddess, Posy’s mother, and I thought she was good,” I mutter. “She can’t be trusted. We’ll have to keep Paxton safe in the city after the war. Make sure he never goes to his father. I need to explain it all to Posy.”

“Your bat is my brother’s mate,” Emerson muses with a small smirk. We both look at each other and burst into laughter.

They are both such opposites. She is all fire, and he is more like the sea, cool and calm. “We shouldn’t laugh, but I’m pretty sure someone’s having a laugh making those two fated mates. I’m pretty sure they’re either going to destroy each other or be an epic love story.”

Emerson kisses me. “I remember a time when you held a dagger to my throat and hated me. Maybe the fates know us better than we do and they are both exactly what each other needs.”

“Maybe,” I muse, brushing my lips down his jaw. His hands tighten on my hips.

“Behave, you’re too weak for anything,” he growls. I nip his neck and he growls louder, lightly tickling me until I’m laughing and pushing him away. He sighs, leaning back. “Lorenzo was obsessed with fated mates as a kid. He read

book after book on them, and he will figure out a way to make it work. I don't want to be around them while they figure out the entire mating process."

I shiver. "Neither do I. I love them both, but anyone nearby is going to get hurt."

He looks out at the grey expanse of mud and grey skies. There's no sun, no stars or moon. It's just nothing. No clouds. Just empty grey skies. How they grow anything here is beyond me. From the taste of these bars, anything they have grown is pretty disgusting. Dawn, well, the grey light, rises soon after, and Emerson joins me on the cart seats, taking over the reins before we get going again. Every few hours, we stop to give the horses a break before carrying on, the light in the distance getting closer. It's not like sunlight, but something clearer and almost white.

Shimmering beyond the horizon, the light is so close, and the path ends, leaving us with rocks to climb to go any further. We let the horses go, leaving the cart in the mud before we start climbing the rocks. By the time we get through the rocks and back to mud on the other side, the wind is chilled, and it's freezing. I'm thankful for the cloak as I pull it tighter around myself. Emerson keeps his blanket wrapped around his neck, and he glances at me. "Here, take—"

"Don't you dare take it off. You'll freeze and die," I cut him off. "I'm okay. We just need to keep moving."

He grumbles at that, but he takes my hand, pulling me close for his body heat. "We should fly."

I shake my head. It's too windy, and it would rip into his newly healed wings. We both know it, but the stubborn Wyern can't see past wanting to look after me. Thankfully, the veil slowly comes into view. The veil is huge. It looks like a wall of water, all of it shimmering high into the sky in the shape of a triangle. Such a stark contrast against the darkness behind it and all around. Where we get closer, I notice that there are mountains everywhere, capped with snow. The veil is nestled in the mountains. Something seems to drum within my chest the closer we get, like my blood is coming alive. There are

several houses built out of stone, old towers poking high into the sky from the mountains. Something about them looks familiar, and it takes me a while to realize that I've seen those spiked towers before in the goddess's memories. "This was once a city."

Emerson looks at me for a second. He doesn't question how I know. "This is what will happen to our world if we don't stop Louie. I'm sorry for what he has become. I know you love him."

My heart hurts. "He isn't Louie anymore. Just a shell with a monster within. I'm a monster hunter and I will stop him. Our world can't become like this. I have a feeling the sword is what I need to fix everything, and I can't leave without it. Maybe it's why I'm here. Louie has the crowns, but the sword... it is more than the crowns. The crowns are seven broken pieces, and the sword has never been damaged. I've never believed in fate, or any of this, but I think I was born to stop this. To stop him."

Emerson kisses the top of my head. "You won't be alone facing him, and you're right, the boy is gone." He suddenly pulls out his sword, and darkness spreads around us like a mist. I follow his gaze to see the outline of two people in front of the veil, the light making it hard to see much of them.

A male voice rings out in the darkness, and Emerson tenses. "Speak, or you will be killed."

CHAPTER
FOUR



Darkness explodes.

Emerson's magic is the pure night, controlled by him, and I can't see a thing within it. Emerson's hand is tight within mine, and he leads us through the darkness, dragging some of it back to reveal two people holding up with their own magic against Emerson. The male has flames spinning fast, pushing the shadows back, and a female is right at his side. I stare at them, taking a shocked step forward. My heart feels like it leaps to life in my chest. They are my parents. "Emerson! Stop! They are my parents!"

Emerson immediately makes the darkness disappear, and the male drops the flames in confusion. Emerson doesn't lower his sword. "Make one move towards us, and you die."

"Emerson," I mutter, tugging his hand. My parents turn to me, and I know they aren't going to hurt us, not with the look they both give me. It's the same look I must be giving them. It's like seeing an old friend after a really long time and barely recognizing them. They look so much older than when I saw them in the vision, yet they still have unbelievable beauty about them. They are fully dressed in weathered brown leathers, and they both have silver blades in their hands. My mother looks at me with the same pink eyes that I have, but she has long white hair braided all the way down her back, and her blade falls to the dirt between us.

She's running for me in a second, and Emerson lets me go, realizing we're not in any danger. I run to her too, crashing into her as she holds me tight. Tears fall down my face and

onto hers as she cries too. “Calliophe. My Calliophe.” She pulls back, cupping my face and pressing a soft kiss to my forehead. I’ve always wondered what my mother would be like, and until recently I could never imagine her at all. She smells sweet and earthy as she stares at me like I’m not real. She’s a little shorter than me, and in the corner of my eye, I see my father heading our way. He watches Emerson, and Emerson is doing exactly the same. He’s ridiculously tall, and I must have leveled off somewhere in the middle of them. My father looks at me, his blue eyes wide, both of them completely speechless.

“Calliophe,” he finally breathes out. “You’re... our daughter. Calliophe.”

“I know you are my parents,” I answer with a smile. “And yes, I know my name is Calliophe. My foster parents kept that name.”

“How?” my mother questions, touching my ears, searching my face. “How do you even know about us? We haven’t seen you since you were a baby. How are you here? Are you fae now? How is that possible?”

“That’s many questions for her, darling,” my father answers before I can. Emerson comes close to my side, his hand resting on my back, though he doesn’t say anything. His eyes say enough; he doesn’t trust them. I get why he doesn’t, but I do, and it’s more than just the fact they are my parents, but the fact that the goddess showed me them once. They loved me with everything they had, and I trust that vision, because I see the same love right now.

My mother looks between us before focusing on me again, like she can’t do anything else but look at me. “It doesn’t matter. You’re here now. You’re here and you’re alive. I’ve prayed to the goddess every single day of your life. I never thought I’d be blessed with a moment of time with you again.” Her voice breaks. “You’re here. My baby is here.”

Tears fall fast down my cheeks as my chest hurts. “I’ve wanted to find you for a long time... This doesn’t seem real.”

My father moves in front of me and cups my cheek. “Welcome home, Calliophe.” He pulls me into his arms, tucking me under his chin, and my mother soon joins until both of them hold me close for a minute, hugging me tightly. I’ve looked for them my entire lives. I’ve wanted to know who they were. I’ve wanted a family. I got to the point in my life where I didn’t let anyone close because I was so scared that I’d be rejected. I thought my parents left me, but I suspect they didn’t choose that fate for us all. They prayed for me, wished to see me again. I don’t know why I was not kept here with them, but they love me. I can tell from how they hold me, from the shock on their faces. All of it tells me enough. They love me and they are my family, too. I look at Emerson, and he smiles softly at me for a second. I found my chosen family with him and my birth family too.

My father leans back, looking over my head at the dirt plains. “Perhaps we best go inside. Who is your friend, and can he be trusted? We need to have a long discussion, and what will be told cannot be heard by anyone untrusted.”

“You must have questions,” my mother softly says, rubbing my back. “My name is Phillipe, and this is Griffyen. We’d love for you to call us mother and father.”

A host of emotions flash through my mind as I think of the foster mothers and fathers in my life, who sacrificed for me, like Louie’s parents. I clear my throat. “This is Emerson. He is my mate.” I leave out the fact he is a king, because they must already know he is powerful, and I don’t want them to fear him more than they might already do. “Or *will be* my mate? We have had a long few months, and there hasn’t been a right time.”

“Time does seem to be against us,” Emerson states, coming to my side. He takes my hand as I step closer to his side. “But I wish you no harm. It’s a pleasure to meet you both. I love your daughter and we have no secrets between us, including how she is a descendant of the goddess. What does that make you, and how much danger is my mate in?”

My father calmly looks Emerson in the eye. “Welcome to the family we didn’t know existed anymore, and she has been

in danger since she was born because she is special. So special.” Emerson inclines his head, and my father does the same. “Come with us. There are creatures that roam these plains, and it isn’t safe for anyone to be out for long.”

I look over my shoulder, then my parents lead me inside, wondering how lucky we got to avoid those creatures. My mother looks back at Emerson for a moment. “Are you injured?”

Emerson grunts. “Somewhat. We fought a battle before getting to this world.”

“We got help from a healer,” I add.

“I’ll make you an herbal tea that is a family recipe. It always helps Griffyen when he has been fighting creatures and hunting for us,” my mother suggests. My father pulls a face at me when she talks about the tea, and I grin. “Anytime Griff goes in and fights some of the creatures here, I always make it.”

“That would be appreciated,” Emerson responds. I’m still smiling as they lead us down a stone path, the stones barely visible under the mud. We go under a stone archway and into a tunnel that soon leads to a room. It probably was once grand and beautiful, but now every wall is deeply cracked, barely held up, and everything looks like it needs fixing except for the fireplace and the blanket-covered seats around it. There’s a small kitchen at the back where my mother hurries to, and my father waves a hand towards the seats. As I sit down, I can’t help but look around at the room for anything that could have been mine. This place wasn’t in the vision, but I imagine I was born here. There are thick cobwebs in every corner, and one other door that has a hole in it that looks like a bug of some kind has spent time eating its way through. There are several heavy chests lining the walls and some weapons piled in a corner. Tapestries line one wall, and they are quite beautiful, all silver and white with flowers sewn into them. Sitting down next to Emerson, I soak in the heat of the fire as my father sits opposite us. Soon I can smell the spicy, quite horrid scent of whatever herbal tea my mother is making for Emerson. I internally wince.

“Was I born here?” I ask while we wait.

My father stokes the fire with a stick before adding more logs. “Yes. Your mother has lived here since she was a baby, and her mother before her. This is the home of your ancestors, but my family came from a lost city. I traveled most of my life before I met your mother and settled here. I didn’t have any family left at that point.”

My mother comes over with a green glass bottle full of something black that looks as disgusting as it smells. She looks so proud that I can’t help but smile at her as Emerson thanks her and takes the drink. She sits down and Emerson looks at me once before downing the lot. He just drank that to impress my mother. I lean in to his side and whisper, “I love you, but I’m not kissing you when you just drank that.”

He nips at my ear, making me giggle as I scoot away, before he puts the drink down and looks at my mother. “That was lovely, Phillipe. Thank you.”

A silence drifts on between us. Might as well get the hard question out of the way. “Why did you leave me in the other world alone? Why not raise me here with you? Why didn’t I stay with you rather than being abandoned as a baby?”

They look at each other before my mother decides to answer for them both. “You’re the child of the prophecy, one spoken by the goddess. We knew it. We sensed your power the moment you were born. You were so powerful even then... but we weren’t the only ones to sense your power.”

My father picks up my mother’s hand and explains, “The old god sensed your power, and he sent assassins to take you from us. I killed them and we ran... but we knew they were going to come for you. He was never going to stop until he had you, and there was no place in this world we could hide you from him. He is a god and as old as the goddess. They were born at the same time, but she had the power and he did not. He spent his life in her shadows, wanting her power, but never able to get it. He is immortal like she would have been, but she died saving everyone. I’m sure you know this story.”

I don't dare interrupt them as they tell us things we definitively didn't know.

“The old god knew you'd be able to get through the veil, because it was prophesied you could get the sword. He would have forced you to get it for him and taken you from us. We didn't want that for you. The sword... its magic is the same as the day the goddess used it. I was not born with the power, and I never dreamed it would be my baby who had it,” my mother whispers. “The day you were born was one of the best and the worst of my life.”

“How did you know she had this gift?” Emerson questions.

My father frowns. “A light burst from her chest, like a beacon, and the veil woke. It was darkness before her birth, and now it is a glowing, bright light in this world. It awoke for her, like we were told it would.”

My mother nods. “We knew we had no choice but to get you out of this world. The old god could not have you. He's trapped here without your power.” She pauses. “The goddess locked the worlds apart because the Rift was a prison for him. Now the Rift is open between our worlds, but not everyone can walk through it. The people talk, even here, and to walk through the Rift is to become a mindless soldier for the Rift King's army. The Rift King is nothing but a slave for the old god.”

Louie.

Emerson wraps his arm around me. “How did you get Callioppe out?”

My mother pulls out a necklace from under her top. “There was a tiny bit of the crown left that the goddess kept. It's nothing more than a necklace.” She shows me her necklace, a deep pink gemstone in the middle of a golden locket. It's broken, cracked in half, barely held together anymore. “It used to be whole. I used it to make a small enough portal to get you through and pushed you through to your world when you were only a few weeks old. I left a note with your name on your blanket. We went far from here to make sure he couldn't find us when we made the portal, but it didn't stay open long. We

didn't come back here for years, but the old god seems to have forgotten about us now. He knew you were gone from this world."

"We didn't want to send you there," my father whispers, his eyes shining. "I hate to even ask what your childhood was like. Did you find a family? Do you have a mom and dad that are looking after you? We don't want to offend them by asking you to call us your parents."

"I had no one," I say quietly. "I was taken in by many, many foster families, who gave up a lot to keep me alive, but I was hunted in that world too, for a different reason." I look at Emerson. "That's a long story, but I found a family with my mate and friends. I have no one to call mom and dad. Those roles are very much yours, and thank you for saving me. For making that hard decision."

My mother sobs. "I'm so sorry you didn't have a family. I never wanted that for you."

There isn't much I can say to that to make her feel better.

Emerson is tense. "The old god. Would he know Calliophe is here now?"

They look at each other. "Possibly. He has the crowns now, but perhaps he still wants the sword or wants her dead. You shouldn't use your gifts."

"I want the sword to save my world," I begin. "The goddess showed me the past and you. She showed me where the sword is, and I know I'm meant to take it from the veil."

My mother softly smiles. "As you should. You were born with a fate, and that sword is yours." Her eyes tighten. "But there was a warning that my mother told me, told to her by her mother and so on. The veil holds no time or love. We were warned that there is a great test within the veil for the child of the prophecy. That unless you are what the veil wants, you won't leave with the *sword* but your *death* instead. We are the last of the royals of this world, Calliophe, and the veil is a test. I'm sorry I cannot pass it for you, but it was not my fate."

"You're not going in there alone," Emerson growls.

My mother shakes her head. “Only she can enter. I’ve tried to go in myself, and it doesn’t let anyone in. It speaks only her name. Callioppe. I didn’t choose your name; what lies in the veil did.”

“I don’t have a choice,” I softly tell Emerson, turning his head to me. “We can’t be trapped here. Louie is coming for our city, our home, our people. He’s got an entire army and endless power because of me. The Wyerns need their king. Our family needs us. We cannot leave them alone in a war.”

“The worlds can burn. Fuck, I’d burn them down for you, but I won’t let you die,” he growls. “You’re mine, and selfishly, nothing else matters to me.”

I softly kiss him. “Emerson, we both know you couldn’t live with yourself if we didn’t do this. You need to trust me.”

His eyes are bright purple stars dying in a dark world. “I do trust you, but I can’t lose you. Don’t ask me to stand back and let you walk to your death. You’ll find I’ll be right in the middle of death and you, holding it back.”

“You won’t,” I whisper. “I’m yours and I will fight with everything I have to get back to you.”

He searches my eyes and I know he wishes he could fight this for me. “I want something before you go in there.” I raise an eyebrow. “I want you to be my mate, bound in blood and marks.”

My heart all but softens for my king. I nod, kissing him once. My mother clears her throat. “We can do a ceremony and there is a blessed mating ceremony room still here.”

“Be my mate, Callioppe,” he whispers against my lips. “Once and for all. Be fucking mine.”

I brush my lips against his. “Forever.”

CHAPTER
FIVE



It doesn't feel real. It feels like a dream. Something I made up when I was still a small child, looking for my parents in the faces of strangers I saw on the streets. I would imagine a day like this, where my parents were at my side as I did the big things in life. I didn't plan for a mate, but this is one of the biggest moments of my life, and I have my parents here. My mom is here, alive, and braiding my hair with her small hands. My pink locks look strange in her hands, and yet there is a deep feeling of comfort, one I knew as a baby for only a short time. The memory may be lost to age, but the feeling is not. She is my mother. She looks at me directly in the mirror as she finishes the final braid, and I see so much of myself in her. I have her nose, her cheekbones, but the structure of my eyes and my lips comes from my father. She smiles softly at me, matching the look in my eyes.

"I never imagined you with pink hair, in all the times I allowed myself to think about you. To dream of you as an adult. I wish... so many things. I'm so sorry for the upbringing you had." Fresh tears fill her eyes, and my heart clenches. "But you're alive. Alive. Now we have found each other, I hope we will have time to do all the things I've dreamt of. I want to be there for you."

My voice catches. "You can be."

She clears her throat, leaning down and kissing the top of my head. A small laugh escapes her. "Is this pink your natural hair color as a fae? Did it change from white?"

I laugh too. It feels good to laugh with her, to have this simple moment. This is the happiest day of my entire life. “No, I chose the pink.”

“Why?” she questions.

I pause. “Usually, I’d just say it was my favorite color. That was the reason why, but it’s not the truth.” Maybe the truth is something I probably can only share with her. “When I was a little girl—I think I was about five or six—one of my foster moms dyed my hair pink like this for a celebration night in the town. It was to celebrate the fae, and for one night, no one looked at me strangely with my pink eyes, because I fit in with them. I danced with the other mortals dressed up as fae, with their bright hair and contacts to change their eye color. She was kind to me. Nice. She was someone I was with for about five months before she was killed. That night stuck with me long after her death. We danced, cheered and everyone complimented me on my hair and said how lovely it was. There was kindness in that night that I clung to. The magic wore off, and by the next day, it was back to its normal color.” I blow out a breath. “Something about the way I felt alive that night stuck with me. So I dyed my hair pink at the first chance I could get. When I was turned to fae, the dye wore off, and Emerson actually brought me this magical dye that stays on permanently. He gave it to me because I felt like everything was taken away from me on that night. Now I’m starting to wonder if it was a blessing that I survived and I have a chance at an immortal life with Emerson. I would never have gotten to meet you, I never would have met my chosen family back in my world, who I can’t wait to introduce you to. I wouldn’t have had the time with Emerson to fall more in love with him.”

“Being turned was a blessing,” she whispers. “I believe every single one of us has a greater destiny, and we may not like the hands of fate playing with the strings of our life, but it doesn’t mean that there isn’t a reason for everything.” She places her hands on my shoulders. My mother is right, that sometimes we have to just let fate lead us.

I glance at my hair, smiling to myself. She's woven loads of little white flowers that glow like stars into a braided crown, and some strands curl around my face. I borrowed one of her dresses, which isn't white but black, and we worked hard to stick hundreds of the glowing white flowers to the dress so it looks like a night sky full of stars. The black dress is tight around my chest before flowing out into a sparkling gown that shines like moonlight. It's stunning. My mother follows my gaze.

"This is my mating dress. I wore it so long ago. It's one of the few things left in our family besides the necklace." She takes it off and clips it around my neck. I touch the broken amulet. "I held on to that necklace for years, even when it was broken and useless. It felt like a promise from fate that you'd come back to me one day." I stand up and turn around and she pulls me into a deep hug before I can even ask for one. I breathe in her scent, holding on just as tight. "I'm glad you found your mate and that you are happy. Whole. I have no doubt he will look after you. I can see it in his eyes. I'm sorry for everything you went through in your life. I wish I could have been the one to bring you up, but I could not follow you. Not from here. I've loved you every day, and I thank the goddess for every second we get with you right now. No matter what happens, you have us."

She leads me over to the door, and my stomach flutters. I'm being mated to Emerson. For a moment, I can't see anything but the moment we met, when he was in my apartment, sitting on my bed, reading my books. My only thought was that he was a monster, but he was about to show me how dark, possessive monsters can be the best at tearing out your heart and making it their own. We claimed each other that night, even if neither of us knew it for a while, and we have been through so much to get to this point. Even now, our future is not certain. If we die tomorrow, which is likely with all the enemies we have after us, at least we had today... we will have this moment. For us. For love. My mom leans in. "I hope your father hasn't scared Emerson with his questioning."

I grin. I have a protective father. "I don't think anything can scare him." Except for losing me, but I don't say it. "He is

the Wyern King and we are together.” We have nearly lost each other far too many times. I feel exactly the same way about losing him. It is my greatest fear. It took a long time for us to get here. I’m glad that we get this.

We head outside the small cavern to the side of the main one, and I look up at the veil and at how it shimmers. Something about it calls to me, begs me to go closer. “What do you think it will test me on?”

“I’m afraid all I have is rumors. It will test your soul. That’s all I know,” she answers me. “My grandmother used to say to be the bearer of the sword, you must be tested to see if you’re worthy.”

Worthy? I watch the veil for a few moments longer. I have to be worthy, get the sword, and get back to our people before Louie destroys everything good about my world. No pressure, Calli. He won’t stop until I stop him. And I will stop him. With everything he has done, to Nerelyth, to the millions of people he has killed, he deserves to die. My Louie is gone, and I will not hesitate to take him out now. None of us have a future until Louie is dead. My mother leads us around into the mountains, down a new pathway with bronze walls. “This used to be a great city,” my mother begins. “We’ve dug out some of it for our own living accommodation, but most people won’t come here anymore. They say the fallen cities are cursed with the ghosts of the dead.”

I turn to look at her. “Ghosts?”

“They’re not wrong, but the ghosts, or what is left of the dead here, do not bother us. For some reason, we are safe here, but many are not. We don’t welcome anyone here for their own safety as much as ours. There are only four cities left, where the rest of the people are starving, dying out, and you are our hope for a future. Now, this is your moment with Emerson. Enjoy it.” She stops and I barely even noticed we were in front of closed doors until she touches the handle. “Today is a day of joy and happiness for our family. For you.”

My mother opens the doors, and they swing fully open on their own. First, all I can see is the soft glow of fae lights

spread across the ceiling. My boots sink into the thick old green carpet, which is ripped and torn but held together to make a pathway to the back of the small room. At the back of the room, which has only half a ceiling, is a stained glass window. Bright pink, purple, and green glass that lets light shine through and onto the pathway that leads to him. In this world of greyness, of death and darkness, there is him.

Emerson lifts his head, his eyes finding me across the room, and the world fades away, like it always does when we are together. His mouth parts, his eyes darkening as he looks me over, and my cheeks brighten at his reaction. Somehow my body is moving towards him, my mother at my side and my father standing in front of the stained glass at Emerson's side, holding an enormous book. I can only see him. My king. My monster. The love of my life. My mate.

I come to a stop in front of Emerson, only a breath away from him, and I look over his leathers that are torn like the carpet. I don't care what he wears. This is about our souls. Emerson has a red strip of fabric wrapped tightly around his wrist and hand. His eyes stay on me, drifting up the dress, devouring me, and it's enough to make me blush further. He finally meets my eyes, and I get lost in the purple sea of his gaze. He gently picks up my hand and holds our hands between us. My mom wraps the end of the red fabric around my hand, tightly, until there is no way to undo the fabric tying our hands together. Emerson tugs me closer to him, and he softly rests his forehead against mine.

"In the name of the goddess, we bring these two mate-marked souls together. This world was born of magic and life, as was the idea of a mate. Two strings, woven so tightly together that not even death can part them," my father begins, opening his book. "We're here, in front of the goddess, to bind King Emerson Eveningstar and Callioppe Maryann Sprite. These two were born as one, and from this day onwards, they will be united forever under the stars of all our worlds."

Emerson never takes his eyes off me, and I can't look away from him. I feel power drifting around us, cold and yet comforting. The room is still dark despite the light pouring in,

and the odd fae lights floating around. The fabric almost seems to tighten around our hands as my father speaks, and soon I feel the mark burning onto my wrist where the fabric touches. I can't help the massive smile on my lips or the tears of happiness that fall down my cheeks. "The mating mark."

"Emerson, do you know the words?" my father questions.

"I do," Emerson answers. With his other hand, he cups my cheek. "May the goddess entwine our lives. May we belong together for all of time. May death be no weapon to part us. May all the gods bless our union. We are as one. We are eternal. My soul belongs to you, my mate, and yours belongs to me."

He wipes a tear away from my cheek as I repeat his words, feeling the magic in the air humming to life, growing with each word. I don't look away from Emerson. Not for a moment. "My soul belongs to you, my mate, and yours belongs to me. I love you, Emerson Eveningstar."

He leans closer, his lips tracing mine. "I love you more than my own soul, Callioppe Eveningstar."

My new name sends shivers down my spine. My last name, Sprite, was never really mine. Just a generic foster name I was given at some point.

"By the gods and goddess of this world, I commend you as mates. For no soul, no magic, no god can break this bond. It is final.

I gasp as I feel the mate bond slam into my chest, burning throughout my body like it was meant to be with me this entire time. Like a part of my soul, of my body, that I was missing. Emerson kisses me passionately, and I barely hear my father excuse himself with my mother and the door shut. The rope is still tightly strapped around our wrists, and it suddenly disappears into black dust. The second it is gone, Emerson growls as he grabs me, picking me up and kissing me deeper. His eyes darken into purple jewels as he pushes me into the wall, pulling my dress up. Instead of hearing his voice in my ears, I hear him in my mind. I can sense him, and he feels like a sea of dark skies, filled with the light of a thousand stars.

“I’ve waited my entire life to kiss my mate, and I cannot wait any longer.”

“But you are kissing me,” I whisper into his mind, hoping he can hear me.

He leans back, smirking once as he lowers himself to his knees. The Wyern King, my mate, is kneeling for me. I push his shirt off his thick shoulders, and for a moment my lips part in awe as I really look at how gorgeous my mate is. His chest is golden, toned, and full of muscles and mate marking that makes him even more enchanting to gaze at. Dark locks of soft hair fall onto his forehead, and there is a slight beard growing that makes him look wild. His lips turn up, amusement lining his eyes. “Not these lips, my queen.”

“Emerson,” I gasp out loud as he pushes me up the wall with only one hand holding my dress to my waist. Emerson runs his hand across my lace underwear, and it disappears. He tugs off my dress, throwing it to the side until I’m naked in front of him. He groans as he stares at me before lowering his lips right to my core. I moan at the first hot lick of his tongue against my clit, and sharp zaps of pleasure sky rocket through my body. Every touch is too much, and I’m hypersensitive everywhere he is touching me, of how his tongue is moving as he explores me and builds me closer to the edge.

One touch, that’s all it takes from Emerson. I feel his desire thick and heavy against my mind, like we are one and the same, and nothing could ever come between us. I moan, my head falling back as he controls my body effortlessly, and I give myself completely up to my mate. Emerson holds my thighs tight, swirling his tongue faster and pushing me straight into a mind-blowing orgasm. My cries of pleasure echo as he pulls up, and I’m dazed as he begins to undo his trousers. I fall to my knees, taking his hands away. He rubs his thumb across his lips, looking down at me. “You never need to kneel for me, my queen.”

I undo his trousers, running my hand over his cock hidden underneath his boxers. “You’re the only person I would bow for.” I pull his thick length out, enjoying the way his hips buck and how his control slips for me. He loses it for me. Emerson

has always been in control, monster form or fae. He has such control over his emotions. As I run my finger over the tip of his cock, seeing his hands clench at his sides, I enjoy every moment of him. I lean closer, running my tongue across the tip, and he moans.

Fuck, I love that sound. I love him.

“Teasing me, are you, my queen?” he muses.

I smile as I suck him into my mouth, guiding until I feel him hit the back of my throat. His groan of pleasure is music to my ears, and I run my tongue around the edges of his cock as I slide him out of my mouth and go back down. His hand sinks into my hair, curses escaping his lips as I take full control of my king. It doesn't take long before he is pulling me up off him and picking me up. Emerson carries me to the altar at the front, laying me under the archway. His lips trail down my cheek, down my jaw and to my neck, his cock nudging at my entrance. I wiggle, wanting him, needing him. He bites my neck, softly, before gripping my chin and forcing my eyes on him as the tip of his thick cock pushes at my entrance. I moan as he slowly pushes into me, inch after inch, until I'm so full I can't breathe. He pulls back before slamming fully into me, and we both moan in pure bliss.

We are finally mates, finally as one. He groans as he kisses me, thrusting in and out, sending me closer to the edge of another orgasm with every thrust. His hands dig into my ass, clutching me to him as I meet every one of his thrusts.

I could die at this moment and be happy. There will never be anyone else for me, never anything else in any world that compares to him and what we have. “Emerson, I'm—”

“I know. You're gripping me so fucking tight, my perfect queen.” He grips my breast, flicking my nipple, and I can't take it anymore. My second orgasm is stronger than the first, shaking my body from my toes to my head. I clench around him, and he thrusts once more before spilling inside me with a roar that shakes the walls. Breathlessly, we stare at each other for a moment, enjoying the silence we have in this moment where words are not needed between us. This was about our

souls, about the perfect moment we have to live in. I know we are lucky, even with all the pain we had to endure to arrive at this point, we still got here and have each other. Some souls spend forever looking for their soul mate and only ever finding the wrong person.

We found each other.

We love each other, and I couldn't be more grateful to the goddess for this all.

There is a crash, loud enough to make the entire mountain shake around us. Bits of stones fall down from the broken roof, but Emerson is quick enough to make a shadow shield appear above us, and the rock bounces away. The echoes of a scream filter in from outside. "My parents! We have to get to them. Something must be wrong!"

Emerson is fast to get dressed as I pull the dress back on, ignoring the soreness between my legs as I run to the door. Emerson keeps the shadow shield around us the entire time as more rocks fall from the ceiling, and he grabs his sword from where it rests near the door. We barely get out the doors before the room collapses behind us. A part of me already mourns the loss of that room, the stained glass, all of it for a second, as we run down the corridor to get out of the mountain. We burst out of the mountain, the ground still shaking as I see my parents. They aren't alone. A cloaked female is standing over my mother, who is too still on the ground. My father is running to them, his powers pulling up the surrounding ground in dark red flames.

The female holds her hand out, sending a wave of grey magic right at my father. I scream, lurching forward, but Emerson has his hand spread out too. A wall of darkness slams into the grey power, protecting my father. She looks up at Emerson, tilting her head to the side before she lowers her cloak, revealing a gold crown. She is a Rift Queen. Fuck.

"I know her from my dreams in this place," Emerson tells me, and he looks at me for a second. "She has come here to stop you. I won't let her."

I lift my head. "We fight together."

He kisses the side of my head. “My mate, we need the sword to kill her. I’ll protect your parents until you’re back. Get to the veil.”

“No, I can’t leave you!” I shout at him.

“I can’t come with you in here, Calliophe,” he reminds me in my mind. We won’t ever be apart again. The female is walking towards my father, and my mother still hasn’t gotten up. Why hasn’t she moved? “I love you. Now, my queen, get your sword and come back.”

I look at the veil and then back at my king. My mate. My world. “I love you.” It’s the last thing I say before I run down the mountain towards the veil, and he jumps off, spreading his wings out and flying right at the Rift Queen.

CHAPTER
SIX



Emerson shields me, even as I run in the opposite direction, away from him. I allow myself to look back, just once, to see him flying right at the waiting Rift Queen. My heart clenches in fear, so thick I can taste it. He is my mate. Emerson is strong, and I have to get the sword. Even with my heart pulling me back to my mate, I force myself to focus on where I'm going. Grey shadows explode around me, but Emerson's shield effortlessly holds, even as the shadows pull up the ground under my feet and I nearly trip. The shimmering veil hangs over me now, casting its light onto the grey and black magic surrounding me like vipers. He's okay, I tell myself over and over. I can feel Emerson's heartbeat next to mine, feel our bond like it's alive and humming within me.

I pull up the bottom of the dress, wishing I was in my leathers as the ground is torn up, and I have to make several jumps to get close to steps that lead up to the veil. Without pause, I run up the steps until I'm in front of the shimmering veil. Light kisses my cheek with how close I am. "Go, Calliophe!"

Emerson's voice fills my mind, and I only think of him as I step into the veil. Hot, almost burning water surrounds me, choking me, and I struggle in the water, reaching and grabbing for anything as I slowly drown within it. It feels like forever, or maybe a few seconds, before something is pulling me straight up in the air. I'm suddenly thrust out of the water, and I slam hard onto the smooth ground.

I cough on thin air, noticing not an inch of my clothes or hair is wet, then look around to see pitch black with stars shining brightly everywhere around me. They are so bright, all different colors, and I can barely make out the darkness in between the stars. High in the sky shines a moon, but the moon is different. Large wings spread out of the moon on either side, Wyern wings. It's beautiful and it reminds me of Emerson for a moment. I stare up at it for a second, still struggling to get my breath before I climb to my feet. What the hell is going on?

"I've come for the sword. Is anyone here?" My voice just echoes and the only response I get is a light hissing. The hiss seems to spread around me, and I spin, looking for where the noise is coming from, but it sounds like it is all around me.

"Welcome," the voice hisses, female and old, and somewhat soft. "Chosen, the sword waits for you. What will you do with it?"

I've never heard the voice before. It's not the goddess. It's not anyone I know. I instantly don't trust it. My mother thought there would be a test. This must be it. "I am a descendant of the goddess, and I have come for the sword to save my world from those with the crowns. Without the sword, I can't get back and stop him."

"I see the truth in your soul, Queen of the Wyerns," she hisses, the title echoing. I reach for Emerson, but I can't hear him or feel him in this place. "The Rift King who bears the crown is beloved to you, as he is your ward. A child you love. Do not think to fool me when I see in your soul that you do not want to end his life. Your mate cannot reach you here."

I look at the moon. "The truth is that I don't want to take Louie's life, the boy I once knew, but I want to kill the man he is now. He was taken from me and turned into a monster. I won't leave him like that and let him hurt any more people."

"Truth," the voice echoes. "The goddess once brought the sword so many years ago. For you. For the one who could put an end to this all."

Relief floods me. "That's what I want to—"

“There will be a price,” the voice hisses in such a strange tone. “To win this war, for peace, you will lose someone you love. There will be a moment, Wyern Queen, when you will feel nothing but despair, and you will rise as a queen or you will die as one.”

My heart pounds. “Who is going to die?”

“Someone you love. Once you feared letting anyone get close to your heart. Now there are many within. Fate has planned an unkind string for you.”

Fear clogs my throat. I don’t know who it is, but I won’t lose anyone. There must be a way for me to save them. “No. The goddess knew death, and she hated it. She took the sword to your world. She took them both. They were sisters.”

The voice hisses. “Sisters that were then separated by worlds. One sword was kept. The other destroyed into crowns, the parts of the sister’s soul lost forever in seven parts.”

She sounds hurt, broken, herself. “I’m sorry.”

“Do not be sorry for me, Queen of the Wyerns. You will have enough power to reshape everything, to destroy worlds and remake them as you wish. With the two swords, you could make yourself and all your family gods. You could have the world bowing at your feet. Not just this world, but many. You had the power to travel between the worlds, destroying and creating. Infinite power.”

I shake my head. “No one should have that much power, and it’s not what I want either.”

The voice doesn’t answer me for a while. “The test is this. You vow not to use your power to save your loved one. They die and you let it happen. I have seen the future of this war, and if you choose to save them, then you will use the power to be as cruel as the ones you wish to stop. In fear, you will turn your friends and mate into gods so that they never die. This will set a path that ends in another war, and another, and another. I will give you the sword, and one more gift, if you vow in blood to not save the one that is destined to fall in the battle with the power of the sword.”

Posy, Lorenzo, Nerelyth, Zurine, Emerson. It could be any of them, and I couldn't live with watching them die, but I need the sword. My voice breaks along with my heart. I couldn't imagine watching any of them die and letting it happen. "Why? Surely one person's life can't matter this much. The goddess wouldn't have left the sword here, for me, only to demand such a horrid price for taking it. I am not evil, I haven't done anything wrong, and I'm trying to help. I'm trying to save the world, and you're demanding I let someone I love die to do that."

"The power of the swords should never have been created, and it would be safer left here, in the veil, out of the reach of mortals or fae or Wyerns or gods," the voice answers, still a hiss, but clearer. "The old god in this world was a lover of the goddess, and she saved his life, turned him into a god, and with time, he turned into a monster. Power corrupts even the purest soul, even you. The old god is controlling the Rift Kings and Queens, and he used his power to age them with the crowns. He has corrupted their souls and they cannot be saved. If you reject my offer, they will destroy both worlds, but the other worlds I see will be safe. This choice lies with you and whether you are brave enough to have your heart broken to save the world you love."

"I need the sword to stop him, but I don't want to do what you ask. You're asking me to let someone I love die? What are you? Do you even know what love is? Do you understand what you are asking from me?"

The stars seem to lose some of their light. "I am the sword and I am alive. I understand love, as I love my sister sword, and she screams in pain as she will never be able to rest while her soul is spilt within seven crowns. My sister and I came from a world far from here, in search of peace, and we found the goddess. She helped us, and everyone else broke us. I know pain and love and loss."

Tears quietly fall down my cheeks, dropping onto the black ground at my feet. Snowflakes drop from above, falling onto the ground. I reach my hands out, letting some flakes drop into my palms. On my right hand, a blue glowing

snowflake mark appears, and on my other, a pink flame mark glows brightly. “The power of fire comes from your father’s side, from the fae that he was born from. That’s who you got the fire gift from. It was nothing to do with the prince who turned you. Your ice gift, on the other hand, is from the goddess herself. Only those with the goddess’s blood can wield the power of ice. With these marks, your power will increase. A gift, blessed in sorrow, for what is to come. Whatever choice you make, you will lose those you love.”

“Thank you,” I whisper to myself. “Does that mean Zurine has goddess blood?”

The air grows colder by the second. “Yes, your friend with the pale hair is another descendant. She was a mortal descendant of the goddess, just like you. Mortal turned fae. You are cousins.”

I had family the whole time, right in front of me. “Your mate’s time is dimming in his fight. What is your answer?”

“I...”

A sigh echoes around me. One of the lights fades, and there is an outline of a female in front of it. She slowly walks into view, the light disappearing behind her. Her long white hair falls down to the floor, trailing behind her, and she holds two daggers in her hands, one set on fire, one covered in ice, but that isn’t what makes me go still. Somehow, I know her. I’ve never met her, I’ve never spoken to her, but something in my chest is screaming at me that she is someone I know well. She is wearing torn grey clothing, and there is a fae royal symbol on her chest. There is also blood pouring down the side of her head, and she is pale, too pale. “My name is Aurora. I am you.”

“Why are you showing me this?”

The voice doesn’t answer, but soon more of the lights go out until only the moon is left. Five more women fall behind Aurora, and they are all me. The lives I lost. Aurora steps closer and offers me the daggers. “We died for you, for him, for a world of peace. You live, and you have a chance. Take

these daggers and cut your hands. Mark the ground with your blood and vow. Then leave.”

I’m sorry. Whoever it is that I’m going to lose, I’m so, so sorry. I don’t have a choice, and I knew my answer right away. I can’t let my world fall and millions more die because of Louie. He has tainted everything and broken a part of me that I will never be able to fix. I take the daggers and she fades into a star full of light, along with the others. “I make the vow. I will not use the power of the sword to save the one I love in the war.”

If it is to be Emerson, I will go with him to death. I don’t say that personal vow out loud, but I know I mean every word as I cut my hand. There is no life, no happy ending, nothing for me without my mate. We are together, in life, in the end, and I dare any gods beyond death to try and part us. The second the blood falls on the ground, the daggers shake in my hands, and I’m forced to let them go. They disappear in a blast of light, and when the light fades, there is a beautiful sword hovering in front of me. It’s gold, from hilt to tip, and smothered in glowing pink flame symbols and blue ice symbols. I grab the hilt, and I can barely breathe as its power rockets through my body and soul.

I hear her voice, one more time, and I know I won’t hear her ever again. “It is a pleasure to be at your side, Queen of the Wyerns. We will make history and then you will set us both free.”

“I will.” Lifting the sword high in the air, I cut through the veil, right as I hear my mate roar in pain.

CHAPTER
SEVEN



The veil fades away like a tidal wave of magic mixed with water, spreading in every direction and casting a blue light upon the once grey world. I land on my feet, the weight of the sword in my right hand as I search for my mate. I find my mother first, in my father's arms, as he shields her in a sphere of fire from the grey magic still attacking them. I follow the magic to find Emerson and the Rift Queen fighting. His dark magic is lashing at her shadows. The pair of them seem equally matched... but Emerson's arm is bleeding. A protective wave of anger washes over my vision until all I can see is my mate injured and being attacked. I barely feel my feet moving—I only know that I am—as I channel my powers through the sword in my hand. Emerson passes me by as I head for the Rift Queen, easily cutting through her magic with my sword in front of me until I'm right in front of her. She stumbles back, her black eyes bleeding black tears down her pale cheeks.

She looks right at the sword, her hand reaching for it, but it's too late for her. She hurt my mate. I don't even flinch before swinging my sword and swinging it straight through her chest, through her heart. The crown tumbles off her head as she gasps, looking down at my sword as I pull it from her. Emerson's hand rests on my lower back as he steps to my side, and we both watch as grey shadows around us instantly vanish, the magic gone, and the Rift Queen crumbles to her knees, her whole body disappearing into grey ash spread around the crown.

The ash rises in the air, and everything pauses for only a second. The ash glows a sea blue and slowly forms a small female child with long brown hair and bright white eyes. The child smiles at me just briefly before disappearing into glittering dust that blows away on a breeze I can't feel. I know that face. I've seen her before. That was one of the fae children that was taken, and now she is free. Death is the only way to free them. I turn to Emerson, touching his arm. "Are you okay?"

He cups my cheek, searching my eyes. "It's nothing. Tell me you're okay. Tell me you're real and you got that sword."

"Real," I whisper, leaning up and softly kissing him. "I have so much to tell you about the veil and the sword."

Emerson kisses me once more before we both look at the crown on the floor. I lift it with the tip of my sword, and even through the sword, I gasp with the echo of power I feel. "It's too dangerous to leave here. We should take it with us."

"Perhaps no one should touch it." My mother's voice makes me turn back, as she is walking to us with my father at her side. The relief I see in their eyes matches mine for seeing her up. There is a nasty bump on the top of her head and blood on her cheek, but she looks okay. My father takes off his cloak, carefully wraps the crown up in it, and makes a tie for us to hold it. He offers it to Emerson.

Reaching for my powers, I watch ice spread out from my hand, covering the cloak in thick ice, everywhere but the top. Emerson smirks at me. "You have your powers back?"

"Yes, it was a gift. I'm stronger now," I answer, flipping the sword in my hand. "Turns out the sword is far more powerful than just one crown. I think I can get us back. It can cut through worlds." I look to my parents. "I have to get back, but I want to ask you to do something for me. For us."

"Anything," my father answers.

"I've told you Emerson is a king." I touch Emerson's arm. "A brilliant, kind, and amazing king. The king our world needs when this is all over."

Emerson lifts my hand. “My queen far exceeds me.”

I roll my eyes at him, and he laughs, which I love to hear. I clear my throat and get back to my point. “There are people here who need to get out of this world. Gather them, tell them about Emerson and our world. Tell them to gather here, and we will come back once it is safe. The last thing I will do with this sword is set this world free.”

My mother has tears in her eyes as she steps forward. She cups my cheeks. “I’m so proud of you and the queen you have become. We will gather your people.”

“I can’t promise we will be back, not if Louie wins,” I admit. “But we are going to fight, and with the sword, we finally have a chance.”

Emerson links his fingers through mine. “My mate and I will be back. He will not win this war.”

We say our goodbyes, and it hurts to leave my parents here. I want to take them with me, but they wouldn’t be safe in our world any more than they would be here. We can’t stay longer, not with the old god breathing down our necks and Louie on his way to destroy Emerson’s people. My people. I’m their queen now and I’m going to have to get my head around that fact.

With the sword in a holder on my back, I pull it out and face the endless grey desert. I think of my world, picture Emerson’s castle in my mind. Just outside his throne room, where we kissed once and I felt myself falling for him over and over. I picture it until it’s all I can see as I lower the sword and make a giant cut. I can feel the magic flowing from my sword, from my heart, from my soul, and it feels as endless as the depth of the sea. Swaying on my feet, I open my eyes to see fire and ice are spinning around in a circle, spitting in every direction. On the other side, I can see the throne room doors, shut closed, but warm light coming from within them. Emerson, sensing how much that just took from me, wraps his arm around my waist before pulling me through the portal. It feels instant, like stepping through a doorway, right before we

are in the castle, outside the doors. The sword drops from my hand, and the portal shuts as my legs give out.

“Calli!” Emerson shouts, picking me up before I can fall. I barely stay awake in time to see Lorenzo pull the door open, a shocked, broken-looking Posy just behind him, and Solandis in the distance with Zurine. Lorenzo falls to his knees, his hair a mess and dark circles under his eyes. “You’re both alive. Thank the gods. Goldway City has just fallen, and he is coming for us.”

CHAPTER
EIGHT



“**Y**ou’re back.”

The cold, empty-of-emotion voice that I hear sends shivers down my spine. I lift my head as I turn and face Louie. He is in the sea, on a boat I’ve not seen before, and it is raining so heavily that I can barely see him. This time, I don’t see any land or anything but thick fog, and hurricanes are echoing in the distance as they bounce around the water. Louie waits at the end of a boat, a good distance from me, the crown bright even in the fog. “And you’re going to die, Louie. For what you did to Nerelyth, to the cities, to the millions who are dead. The next time we meet, I will end your life.”

Louie grins, revealing rows of black teeth that were not there before. “We both know you won’t be able to kill me. I’m still the boy you loved as a brother. I remember the time you came with me to watch me play ball with the other boys, and I —”

“Stop it!” I scream at him, tears prickling in my eyes. I remember that day. I remember hugging Louie so tightly when he scored a goal, and swinging him around. He was so happy... but he is gone. This is not the same boy. This is a monster who has stolen his body. “You might have his memories, but you are NOT him!”

Louie begins walking to me, but I step back, right off the boat and into the cold sea. Even as the sea swallows me into its depths, I hear Louie’s voice. “We are the same and you will not be able to kill me.”

“YES, she’s my queen and my mate, Lorenzo. I have not lost my mind. I have not been enchanted.”

Emerson repeats similar responses to his brother, who is questioning his sanity at the same time as being very happy he is alive, as I try to remember to breathe. Louie isn’t here. It was a dream. Breathe, Callioppe. Breathe. Lorenzo and Emerson’s arguing is all I can hear as I slowly wake, answer millions of questions that have been filling my ears as I try to wake up, but it’s good to hear my friends voices. They are normal and safe and far better than Louie in my head.

I’m tired. Exhausted, even. I felt how much power it took to open the portal between the worlds, and it was too much for me so soon after coming out of the veil. I open my eyes to see the back of Emerson’s head as he sits on the edge of my bed, right next to me, Lorenzo standing over him. I can’t see Posy, but I sense her in the room. Lorenzo looks over his shoulder at me. “Ah! Our new Fae Queen is awake.” He looks back to Emerson. “I’m sure the entire Wyern Court are going to understand that you’ve taken a fae queen mate when you’ve known her for barely a few weeks. They just love the fae, brother.”

“You don’t remember, but we have known each other much longer than that,” Emerson coolly responds, turning to face me. He searches my eyes. “Another dream with Louie?”

He knows me too well. I can only nod. He pulls me to him, holding me against his chest and kissing the top of my head. I suck in a deep breath. “Where’s my sword?”

Posy steps out of the shadows, where she was waiting by my sword that is resting on a chair in the corner. “It’s here. The power in that sword is...”

“I know,” I whisper, pulling my eyes from it and to my friend. “It’s good to see you.”

Posy winks at me. “You made me cry, you bitch. I thought you were dead.”

“It’s the first time I’ve seen genuine emotion from her,” Lorenzo jokes, but there is a seriousness to it. He didn’t enjoy seeing her cry, and hearing Emerson might have been gone broke him too.

“We barely got out, and it was pure luck,” I explain.

Emerson links his arms around my waist, pulling me onto his lap. “I’ve explained everything, Doe. Even if he is confused because he doesn’t remember like I do.”

The power of no god, no spell, can withstand the swords or crowns. The sword’s words echo in me. If the crown broke the spell on Emerson, then I wonder if my sword can break the spell on Lorenzo, too. “Lorenzo, give me the sword. Please.”

He looks at Emerson and then back at me. “Do as she says. She’s your queen.” Emerson’s command is near enough a bark, and I shiver.

Lorenzo sighs like we are both insane and grabs my sword, wincing. “It doesn’t want anyone to hold it but you. It hurts to even touch it.” Lorenzo is quick about dropping it on the bed next to me and stepping away.

Posy rolls her eyes at me. “I carried it here, and it didn’t hurt me.”

“Maybe that has more to do with the blood in our veins, Posy. We are children of goddesses, and this sword was made to be wielded by the gods alone,” I explain to them all, picking up the heavy sword and feeling the power flow through me. I look at Lorenzo. “Put your hand out, please.”

He clearly doesn’t trust me, but he does trust Emerson. I press the tip of my sword into his hand, cutting a line down his palm. He barely shows there’s any pain, but he pauses. It seems like forever as all of just watch him. He just stands there, completely silent before his eyes widen slightly. He looks at Posy first, something unspoken between them before he playfully grins at me, rubbing his palm. “Hello, little faeling. It’s about damn time you’re our queen.”

Relief floods through me. He remembers who I am. Lorenzo scoops me out of Emerson’s arms, and Emerson

growls as Lorenzo wraps me in a tight hug. I hug him back just as tight. "I'm sorry I forgot."

"It was my fault. I made the deal, and I just wanted to save you all," I mutter. "But that's in the past. What, or who, is coming for us is far worse."

Posy looks at me as Lorenzo puts me down. "We know. I've seen him destroy two cities now. Goldway is gone, nothing but ruins and dead souls. You need to explain to me why you didn't want me going to my mother to break the curse on them with Paxton."

I'm shocked silent. Goldway is gone? There were millions living in that city, and they had defenses... they can't just be gone. No. Emerson looks right at Posy. "Explain what happened to Goldway."

She looks at Lorenzo, who answers. "After we thought you were dead, our people demanded we had to make a plan. Many of the fae here had people they loved in Goldway, and I knew that we needed every fighter we could get, and we had to help who we could. I made a plan with the inner court, and we went with a big team to Goldway to save as many as we could. We focused on children and females first, and sent patrols into the city with Zurine's help. We were there half a day before he came."

"He knew, or must have heard, that we were there," Posy continues on. "He came off the coast with the boats, and I knew he was going to do what he did in Junepit City. We got everyone we could to the portals, and even as he destroyed the city, people were still flooding through the mirrors. We saved maybe two thousand, but most were children and females."

"Not fighters, per se," Lorenzo corrects. "Goldway thought they could keep up their defense, but they could not. They had evacuated a good portion of the city into the wastelands, and we will go for them next. I don't know how long people are going to survive out there with no food. We barely got out with our own lives, and yet the city fell, and there was nothing we could do to stop his power."

I touch the blade. I know the guilt of what Louie has done with my power is going to haunt me forever. All I can do now is stop him for the future. “It’s my fault. That power, it comes from me. He took it from me, and he’s using it to kill millions. He will just keep killing until there’s nothing left unless I can stop him now with this sword.”

“We are at war.” Emerson rises to my side. “He’s going to come here next. We are the last big city in this world, beside the witches.” He looks at Lorenzo. “The witches are your family, and we need their army to side with us. Your fiancée is close to the queen. Could you get them to come here? Side with us? If we fight from here, perhaps with two dominant races, we could beat him.”

“I could go to them and demand an audience with the queen,” Lorenzo agrees, his eyes drifting to Posy. “Though, my fiancée might not be entirely happy with the news I have for her.”

“Perhaps keep that to yourself for now,” Emerson suggests. “War is the threat we must be focused on. We all need to survive, and it’s not like you’ve taken your mate yet. Your scents are not blended. No one will be able to tell.”

“I don’t know why you’re bothering to tell her at all. I don’t want you or care,” Posy snaps.

Lorenzo groans. “Can I speak to another one of your personalities, Posy? Number twenty-five, if possible; she is the nice one.”

Posy only snarls at him, the sound more animal than mortal. He must know she makes the portals now, and she isn’t all mortal. If he knows the truth about her, I doubt he would be pissing her off when she can throw him out the window, or he just doesn’t care if she does. I step between them when the air in the room seems to shimmer with magic. “How is Nerelyth?”

The tension dies along with the magic, and the look in Posy’s eyes makes my heart hurt. She doesn’t answer my question, and I know why. “Do you want me to take you to her? Maybe you can... get through to her. It’s dangerous for us

to send any healers in there. She doesn't hurt me, but she won't speak or reply to me."

Emerson touches my hip, wrapping his hand around me. "There's something we must do first before it is safe here. You've been attacked before, and I won't take that chance."

My shoulders drop a little. I want to see Nerelyth, but Emerson is right. "Also, we are both covered in mud from the battle. We should clean up."

Posy crosses her arms. "Nerelyth might appreciate the shower... like the rest of us."

I glare at her as Emerson leads me from the room, Lorenzo and Posy staying behind. He looks back at his brother. "Call the court. Everyone must attend." After I open the door, Emerson leans down to my ear. "Come, my queen. We must show the court that they have a new fae queen, and if anyone touches a single hair on your head, they are dead."

"So romantic with your death threats," I mutter, knowing he is serious, and he would murder anyone who even thought about hurting me. "I don't want them scared of me."

His tone is unapologetic. "I do."



AFTER HAVING a hot shower and getting changed into black leathers, I go back into Emerson's room. He sits on the end of his bed, next to my glittering sword. He hasn't tried to pick it up yet, and I'm curious if he can hold it at all. Emerson is one of the most powerful males that I have ever met, and the sword... it would make him indestructible. It could make me the same, but too much power is lethal. It's all-consuming and addictive, and I feel that every time I touch that sword.

Emerson's black crystal crown, a different one than I've seen before, is firmly fixed on top of his head, nestled in his soft black locks of hair. He usually wears a green or silver one, but perhaps the black marks him as a mated king. He joined me in the shower before leaving me in it after we both got way

too distracted, and he ended up taking me against the shower wall. I have no regrets. I never will when it comes to him. Loving Emerson. It's like being alive and breathing after drowning in the sea for my entire life. I was waiting for him, searching for him in every monster I hunted, and he was looking for me, too.

I take a moment to run my gaze over my mate, enjoying how perfect he is to me. His thick black leather top and trousers show off every one of his muscles, and he has his wings out, curved around his back. His swords are strapped to his back at a cross angle, and he has several daggers clipped to his waist. A cloak that looks like it is made of darkness falls from his shoulders, and it has slits that let his wings out. He looks like a king of darkness, and if he is, what does that make me? I glance at myself in the mirror. The thick black leather matches Emerson's, but my pink hair is like a wave of brightness in the dark as it sweeps down my back. "Come here, Doe."

Now that he has explained the nickname to me, I love when he calls me it. It feels like a secret between us, one born of love. I blink, pushing my gaze from the mirror, and walk over, to see he is holding a crown. It's familiar but I don't know where I've seen it before.

"What's that?"

Emerson looks up. "It's yours. It's a Fae Queen crown, passed down for generations. It was my mother's crown." My heart clenches. "Now that I remember everything, I'm glad I did not destroy it when it appeared in our vaults. I believe my mother put a spell on it so it would come here when she died so I could keep it for the female I fall in love with and make my queen. The crown has been altered from when I saw it. It's yours."

It's a beautiful gold crown and looking at it, the full pressure of being a queen seems to hit me. If I put that crown on, I have people I must protect and fight for. I will be a queen of the Wyern race. The gold crown has been changed with pink and black crystals added to it, making one of the most beautiful crowns I've ever seen. It's lined with pink diamonds

all the way around the base. “I was debating whether to make you a new crown, a Wyern Queen crown. There are many crowns in the vaults, but this one screamed at me. It will remind us all that you are the Wyern Queen, but you’re not just my queen, you’re fae. You were once mortal, and I know you will welcome all. I think this crown equally represents all the parts of you that will be remembered.”

Tears fill my eyes. He has always accepted every part of me, loved me when I was just mortal and screaming at him that he was a monster. He loved me when I hated myself as a fae, when I couldn’t see any good in it and wanted it all to end. Emerson loved me, through the darkness and the light, and made me his queen.

Emerson rises to stand in front of me, his scent surrounding me. “My queen.” He places the crown on my head, and it perfectly fits. In more ways than one. Emerson cups the back of my neck. “I hate that I’m crowning you when we’re on the cusp of war, but there’s nothing I can do to stop war coming for us. I promise I will protect you, and you will be standing when this war is over. I wish that I could crown you in front of our cities, in front of millions, and celebrate for weeks inside you.”

My cheeks burn, and he leans down. “We will combine the celebration of our mating and the war being won. We will get that time.”

“We fight for our time,” I whisper to him. “And for our people, our family.” I lean up and kiss him softly, which only sparks every part of my body and makes me want to get undressed really quickly.

He groans, breaking the kiss, and I’m glad he had the strength to, because I didn’t. “You’re far too tempting, my queen. I’ve just had you and I want you again. I’m tempted to say fuck it and make them wait longer.”

“We both know they’d be waiting all night if I let you,” I mutter, going around him and grabbing the sword. I slide it into the holster on my back, and even through my clothes, it’s power sinks into me.

Emerson watches, his purple eyes dark. “You look paler every time you touch that sword.”

I take his hand and lift it to my mouth, placing a kiss on his knuckles. “I’m okay. If it gets too much, I will tell you.”

He grumbles at that but leads me to the door. “Lorenzo has gone to the witches. He didn’t want to waste any time.” I’m glad he has his memories back, even if I don’t like him being away from us all. We need the witches’ help, and Emerson has an alliance with them, which they will hopefully uphold.

I also brought back the memories of my chosen family. I used the sword to break the spell on Zurine and Solandis and everyone in the inner court before we went for a shower. It was good to have Zurine remember. I missed her.

I try to distract myself with anything as my heart is racing fast along with my thoughts. But with my hand held in Emerson’s, I don’t feel as terrified as I thought I would, walking into the packed throne room. It’s full of Wyerns, all of them with hostile looks that seem to only get worse when they see the crown on my head. Zurine is a friendly face, along with Solandis as we walk down the middle of them, next to the two thrones. There only has been one throne in this room, but Emerson clearly has been at work, because there is a matching throne next to his. They are equal, like us.

Emerson walks me straight through the whispering Wyerns before waiting for me to sit on one of the thrones, and he sits down next to me. Everyone goes instantly quiet as they wait for their king to speak. Emerson looks at me. “This is Callioppe Eveningstar, Queen of the Wyerns and my true mate. We have been mated.”

There is silence and some of the hostile glares have faded from their eyes, but not all of them. The room grows darker, shadows and darkness rising up the walls like a fog settling in. I’m not sure Emerson is even aware he is doing it. “To act against her would be to act against me. Death would be too kind to those who dare to lay a finger on my queen, but you will pray for death to save you, regardless.” The hostile looks disappear. “Now bow for your queen.”

There isn't even a pause, even a moment, before a whole room full of Wyerns bow to me. I can't help the flush that fills my cheeks. I look to the side and see Posy by the wall, and she inclines her head. Even Posy bowed. I turn back to the Wyerns and stand up. "I know many of you are not happy with a fae queen, and I don't blame you. The fae have been calling you all monsters. Your court was cursed by the Fae Queen for years, and you have been made outcasts in the world by them. The world is changing, and we can change with it. I want the history books to tell about how the world of the fae fell, and it was the Wyerns who saved this world. It was the Wyerns who changed, who turned hate into mercy and proved they are not monsters." I look at Emerson and see nothing but pride in his eyes. It gives me confidence. "I was born mortal, reborn actually, and then forcibly turned into a fae. Throughout all of this, I loved your king. He is my mate and our lives were destined for this. I don't want you to follow me because you are frightened of your king, but instead, I want you to follow me into a war because I will fight for you. I will never stop until the Rift King is dead and his army alongside him. Anyone who sides with him is a traitor, and when we save this world, no one will remember you as monsters."

Emerson stands off his throne, taking my hand. "As you are aware, war is on our doorsteps. The Rift King, Callioppe knows him personally from when he was a mortal child before he was taken, killed, and morphed into the monster he is now. He has power, but so do your royals. We will stop the Rift King, but we call upon you to take out his army."

He looks at the crowd before continuing. "I won't sugarcoat this for you. He has massacred three cities and killed millions. He will kill everybody here. Female, elder, child. It makes no difference to him. They all die. He wants to remake this world, and that means getting rid of anything that can fight him. He left us for last because he knows we are the biggest threat to him. All three of the great cities are gone. We, along with the witches, are all that is left, all that stands between him and his goal. To survive this war, there will be many losses. I cannot promise that you won't know someone that will die. But if we survive, if we manage to, we will no

longer be hidden in this mountain. We will no longer stay in the shadows and pretend that we are heartless monsters. I will not sit on a cold throne in the mountains and let the world pass by.”

I smile to myself as he echoes my words I once said to him in this room. “We will join this world,” he promises, “and we will rebuild it in peace between our races. There was a time where I hated the fae because of what I believed my mother had done to my true mate’s soul. It was not true. She spent her life, all up to her death, protecting me. My father lost his mind protecting me. I was born to bring the gap between the fae and the Wyerns to a close, and for years I chose to live in a world of hate rather than accept the fate I was born to.” He looks at me. “We are changing, if we can survive this war. The fae will not be our enemies any longer, as I am their king. I am taking the fae throne with my queen and uniting us.”

The doors open and fae walk In, most of them I know well. Lady Sahana Trixnoble, Ailen Riverbell, and more from the court who I met in passing. I smile at them before they each bow in front of Emerson. “These are the new members of our court, which will forever be more than just Wyerns. We will welcome any refugees into the city while the war is continuing. Any person who can fight, male or female, must fight for our future. Prince Lorenzo will be back from his journey to the witches, and they will be fighting with us in accordance with the terms of our alliance. War is coming. Go be with your families for the short time. Train. Get your best weapons and be ready. More plans will come forward in the next few days.”

“To our king and queen!” Nathiel shouts, stepping forward. He claps once, but it is swallowed up by cheers that echo out of the throne room and shake the mountain. This is where it changes for all of us, and we go forward. I stay at Emerson’s side, holding his hand as he begins to walk us out of the throne room. After we speak to so many people, I lose track. When the throne room doors are shut, Emerson kisses my forehead. “You did well.”

“So did you,” I reply.

Several members of his inner court are following him out, and they wait for Emerson. “Are you going to come with us to discuss the war plans?”

“I want to see Nerelyth first,” I softly explain. “But then I’ll come back to you.”

“I’ll guard her and show her the way.” Zurine steps forward, linking our arms.

Emerson nods at her. “It’s good to see you, my friend.”

“I never believed for a second you were gone, my king,” Zurine firmly answers, her head held high. “This world needs you both, and death wouldn’t stop you.”

Emerson is called away before he can reply, and he looks at me one more time. “Call me if you need anything.”

“I miss you too,” I send back to his mind, and I know he is smiling without being able to see him. Posy catches up to us before we get too far, and both of them ask a lot of questions about the other world, the sword, and everything that happened. I fill them in as much as I possibly can before we stop outside the dark wooden doors. Zurine looks at the doors. She didn’t even blink at being told she is a descendant of the goddess, like me. “We’re both right out here if you need us. Please try to ask her what happened to Felix,” she says quietly. “No one knows where he is since the test, and his brother is worried. His whole family is. Nerelyth might know.”

A bad feeling settles in my chest. Felix would be here if he could. Zurine’s purple and blue eyes watch me, and we both don’t need to say it. Felix would be here, and he wouldn’t leave her. Posy touches my arm. “She’s so broken and I’ve been where she is. Someone needs to get through to her, and hopefully, that’s you.”

I hope so too. I open the doors, a creak echoing as I step into a very dark room. A few fae lights hover around the bed, where I can see red hair spread across black pillows. Nerelyth lifts her head and looks up at me as I close the doors. She is so pale, her hair is a mess, and there are lines down her cheeks

from tears. I croak out her name as one look seems to stab me in the chest. “Nerry.”

She doesn’t answer me and she lies back down, staring emptily at the wall. I go to pick up her hand, but she sharply pulls it away. “Talk to me, please. I’ve been so worried about you.”

Her green eyes stare through me. Hauntingly clear. “Is he dead?”

I don’t need to ask who she means, but I wince. I wish I could tell her yes. “No,” I answer. I don’t want to lie to her. “But he will be. I promise you. I’m not going to stop till he pays for what he did to you.” She watches the wall still. “Are you okay? At least physically? I know you haven’t let a healer touch you, and maybe you should. We just want you to be okay. You’re safe now.”

A hollow laugh escapes her before she sobs. It’s gut wrenching. I don’t know how long I sit with her, clueless what to say. I just hope she finds comfort in having me here. Zurine’s request comes back to me. “Nerry, do you know where Felix is?”

“Dead.”

That one word rings out between us. So cold, so empty. My heart cuts open. “By the goddess, no.” I can’t help the sob that escapes me as hot tears fall down my face. Felix was a good, good male. He was my guard, who protected me when I was broken. He was such a good friend. “What happened? Please tell me so I can tell his family.”

“He killed him. He killed him because he loved me. Is that what you want to hear?” She lifts her head, anger making her eyes glow. The glass of water on the side table smashes. “And then he destroyed me, over and over, and I will never be rid of what he did to me. I’m glad Felix is dead, so he didn’t have to see what happened to the person he was in love with. Is that what you want to know? I fell in love and he was killed because of me!” she cries. “I don’t want to live. I don’t want to be here. Why did you save me? Can’t you see there is nothing left?”

I quickly step to the bed and pull her into a tight hug. She cries with me until her voice is broken. I lie down with her, letting her cry it out until she falls asleep. I brush her hair from her cheek and tuck her into the bed. “I’m so sorry, Nerry, but there is *you* left. You are worth saving, and I will not give up, even if you have.”

CHAPTER
NINE



The war meeting seems to never end, and most of it, I don't understand. They have spoken about areas of the mountains and cities to defend, places to send the young, elderly, and those who cannot fight. They have been preparing for war for years, not against the Rift King, but against the fae. If anyone has a chance of winning, it's us. It has to be us. I haven't had the heart to tell Emerson about Felix, or his brother either. We need to be alone for that. I still find Nathiel looking at me now and then, and I swear he knows or senses I'm about to destroy him with the news his brother is gone. But I will tell him before we leave here; I just want us to be away from the rest of the inner court.

I rub my eyes, feeling more than a little tired as Emerson talks about the formations of the armies. The plan is to have the armies engage with Louie's army, and for Emerson and me to face Louie. I can't let him use his power, use that crown, to destroy everything. He won't be alone. There will be other Rift Kings and Queens. We are outnumbered and I don't know how to help us. I look at the raised map, the many ornaments that mark the thick mountains that wrap around the bulk of the city mountains. Most of the inner city is deep within the middle, and it will be kept that way. The outer mountains are full of storage. Nothing useful, but they're good for attack, apparently filled with many tunnels for the Wyerns to fly in and out of. Louie will not know which mountain to hit, and his power is great but only if he knows exactly where to hit. We will have a short amount of time.

I stand up and walk to the window, looking over the mountains where the cities lie. It won't be enough, even with the witches' help. It will not be enough. The old god must be in this world now, and he has the rulers with enough power to total this world. All our preparation will not be enough.

"Callioppe," Emerson calls my name. I turn. "We are discussing the part of our war plan that includes you and the sword."

"Only my sword can take out the rulers and likely the old god. Which means I need to be in a lot of places at once in this battle, which is near impossible. If Lou—the Rift King keeps them all together, then I will try my best against them all. I've barely tapped into the power of the sword," I admit. "But it takes from me. To use the power, to kill them all, we cannot waste any time."

"I will fly you everywhere," Emerson states, his eyes briefly meeting mine with nothing but concern. "I won't let the sword take you, either."

Posy leans forward off the wall, where she was leaning near Zurine. "My power isn't great, but I can direct winds to make you fly quicker across the battlefield with her. I will practice with my gift."

"I will help you practice pushing me through the air," Solandis steps forward. Posy nods at her before looking right at me. We have things to discuss about her mother, and I know she is giving me space for now with everything going on. How do I tell her that her mother is a villain? A true monster who deserves to be locked away for what she did to the dragon goddess all those years ago.

Nathiel rubs his chin. "We're still greatly outnumbered with the sirens, the dead monsters, and the Rift soldiers. Our spies have counted the army numbers, and it is going rising. They're at least five hundred thousand stronger, and we're sitting on about a hundred and fifty thousand. With the witches, maybe looking at two hundred and fifty. We're still outnumbered, my king." He clears his throat. "Emerson, we are going to need all the luck of the gods to win this."

We all go silent. It's not much we can say. He is right. I glance at Posy. There is one more thing we could do to level the playing field, but it would mean making a deal with gods. When Emerson begins talking in detail about training and magic attacks, I walk over to Posy. I keep my voice quiet. I can explain it all to Emerson after I've done it, or he'd never let me. Worse, he'd want to come with me, and that would get us all killed. "I have a crazy idea, and I need your advice on it."

"We need a little crazy right about now, or we will all be dead," she mutters. "I've just gotten my body back, and I'd like it kept in one piece."

I keep my voice quiet. "I'll come for you, and we need to talk about it first and make a plan."

Emerson comes to my side. "That's the best we can do for now until Lorenzo's back, and we will make a further plan with the witches. Continue with the army and the evacuation of the children and those who cannot fight."

I call out. "Nathiel, can you stay for a moment?" I look at Zurine, who is quiet. "You too, please."

"Of course, my queen," he respectfully answers, and Zurine nods once.

I wait until the room is silent and take Emerson's hand tightly in my grip. "When I spoke to Nerelyth, she told me something. Something that you need to hear." I clear my throat, unable to keep the tears from wetting my eyes. "Felix and her, they were in a relationship. They were in love. It was sweet to watch how much they fell for each other in the Conquest of the Sea. All of us saw it, and how happy he was with her. He risked his life for her, cared for her. It was clear he was quite obsessed."

Nathiel grins. "Never knew he liked sirens. He never dated or took anyone serious..." He pauses when he looks into my eyes. "Does she know where he is?"

I make sure to look right into his eyes. "He's gone," I say quietly. "I am so sorry. He was killed by the Rift King because

he loved Nerelyth. He was killed to break her soul, and it worked.”

“NO!” Nathiel screams in pain, and Zurine bursts into tears, grief overwhelming everyone in this room. Felix was a good male, and he will not be forgotten. The ground shakes and snowflakes fill the air as Emerson lets me go and heads to his friend. He pulls him into a tight embrace as he howls and roars, turning into his monster form and losing all control. My heart shatters once again, seeing him break. Louie did this.

I walk to Zurine and hold her as her magic fills the room with snowflakes and makes it bitterly cold. Posy is pretty silent, but even I can tell she’s shaken silent. I lead Zurine out of the room with Posy and back to her room, leaving Emerson to calm his friend through the grief. I step out of Zurine’s room and look at Posy.

“So, what’s the plan and why don’t you want your mate knowing about it?”

CHAPTER
TEN



Posy simply looks at me for a long time, and for once, I can't read her expression. I'm not surprised she is silent after I've told her everything in her room, and she knew it would be a long talk when she invited me in. This room is dark, everything from the black bedding to the walls that are black too. But the ceiling has hundreds of painted stars in every inch, and within them are tiny fae lights, so it actually looks like the starry night sky. There isn't much personal in here, but she hasn't had time to settle it. Everything I've told her is a lot to take in, and it's personal. I've explained everything that I learned in the visions before Junepit City was destroyed, about her mother and what she wanted with Paxton, the earth god's son. Now, she was still talking after learning all of that, but the fact I've just asked her to take me to her mother so we can make a deal with them has her silent.

She blinks. Once. Twice. "You want to offer them a deal? In exchange for breaking them out of their prisons, you want them to join us in the war?"

Crossing my arms, I nod once. "Yes."

She places her hands on her hips. "You want to work with them after you've just learned they are complete monsters? They literally tortured your great grandmother, your ancestor, and you still want to let them out?" Her eyes are filled with a mixture of confusion and worry for me. I get it. I sound insane right now. "She's my mother and I absolutely think you should not let her out, even if I didn't know what you told me. She is

a very powerful goddess, who wasn't known for being kind to mortals."

"Posy." I blow out a breath. "What makes you think I have a choice? I mean, yes, they're dangerous, but they're also extremely powerful. Right now, we have an army at our doors. They are more powerful than us, but maybe not the four elemental gods put together. It's that simple." I rub my forehead. "The Rift Kings and Queens will be with Louie and stand against us. There's one sword." I raise my hand to touch it over my shoulder. "One sword and one of me. There are many more of them. If they team together, we're done. Our best chance is separating them to fight one on one. We need more than us to do that and survive."

"But—"

"No, Posy. I won't see my mate die, or you, or anyone else because I didn't ask when I know I can. We can convince them together," I interrupt her. "I'm willing to make a deal with some of the most evil beings to ever be in this world in order to save all of us." I pause. "I need you there."

"I'm not going to see them! No! This is insane!" she snaps. I get why she is angry, but it doesn't make this decision any easier. We don't have time to argue this when Louie could be here at any moment. I don't know why he isn't already here.

"Then we die. It's that simple. We die because we won't be able to win against him. He's evil. They all are and they will kill us," I whisper. It feels wrong to even say it, like speaking it out into the world might make it come true. "This sword, the pressure you all have put on my shoulders... I can't do it alone."

"You won't be alone, Calli," she replies, but her eyes speak the truth: I would be alone. Even Emerson won't be able to save me, and he would die trying. I would die trying to save him, too. There isn't a world where I want to live with him not at my side.

"There is an old god with them. We are playing in a war of gods, and we are not gods. There'll be nothing left but them. They will wipe this world and continue on." I lift my head.

“Can’t you see this is the only way? I think the goddess showed me everything, not only to warn you and Paxton, but to show me their power and what they can do. With them, we would stand a chance. A real chance.”

Posy walks to the window, putting her back to me. “What about Paxton? She’s going to want him, and if she is free, then nothing stops her. I’m not letting her have my cousin. He is a few doors down with his friend, and he is a funny kid. Innocent. She would destroy him.”

I think of the small boy with dark green hair, who reminds me of lying in freshly cut grass, feeling the earth under my fingertips. The earth god’s son is a risk. “If his father gets out, there’s a very good chance he’s going to come after his son and want to take him back. His mother is dead, and she clearly didn’t want her mate to touch their child.”

“We’ll make a part of the deal that they cannot speak to Paxton until he is old enough to make his own choice,” I suggest. “I won’t let anyone take him. We’ll make sure that whatever we offer them in terms of a deal means they can’t touch any of the children. That includes you, too.”

Posy stares out the window, over the dark mountains, for a long time. I can almost see every scenario playing out in her mind the same way it has mine, and she is coming to the same bitter conclusion. We need them. Even as a bat, I thought she was one of the smartest people that I have ever known. Eventually, she turns back and nods just once. “To my mother, then. I hope we aren’t wrong about this. Have you told Emerson or anyone else?”

“No, he would want to come with us, and his temper would make sure we never get their help,” I admit. “I love him, but perhaps this is better left to the females.”

“Aren’t you worried about my temper?” She arches an eyebrow.

I grin. “You’re her daughter. She can’t try to kill you for it.”

Posy sighs, grabbing daggers off the side of a bookcase in her room. “You’ve thought this through.” I had a lot of time to think about what we could do if we ever got back to Wyvcelm. “I should have known my mother would turn out to be an evil sociopath.”

“If Lorenzo were here, he’d make a joke right about now,” I fondly offer.

She frowns at me, softer than usual, and just for a second, I wonder if it’s even possible for them to work out. I know she doesn’t hate him. Posy looks away and I get brave. “About Lorenzo—”

“No, don’t even go there if you’re going to say mates are all fucking magical rainbows and I should ride my own rainbow to happy town,” she interrupts.

I cough on a laugh. “I wasn’t going to say that. Or anything like that. I wanted to ask, is there any chance for him? For you?”

She watches me. “I know you are happy with Emerson, but it won’t work for me. There is some irony in the fact that I was kidnapped by witches, tortured, and used by them, forced to marry one who brutalized me too... only for my mate to turn out to be half witch. Even worse, a prince.” There is a sharpness to her tone. “He’s a good male. I’m not saying he’s not, but we would destroy each other. I would destroy him. I’m not good, I’m not full of light, and I hold too much bitterness to let go of the past. When this war is over, I have my own personal war to begin, and there is no way he would be on my side as I slaughter the witches who hurt me. He will protect his people.”

My eyes soften. “I think he deserves a chance to make his own choice on that.”

She waves a hand. “It doesn’t matter. He needs someone that’s just far better than what I am now.”

“Is that what you really believe?” I ask her quietly. “That you don’t deserve him? I hate to break it to you, you do. You deserve the world, Posy. I will say that fate is never wrong,

and I know you both so well. I think you'd be really good for each other. That's what I'm going to say about it."

"You're wrong," she whispers and clears her throat, straightening her back. It's clear the topic of Lorenzo is over. "Are you sure that you really want to take that sword with you? She will want it."

"They will respect that I have it," I suggest instead. Yes, she will want it, but it's mine. I remember how they loved the sword and the goddess for what she could give to them. I will be giving them something, but I won't be used and trapped like she was. I've learnt from her. "It might be the only reason they listen. I don't have a choice." Posy holds her hand up, and the air in the room picks up, a breeze building as I'm honest with her. "If it were just me I had to think of and I was selfish, I'd take Emerson and all my friends, my family, and go to another world with the sword. I'd shut this world away and pretend it didn't exist."

"We both know that's something I would do, not you," she answers. "I'm rather glad the sword belongs to you, not me."

She looks right at me as I reply. "We both know you'd come back because you won't let innocents suffer any more than I would." Winds whip around us, pulling up her black hair into a wave behind her as she lightly glows. She hasn't done that before. Posy looks like the daughter of an air goddess in this exact moment, and her power is like a hailstorm, slamming into me, even when she isn't directing it my way. "Since when do you glow?"

"I'm not sure," she truthfully answers as the portal forms. "I've been practicing my magic, and maybe this is it working better?"

"You'd make a good fae light in the dark," I tease, earning a glare from her before I walk through first into the prison of the air goddess. It feels deeply wrong to be breaking them out, even considering it, when the goddess died to keep them in here. But she died to save this world, to protect the people, and if I don't stop Louie, then none of it matters. Everything would have been for nothing, and the Rift people will be the only

victor. Posy follows behind me, the portal slamming shut behind her. I stay at her side as we walk through the enormous doors into the living area, where the air goddess herself waits for us like she knew we would come. The thought is disturbing.

She is sitting in a chair, one leg crossed over the other as she leans on her hand. “The wind whispers to me that you learned how to break my brother’s curse and you got a shiny crown, Wyern Queen. I take it that you figured out who you are, after all.” She tilts her head. “How unfortunate, but our deal is not over. Where is the boy?”

“Paxton is never going near you,” Posy snarls. “The pretense is over, mother, along with the deal.”

She watches her daughter as I speak. “The goddess showed me what you did, who you are. Let’s not play pretend anymore. I don’t know what you wanted the boy for, but he is safe and far from you. It will stay that way.”

Air loses the happiness, the smiles, all of it, within a second. The pretense was good, I’ll admit. “Fine.” Her eyes drift over my shoulder and widen slightly. A longing fills them instead. “The sword. Ah, that’s what the wind was whispering to me about. A power back in this world. Give it to me.”

I arch an eyebrow. “You will have to kill me to lay a finger on it.” I wrap my hand around the hilt a bit behind my head. “But I may let you touch it when I run it through you if you dare to come closer.”

Her eyes turn to ice. Brutal icy wind whips around the room, tightening around my throat, making it hard for me to breathe. I push on my own magic, fire and ice dancing around in a hurricane at my feet, spreading up until they cover me and Posy from her view and her power. Posy looks at me. “Stop. Please.”

I let my power go, the ice and fire drifting away in a breeze. Posy steps in front of me, her hands stretched out. Instantly the air becomes warmer, and it stops strangling me. “Your power is reduced in here, isn’t it? You would struggle to

kill us.” Air doesn’t reply, but the tightening of her lips gives her away. “Do you want me dead, mother?”

The word *dead* seems to echo around them, off the marble floors and great pillars. “No,” Air bites out. “You’re my only daughter. The only child I will ever be gifted. Your father was my true mate, and that means that the only child I can ever have is you because he is gone.”

“Is the story of how he died even true? Or was he running from you?” she asks, her voice biting with anger. “Is that how the witches so easily took me? Because he was already weak and running—”

“No, it was true.” She stops her daughter. “I swear on my blood, on my magic, and on my soul that I told you the truth. Things for me, at least, were different when he was here. When you were born.” She looks away at the empty fireplace. Without a fire in here, it makes this place show what it really is. A prison. “You don’t get to have a second mate in life, in any life, even if you are a god. I didn’t find him; he came to me, which is funny since you,, our child, would be needed to save this world. Paxton is a key, too. His birth is no coincidence.”

“We are not discussing Paxton,” I remind her. “He is not for you.”

“You look like her. The same face. Same way you hold yourself. It’s rather annoying to see her again, but you lack her power. You are powerful enough, but no goddess,” she taunts me.

“Was it worth it?” I bite back. “All that death, using the goddess, all of it so the mortals would worship you as gods. Was it worth it, considering they forgot about you? They all still worshipped her. Always her. You were left as fairy tales, jokes, really.”

Her eyes bleed white, and she stands. “I’m going to enjoy killing you!”

Posy makes sure she is covering me. “Not unless you wish to kill me first. If she dies, so do I. I’ve sworn to protect her

life.” She looks over her shoulder at me. “Even if she pisses off powerful goddesses rather than doing what we came here to do.”

I straighten my back and step around Posy. “I want you to fight for me and my mate. The Rift Kings, Queens, and the old god from the Rift are here, along with an army. We are outnumbered. The Wyern and witch cities are the last that stand between them and destroying this world. They have slaughtered millions already.” I pause as she sits back down, her eyes nothing short of calculating. “We need you to fight. We want you to make a vow to fight for us, with us. All four of you.”

She links her fingers. “You want me, my brothers, and my sister to fight for you mortals? For what? For the mortals who forgot us, as you clearly said. They worship the goddess. Why not beg her spirit to come and fight?”

“Because she’s dead. You all know that. We will offer you something in exchange, and it won’t be Paxton or Posy.” She leans forward. “Here’s the deal. We offer you freedom. I will break you out of here with the sword, and you will fight in this war until it is over. You will swear loyalty to both Emerson and me, complete loyalty, bound in blood, and this deal will live through our heirs. If you do anything that is not within the rules of our own court, which includes murdering, enslaving, any of the evil shit you are used to doing, you will be forced back in here by the magic you swear on. You will also be forbidden to hurt any Wyern, fae, mortal or supernatural in anything but self-defense. Do you understand?”

“Freedom, mother,” Posy says. “True freedom. You want to be with me? Protect me? Then you need to take this deal.”

She looks a little surprised. “Your deal is tempting but restrictive. Can we—”

My tone is firm. “No.”

Posy walks to her mother. “I’ve heard what you did all those years ago, but I still believe you could change. If you leave us to fight this alone, we will probably die in this war. You’ll be stuck here with nothing but the monsters outside.

Here alone, forever. Make the deal, if not for yourself, for me.”

“I do not make deals with mortals, even queens,” she huffs.

“I am fae and immortal,” I correct her. It’s the first time that I really believe it. “I am the Wyern and Fae Queen, and you will make a deal with me. I am the granddaughter of the goddess. I bear her sword and her magic, too. You may have tricked my grandmother, but you will not trick me. I’m not offering you forgiveness; that will never come from me, but perhaps there is a chance you could earn it from others. You should come and fight with us. Maybe then, you can get mortals to believe in you once again. They might even sing the songs of the elemental gods who came out of their prisons to fight. To save them. I believe you wanted to be loved, and this is your chance.”

She looks at Posy. “I will bring my answer on the wind. I must consult with my brothers and sister.”

Posy glances back at me. “I want to talk to her alone.”

“I’ll wait outside,” I answer before turning and walking out. The doors slam shut behind me, leaving me in a dark, soundless room. They talk for quite a while, although I can’t hear anything. There is nothing but utter silence, not even an echo. The doors open and Posy storms out, waving her hand and making a portal. I quickly catch up to her side, noticing unshed tears in her eyes. “Are you alright?”

“She will have an answer by tomorrow morning,” Posy answers, and I don’t push her on it as we step through the portal, back into her bedroom. It snaps shut within seconds. “You shouldn’t trust her. Make sure the deal you bargain is air tight, or she will find a way around it.”

“I will,” I promise her, searching her eyes. Whatever her mother said has upset her, and unless she wants to talk to me, there is nothing I can do to convince her to talk to me. Posy is stubborn.

“I’m going to train,” she declares. “I need to work off some of this energy.”

“Training?” I question, dumbfounded. I’ve heard Lorenzo beg her to let him train her a million times. “I can help you. Lorenzo taught me—”

“I will learn on my own,” she says, cutting me off, her chin held high, and she stubbornly walks out. I sigh before going to find Emerson and explain to him everything and hope he doesn’t get too mad at me for not telling him my crazy plan. The corridors are quiet and the soft sound of piano music echoes to me. I follow it, finding Emerson’s father playing his piano. He looks back at me. “Come in, Callioppe. We haven’t seen each other in many, many months.”

“I’m sorry we haven’t,” I softly answer. I know who he is, what he has done, but I never get the sense I’m in danger with him. I sit down next to him and touch a key, the lingering sound banging. “Why do you only speak to me?”

“I hoped you would ask,” he replies as he begins to play, his hands moving expertly across the keys. “The magic I used to save him, it cursed me. I cannot speak to my children, and every time I try, I am blocked. Sometimes, I lose my mind and I’m not here. Not aware. You are above my magic. In every one of your lifetimes, it was possible for me to speak to you. I could speak to what was left of my lover. Emerson’s mother.”

My heart races. “I asked her to make the Monster Acquisitions Division, to make protectors to hide you. She told them that you would be the one to save us all, and she believed that, even as her soul was broken and her body taken over by creatures from the Rift. She gave up what magic she had to protect you and your enforcers knew it.” He keeps playing, the music racing up in its beat. I don’t move, even as I sense Emerson in the doorway. “I believe she was the one to pick you up off the floor outside the Rift and care for you. We made many mistakes as rulers, caused much death, but Emerson and you are our salvation. Our legacy.”

“Father…” Emerson gently whispers.

He doesn't look back or away from the piano. "The song of me is ending soon, but my love for my children will exist forever. It always existed in my love, the Fae Queen, for her only son."

I look over at Emerson as his father continues. "Love exists forever."

"Forever," Emerson repeats, and his father's song stops, and so does he. Any chance of speaking to him is gone. I kiss his cheek before leaving him to play and going to my mate, who I can feel is troubled by everything he heard. His father is alive, but a ghost that haunts him. I wish I could fix everything between them now, but so much has happened. Emerson's parents, both of them, did everything for him, and I couldn't be more thankful for them.

Emerson wraps his arm around my waist, leading me back to our room. He sits on the end of the bed, taking off his crown and placing it next to him. I walk over, stepping between his legs and running my hands through his hair. He looks up at me, his purple eyes glowing softly with nothing but love. "They say I was born to be the king, to unite them, but I only ever wanted one thing. One person. You. I wouldn't be able to do this without you, Doe. You're my beginning and ending."

"You're mine too," I softly whisper, leaning into him. "You are stronger than you think, my king."

"I like when you call me that," he suggests, running his hands up the back of my thighs, over my ass, and to my waist. My skin buzzes to life where he touches, leaving me wanting him more and more. Emerson hooks his fingers in my trousers, dragging them down my thighs and legs, until I step out of them. I pull my shirt off over my head, careful not to knock off my crown. His large hands trace over my stomach, cupping my breasts. My breath hitches as he runs his fingertips over my hard, perked nipples. "You're so beautiful, Callioppe. So very addictive and my favorite person in the world."

"Kiss me," I beg of him, needing to feel his lips on mine. A devilish grin spreads across his face as he leans forward, kissing one of my nipples, running his teeth across it. I cry out

in pleasure, unable to stop myself, and he pulls me onto the bed, on top of him. I spread my legs around his waist, tugging at his shirt. He pulls it off as I lean up, my cheeks flushing as he looks at me. I can feel how hard he is under me, and I shamelessly rub myself against him, needing something, anything. His eyes darken as he reaches between us, sliding his hand down my soaking wet core and pushing two fingers inside of me. I clutch the bedsheets as he rubs my clit with his thumb and thrusts his fingers in and out of me, teasing and pushing. He knows my body so, so well. It doesn't take much, and he knows it.

Before I orgasm, he stops and undoes his trousers. Lining us up, I slowly sink down on him, and he fills every bit of me until it feels like I'm going to break from having him inside me. His desire mixes with mine as I move, and he holds my hips, guiding each one of my thrusts. I go faster and faster, enjoying how he fills me over and over. My orgasm is right on the edge, and he knows it. My mate spins us over on the bed, pulling me to the edge and making me lie face down. I moan as he pushes his cock back into me. This new position makes him feel even bigger. I grab the sheets tight. The friction of the bed on my clit and Emerson's cock thrusting in and out of me is too much.

My orgasm crashes into me like a storm on the sea, and I moan loud enough for the entire castle to hear. His hand wraps around my hair, pulling my head back as he thrusts harder and harder. The mix of pain and intense pleasure is incredible. I can't think about the pain at this moment. Emerson groans as he thrusts deep, spilling himself inside me with one long groan. I swear I'll feel his handprints on my ass for weeks to come. Emerson pulls out of me and picks me up, tucking us both into the bed and under the sheets. I lie on his chest as he strokes my back, knowing I need to clean up, and Emerson speaks into my mind. "I love you."

"I love you too," I whisper back, running circles on his chest. I want to live like this forever.

I don't even remember falling asleep, let alone being lured into this dream. I was in Emerson's arms and then... I'm

dragged, torn, and forced into it as I claw at the door to escape. Most of my dreams come easily into my mind, like floating in a cloud to an island, but this dream is different from the beginning. Within seconds, it's too late to escape him and this dream.

Louie is here, and he is dressed for war with a stolen crown perched on his head. The beautiful Wyern mountains proudly stand behind him, spread out in a wave from his shoulders. They almost look like wings. Like he's the angel of death himself, waiting to catch us all. My heart races because this means the war is here. He is outside my home now. I look behind me, and in the far distance, I can see the armies coming from both land and sea.

"You can stop all this now. Come to me and I'll send the armies away for now," he offers, his voice mimicking how Louie spoke to me when he was a child. His voice tears at my heart, and we both know it's on purpose. "Come with the sword, and this all can be over before I rip your mate apart."

I lift my head, fury burning through me as darkness floods my mind. I'm not alone anymore. I never will be. Emerson forms next to me in the dream, our mate bond allowing him into my mind and into my dreams. I smile as Louie looks shocked, and he actually takes a step back. He fears Emerson, but I don't understand why. Louie is powerful with the crown, and Emerson is powerful too, but not in the same way. Darkness shakes the world around us, cracking darkness into the dream, making it look like an old, dried out painting, cracking under the pressure. "I will see you on the battlefield, Louie, and your time in our world will be over." Emerson wraps his arm around my waist, never taking his eyes off Louie, and the look he gives him is more sinister than his shadows and darkness. "Now get the fuck out of my queen's head. She. Is. Mine."

The dream explodes in darkness, and Louie roars. I wake up breathless, and I turn to Emerson as he sits up in our bed. "He's here."

CHAPTER
ELEVEN



After waking up, everything becomes a blur, and I can barely get my thoughts in order. War is here and I know one of us will not survive this, and we might not win. The sword never told me if I win this war. I glance at the box in the corner, where the crown from the Rift Queen is hidden away. It feels wrong to use it, but maybe we shouldn't leave it here. There isn't time to ponder it as I continue getting dressed.

Emerson was out of bed in seconds, dressed, swords on his back, and barking orders to everyone nearby to get the armies ready as I throw my leather clothes on, clipping all my daggers in place on my hips and putting the sword on my back last. I find Emerson outside the throne room, talking with Nathiel and Ferris. Ferris bows his head my way. "Thank you for the warning. We will be ready, Queen Calliophe."

"It's just Calli," I mutter, but he is already gone. Nathiel stays a few steps away from Emerson, waiting, as Emerson cups the back of my neck and kisses me. His kiss is consuming, his hot lips devouring mine like it's the last time we will ever get to kiss each other. I refuse to let that be true. It will not be the last time. It can't be. "I don't want to leave you —"

I kiss him once. "You're their king and I am fine here."

He leans down, burying his head in my shoulder, and he groans softly. "It is fucking painful to leave you. I will be at your side long before he gets close to here."

“I know you will,” I softly whisper. He needs to be there, getting the army ready, and I need to be here, making sure this castle is empty because Louie will be able to see it soon. He will attack here. We planned to evacuate the castle in the next few days, but Louie has surprised us for the last time. “Go be their king. I will get Nerelyth, your father, the kids, and anyone else here out of the castle before joining you at the front.”

As I lift my head, I see groups of Wyerns heading to the portals or jumping out of the windows to fly to the city. Thunder flashes outside the windows, heavy rain pouring against the old walls of the castle. It’s dawn, but the sky is dark enough that I can only just make out the rising sunlight. Zurine and Posy are together, running down the corridor to us. Posy meets my eyes and nods once. I speak into Emerson’s mind. “I have to free the gods. Posy said they have agreed to our deal.”

Emerson looks down at me, tension radiating off every inch of his body. His features ripple into his monster form. My monster king, the love of my life, my mate. “Make the deal. I will hold him off.” My heart lurches. I want to be at his side. “Callioppe, I love you. I’m thankful for every single second we have been allowed to have together, and there isn’t anything I would change. I am in love with you, my beautiful queen, and we will survive this. Death will not take the years we deserve together away. I have planned out those years with you, and we are going to fight for them. For us.”

Tears fill my eyes and I make sure they don’t fall. There is nothing I can say back to him that means more than three words, three words that are etched into my heart, soul, and mind. “I love you.”

Clearing my throat, I force my gaze away to Zurine and Posy. I can’t watch him leave. He looks at Zurine. “We need Lorenzo. Go to the witches. It’s now or never for their help.”

“Of course.” Zurine nods in agreement, looking at me. “Are you going to be safe here? I want to fight at your side, my queen.” She smiles as she calls me her queen. Zurine was always on my side, always told me I’d be her queen one day.

She was one of my best friends from the moment we met. My sister in my soul and we even share blood...although distant. Posy and Nerelyth are the same to me. I want to fight next to her too, not send her away to the witches.

“I won’t be here for long. Posy and I have something to do,” I answer. “And we need Lorenzo and the witches.”

“I’ll help you on the way to the portals,” Zurine replies, and I look back, seeing Emerson is gone. Nathiel remains behind and I sigh. He is here to protect me, I’d guess. I should have known. He bows his head once, and my heart hurts when I meet his eyes. He looks so much like his brother sometimes.

“Let’s move,” I state, knowing time isn’t on our side right now. We get to Nerry’s room first, and I hold my hand up at the door. They wordlessly stay outside as I go in, the fae lights burning brighter for me. Nerry doesn’t look up, but she knows it’s me. She’s curled up on the bed, and she doesn’t even flinch when I pull her blanket back. She’s so pale, and the room smells of sickness as I push her red hair off her face. Her green eyes meet mine. “We need to leave here. I’m sorry, I know you want to stay in here, but you cannot.”

“Leave, there is no one here worth waiting for,” she dully responds.

I shake my head. “No, my best friend is here and too weak to fight. I’m not leaving.” I blow out a breath. “Please. I don’t want to fight you on this, but I won’t leave you here.”

I don’t want to warn her about who is coming, but we both know she is aware. “Leave me a dagger and I’ll be fine. He can take my dead body.”

The floorboards creak and I turn to see Nathiel step into the room. Nerry looks up, her eyes widening. “My brother died, and he would haunt me if I didn’t save you now. Don’t give up on life when his was stolen. It would be a dishonor to my brother. I know what happened to you, and most of us would understand if you wanted to give up, if you want to die, but your life has barely begun, and ending it now would let the monster who hurt you win. He would win with your death. I won’t plead with you to get up and live, but for Felix, I’m

begging you to come with me. For my brother, for his memory, for how he was a good person who loved you endlessly.”

I expect her to scream, to do nothing, to ask for a dagger once more, but she doesn't. She stares and stares at him. Tears so clear they could be jewels fall down her cheeks in the minutes that pass. “He died for me. He tried to protect me, and if I go with you all, you might have the same fate. I can't...”

“You can.” Nathiel is firm, but gentle. He comes over and offers her his hand. “Come with me, Amor de Sereia.”

To my shock, she takes his hand. He helps her stand, and I grab a cloak off a hook on the wall and pull it over her arms, clipping it in the front. Nathiel nods at me, staying at Nerry's side. She trusts him. It's enough for me. Posy and Zurine are as surprised as I am when he leads Nerry out into the corridor, and we all head towards the mirrors without another word. We don't have time to talk about it.

I stop to search for Emerson's father, but he isn't in his room or in the piano room. “Where is he?”

Posy runs off to grab Paxton and his friend. Zurine shakes her head. “I don't know. He doesn't usually leave these rooms. Let's get Posy and the kids to the portal, and we can search quicker without them. He wouldn't have gone far.”

“You need to get to the witches. Lorenzo must know—”

“Lorenzo is with the witches?” Nerry stops. “No! You can't trust them! The queen—” She blanches. “She is in love with him, and they will side with the Rift army!”

My blood runs cold. Lorenzo has been there for a day. He's been with our enemy for a day. No. “What did you just say?”

I turn to look at Posy, as the color drains from her face. From all of ours. She is holding a little girl, and Paxton is at her side, but I can see the world has disappeared. Nerry sobs. “Lorenzo is in danger. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry—”

“It's not your fault,” Nathiel gently tells her as she weeps.

Posy hands me the girl. “I have to go after him. Now.”

“We have to go—” I pause. “Posy...”

Her eyes harden. “Don’t ask me to go with you and leave him there. Please don’t.”

If it were my mate, I’d do anything in her shoes. My shoulders drop. “I won’t. I’ll go alone and figure it out.”

“Where are you going?” Zurine questions. “If you need Posy, I’m going to Lorenzo either way. I will get him out.”

“I can come too,” Nathiel adds in. “Emerson tasked me with keeping you safe. All of you.”

Posy and I look at each other. I clear my throat. “Let’s get to the mirrors, get Nerry and the kids safe, and find the old king. When that’s done, we make a plan.” I search Posy’s eyes. She tensely nods. I know she wants to make a portal and go, but it will be a trap. Lorenzo is bait for us, to pull us apart. I quickly tell Emerson everything through our link as we head to the mirrors, and his fear for Lorenzo copies my own.

“How do you turn these damn things on and make sure they go to the right place?” Posy questions as we step into the room of mirrors, the portals shining brightly. The second we step in, each of the mirrors ripple. The water inside them turns black right before cloaked witches step out of each one, and the mirrors behind them crack softly. Their magic fills the room as I hold the girl tight to my chest.

Lastly, the queen steps out of the middle one. She looks right at me as I take a step in front of my friends. Blood that smells like Lorenzo is painted like war marks across her cheeks. Fury burns through my veins as my own powers begin to emerge at my feet, flames and ice licking the ground. “Where is my brother-in-law?”

Posy steps to my side. “You will pay for every drop of his blood you spilled, Witch Queen.”

“The air demigoddess,” she coos. “Your mate’s blood tastes as delicious as yours once did.” The Witch Queen looks around her. “And now there are two of you, just like my dark Rift King promised me.” She raises her arms. “The rest of you aren’t needed. It turns out the prince’s blood, blood of the

royal Wyerns, is all you need to control the magic of the mirrors.”

Water blasts out of the mirrors, monsters within the waters, and slams into all of us. I can barely scream before I’m thrown into the corridor wall, and the water swallows me whole as I cling to the child in my arms. EMERSON!

CHAPTER
TWELVE

KING EMERSON



I stand on the edge of the mountains, looking down at the seemingly endless army, and I'm no fool. We are outnumbered by at least five to one. The only difference is we are alive, breathing, and we are not monsters with no clue how to really fight. I've trained my people, along with my brother, and I know they will not let me down. If we fall, it will be defending the last bit of good left in this world.

My parents wanted me to be good, to bring light into this world and link all of us. The war pulled everyone together, but I'm proud that they all stand with me now. We're about to face destruction and death, and the tense feeling humming around in the area is thick with fear. Only a stupid person wouldn't be frightened right now. My people stand behind me, and it's not just my Wyerns. The fae are here in their thousands, ready for war, ready to fight for the Wyerns they once cursed.

The irony isn't lost on me that they are fighting for me, their new king. All kinds of supernaturals make up the ranks, spread out around the mountain range at the front, ready to draw the bulk of the army into the middle of the mountains. The fortified mountains will act as a trap, and our fliers will easily be able to pick them off, one by one, and crush them. I raise my voice. "For once, we stand against a common enemy." Everyone looks at me. "For once, we will fight together. For the world we want to build. The freedom that we want for our family and children. Fight with everything you have, remember who you are fighting for, and never stop. We will not fall to these monsters. We will blast them back to the hell they came from."

Cheers echo like drums in the air, backed by the roars of the monsters. Solandis looks up at me from my side. “When this war is over, perhaps we can learn to be closer as a brother and sister. I know you resented me for locking you away in the Wyern cities and not allowing you to travel the world, and I was wrong to do so. I wanted to protect you and took it too far. I locked myself away too.”

Solandis touches my arm. “Brother... when I thought you were dead, all I could think about is how I never thanked you for protecting me. I had a good childhood, and so many happy memories. I admire you, Emerson. When this war is over, we will enjoy the freedom together. I want to sit on a beach and sunbathe, what about you?”

I smile at her. “I want to build my mate a flower garden with her favorite flowers.”

She laughs, not mockingly, but in surprise. “I hope when I find a mate, they are as sweet as you.”

“They will be or I’ll teach them. The hard way,” I grumble, disliking the idea of my sister having a mate. I believe I will forever see her as the little girl who followed us all around and loudly voiced her opinion on everything. I turn back to the army, knowing I can’t waste any more time. This has to begin now. “Keep safe, sister.”

“Don’t die, brother,” she whispers, but the wind carries every word she says. “None of us can break like that again. We love you too much.”

I jump off the ledge, letting the wind catch my wings in the draft. Effortlessly, I glide down to the army, my Wyern generals flying with me like a black shadow. I keep my power locked at the surface, ready to protect from any attacks. They stay tight at my side in formations that we’ve done a hundred times over the years for planned battles against fae that we never needed. Arrows leave the mountains in floods from hidden spaces, spearing dead monsters and Rift soldiers on the front lines. I fly above as my Wyerns dive to the second line, demolishing them as I search for him. Just one more time, I let myself find my mate bond and check in on her. Calliophe

Eveningstar, my mate and queen. I would fight a million wars, with no magic and just my bare hands, to keep her safe.

This world can burn, but she must survive. Just for a second, as I search the army from above, I sense she's okay. She's alive and she'll be at my side soon when she has gotten the castle sorted. I spot Louie in the middle of the army, an empty space around him. He isn't alone. He is with several of the Rift Kings and Queens, and a cloaked male standing not far behind them. The old god. I land near them all, my feet crunching into the frost-covered mud.

He smirks as at least a thousand monsters and Rift soldiers run straight at me from around him. I hold my hand out, letting my power rip out of the earth, out of the shadows and darkness, and turn all of them to black dust within seconds. Louie barely blinks as I walk through the dust, letting it settle around me, pulling shadows and darkness, pure chaos towards me with every step. It feeds my power.

Louie tilts his head. "Where is she?"

"Don't speak about my mate," I growl at him, straightening my back. "Calliope belongs to me, and your hold on her is over. It's a sick game you've been playing. You are not Louie anymore."

I look to the left for a moment, sensing the water. There is a tidal wave, high enough to break over the top of the mountains, rushing towards us. "NO!" My roar does nothing to stop the tidal wave crashing into the mountain, flooding the inside of it, and I can't see it, but everyone in there will be drowned.

"Siren magic," Louie warns, thunder cracking overhead as heavy rain continues to pour. I don't see any sirens in his army, and that would have taken much magic. I bet it's all he has from them. I pull out my swords, gripping them tightly. My swords have never failed me, and they will not on this day. "This is going to end here. I will not let you near her."

He smiles at me, like nothing matters to him. His eyes are black, empty. There is a dullness to his skin that wasn't there before. He is changing and not in a good way. Maybe his body

won't last all that long, not with the magic used to change him and morph him into this monster. "She will die at my hand, and I'll make you watch."

I grit my teeth, knowing he is taunting me so I make a mistake, but, it isn't going to happen. The other Rift Kings and Queens stand silently behind him, and the old god has disappeared. I never even got to see what he looks like. Louie lifts his hand to use that awful magic of his crown, but I latch my shadows around him, pulling him down, refusing to let him use it. Two of the Rift Kings slam their magic straight at me, only to find their magic does not work on me. My own version of the crown, wrapped around my wrists, absorbs all the magic they shoot at me. Callioppe made sure that I had magic here and I was defended, or she never would have left me alone. In defense, I swing my sword, beheading one of them. I slam my sword to the hilt through the other's heart. Both of them fall, their crowns rocketing across the ground. The Rift Queens run into the crowds. Louie looks up, his eyes wide in shock. "What have you done? HOW?" he roars at me.

I only smile at him, leaning down. I grab him around the neck and throw him back into the mud. "My mate is smarter than you." He hasn't used his magic to destroy everything yet, and I think he won't, not with how sick he is looking. He wouldn't have bothered to bring them here if he was just going to use his power. Louie is dying from that crown; he isn't meant to wear it or harness the power.

Louie screams and slams his power into me, hard enough to send me flying straight up into the air. I catch myself on a current of air, spinning around to find Louie coming straight after me through the air, using grey shadows like wings themselves. He slams straight into my chest, and we both fly fast in a current, grabbing at each other. He claws at my face as we are both thrown straight into a water-logged mountain, crashing down around each other. He picks himself up, lightning flashing through the arched windows that make up this domed space. It's an old temple, built in the tip of the mountain. "My army will destroy yours. Flood your city and kill everyone. Even if I don't survive you, the old god will. He has a plan, something you can't stop."

“You talk too much, Louie. Perhaps losing your head will fix that,” I counter. He uses his grey shadows to make swords and meets me in the center of the room. He’s quick, fast, moving with a deadly speed thanks to the magic he is drawing around him. But I’ve had years of training, and I make sure he doesn’t get close. The fight seems to last longer than it should before I finally get a cut into his shoulder, and he screams.

Louie steps back, black blood pouring from the cut. That should slow him down. “Let’s see how long you can hold up against the full power of the crown.” His skin pales further as he throws his grey magic at me, and I counter it with a slam of my own. The grey and black magic mix in the middle, pushing and pulling, almost equal.

I feel it instantly. Callioppe, our bond... it’s dimmed somehow. She is in trouble. The last thing I sense is her pure panic, like it’s mine. I look over my shoulder at the castle in the distance as every window smashes and water floods out. Louie takes full advantage of my distraction, and his power hits me hard, ripping through my skin to my bones. I scream her name.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN



Thump. Thump. Thump.

My heartbeat echoes in my ears, over and over, along with a ringing noise that blocks everything out. EMERSON! I scream in my mind for him, search for him, but our bond is dull. I can just about see and feel it, but it's clear that communicating with Emerson isn't going to happen.

Cries echo around me as I blink my eyes open, my clothes soaked and my hair stuck to my face. My clothes are torn in places, and I'm bleeding into the surrounding water. It's not just my blood I smell either. No, wait, it's the little girl crying as she clings to me. Emily has a death grip on my neck, her small nails sharp and her orange curls in my eyes. With a groan, I sit myself up, leaning back on a wall. We've somehow landed in a room, right in the corner, where there's nothing but water up to my waist and a floating bookshelf by the door, along with cushions and books. The fae lights are blinking on and off, making it hard to see, and some of them are underwater. I can't sense anything, and the world is spinning. "Hey, you're okay. I've got you."

I know I'm bruised, and possibly my rib is broken, but the blood in the water isn't mostly from me. The girl is bleeding from her tiny arm. I rip the end of her green dress and wrap the fabric around her arm to stop it as she continues to cry, but at least she doesn't fight me. Her cries are going to lead the witches right to us. I stand up just as I hear a splash and movement in the water outside. Instinctively, I slide the girl onto my hip and reach for Emerson again.

I try with everything I have, shouting in my head for him, but something's very wrong. He isn't dead, I can feel that. I live on that, knowing I can still get to him. We should never have separated, because this is a distraction, a way to keep me from the battle. Louie has outsmarted us with the witches, but this is the last time. I hope everyone is okay. That water came out so fast, and I don't remember much. I'm surprised the girl is still in my arms. Lorenzo. He has always been like a brother to me, and he has been in trouble for days. We should never have sent him to them. If they have killed him... no, I can't think like that. I won't think like that. Still, my mind sneaks itself back to the sword's warning that someone I love is going to die in this war. Someone I'd try anything to save. It can't be him. It can't.

The splashing is getting closer and the girl's cries louder. Witches. I don't know a lot about their powers. I know they're similar, not to the elemental gods, but they use blood to power themselves. I need to find the others. A witch steps into the doorway, grinning as her eyes fall on me. I don't smile back. I unleash my powers within seconds. The water around her turns to ice, locking her in place as she lifts her hand. I can't breathe. I can feel my power being drained away, sucked from my soul, and I scream in pain. The girl screams too, and I realize with horror that the witch is hurting her too. The sword on my back burns my skin, shocking me, and I straighten myself as I lift my hand. The ice spreads up her body, smothering her hand and all the way up to her neck.

Her smile fades away.

"Don't look," I whisper to the girl, and she thankfully turns away.

"Stop! Please!" the witch screams as my ice crushes her body, and I close my hand, watching as she is smashed together with my magic and blood sprays everywhere. Ice chunks fill the water as I carry the girl out of the room and look down the corridors before stepping out. The throne room is near here, from what I can make out. I have to hope the others make the same plan I have. The fae lights keep flickering on and off, making it difficult to see my way.

“You okay?” I ask Emily, her little sobs breaking my heart. She is too young to have gone through all of this. First her city was destroyed, and now this? I have to keep her safe and get to Emerson.

“Paxton.” Her single reply is all I need. She wants Paxton, and we are going to find him. My fae healing is kicking in, and I don’t feel as dizzy or sore as I head down the corridor, pushing through the thick water that is full of random things and broken glass. The castle cracks and groans with the weight of the water, and every window is smashed from it, water pouring out of them. Some doors are open but others aren’t, and I can’t get them to open with the weight of the water. The girl has stopped crying now, just little sobs, and I stroke her back. I won’t lie to her and tell her it’s all going to be okay.

A scream echoes through the air. Paxton. My heart lurches as I run forward, coming around the corner and into the entrance of the throne room. A witch is dragging Lorenzo across the floor, towards Paxton, who is hiding behind the throne. He keeps screaming, blocking the sound of my movement. Lorenzo is in a bad state, but he looks alive. He’s alive, even smothered in blood and cuts, even as pale as he looks. The witch dragging him drops him in the center of the throne room and turns back to me.

She grins, and at least twelve witches step out of the shadows of the throne room, and instantly I can taste their magic in the air. This was a trap. I step back, but a dagger is pressed swiftly against my throat. I never even heard the witch move behind me. “Move, and I’ll cut your throat, Wyern Queen.” I recognize the voice as Marzena, the Witch Queen. I grit my teeth but I don’t move, not yet. There are thirteen of them against me, and there are two kids here I need to protect. “The sword is mine. I’m taking it to him along with the earth demigod and the air demigoddess. This castle is full of prizes, but he never asked me to bring you back alive. Your head on that sword will work.”

A hooded witch drags Posy out and throws her unconscious body next to Lorenzo. Another one grabs Paxton and pulls him, kicking and screaming, into the middle of the

room. The ground begins to shake, but the Witch Queen tuts. “Use your powers, kid, and I’ll kill the girl.”

Paxton goes still, a cry filling his scream. “No, please. Please!”

The witch kicks him, so he falls next to Posy. Paxton curls up next to her, never taking his eyes off Emily in my arms. I need to make a plan, make my next move. I’m just not sure what the plan should be. “Why would you do this? You had an alliance with us, and Louie will not honor whatever agreement you have with him. He is evil. The god he serves wants to destroy this world and remake it. He won’t let you be part of that.”

“My people have been promised a place in the new world.” Her confident statement makes me shake. She is delusional and I should have known better than to trust a witch, with everything they have done to Emerson’s people in the past. I hoped that Lorenzo being half witch would make them side with the Wyerns, but they clearly have chosen a different breed of monster. “Now kneel.”

“I will not kneel for you in my own throne room,” I bite back. She pushes the dagger closer against the skin of my neck, cutting me. “The sirens made a similar deal with Louie, and now look at them. You will suffer the same fate as they did unless you change your mind. Lorenzo is not dead. We can make a new—”

She shakes my shoulder. “I told you to kneel.”

“The queen of the Wyerns, protector of the fae and defender of the mortals, does not bow in her own throne room. She will outlive us all and remake this world into one of peace. Now remove your weapon from her throat.” Emerson’s father’s voice is like smoke, wrapping around us all, and I can’t tell where he is. A witch screams from my right, and her body slams onto the floor. “Your mother would be disappointed in you, Marzena. So would your father.”

“FIND HIM!” Marzena screams near my ear. Two more witches fall dead, and this time they don’t even get to scream. I see the gleam of a sword in the shadows as he moves through

the throne room, witches dropping like flies to his skilled attacks. The witches' magic isn't stopping him. My heart pounds when I see him for the first time, as he attacks the witch standing over Paxton, Lorenzo, and Posy. Her head rolls across the floor between us, and there is silence. "There are dozens more on the way, old king."

She holds out her hand, moving so fast with a lash of gold magic, but Emerson's father is faster than her magic as he charges our way. For a few seconds, I believe he is going to get to us. He is going to help me. He looks at me just as Marzena throws me to the side and meets the old king with a dagger straight into his heart. A scream rips out of my throat as she wraps her hand around his neck, blood pouring from his lips. He roars in pain as she twists the dagger in his chest, gold magic spreading around them both, pushing everything and everyone away.

"FATHER!" Lorenzo's shout echoes, filled with agony, and the old king looks back once more at his son. Whatever he sees in Lorenzo gives him strength as he turns back. He lifts his sword and pulls himself away from the dagger in his heart to swing his sword straight across the witch's neck in such a quick move that she never saw it coming. She grabs her neck, stumbling backwards, right into Zurine, who grabs her. Ice smothers the witch from the head down, right before Zurine kicks her hard, smashing the ice into pieces. The queen of the witches is dead.

"Shut the door!" I shout at Zurine, putting the girl down and rushing to the old king. I pull his head onto my knees and cup his cheek. The rest of the witches are likely searching the castle for us and it won't take them long to get here. I push his hair out of his face and shake my head. I can't heal him. The wound looks bad, and there is too much blood. "Why did you do that? You knew they'd kill you." I look over at Lorenzo, but he is out of it again. Posy is slowly waking up, and Emily is crawling into Paxton's open arms.

Zurine moves to my side as the old king wraps his hand around mine. "Give Lorenzo my sword. Once you bond with the sword, no magic can hurt you. It will protect-t him." I wipe

some of the blood from the corner of his mouth. “Emerson. He was born for peace. Together, you’re going to find it for all the people in this world. I couldn’t fix it all, but you can be better than I was as a ruler. Better than his mother was. Keep him safe and love him, Callioppe. Tell them both that—” He pulls me down to whisper in my ear. “Tha-t-t I watched them grow into males I will forever be proud of.”

His hand falls from my mine as a sob laces up my throat, and when I lift my head, all the light has faded from his eyes. Zurine lets out a soft cry and touches my shoulder as I run my fingers down his face, closing his eyes. I gently lay him down as the throne room doors are pushing open, and Nathiel comes in with Nerelyth at his side. His eyes widen when he sees the dead old king and the state of all of us before slamming the door shut.

I hold my hand out, pulling ice up from the floor and smothering the doors with it. Zurine helps me until the door is blocked. For now. When I look back, Posy is at Lorenzo’s side, holding his hand. She looks up at me, sensing me looking at her. I walk over, picking up the old king’s sword and lying it next to Lorenzo before meeting Posy’s eyes. “We need a portal to the battle.”

“I can’t leave him.” Her hand shakes as she touches his chest, over his leather clothes, her hand laid over his heart. “And I won’t take him there.” Her eyes stay on Lorenzo, her head bowed.

Nerelyth steps to my side as the throne room doors are banged and the ice begins to crack. We don’t have long. “Go and leave the kids and Lorenzo here. I will protect them.”

“No offense, but you’re—”

“She is a powerful princess of the sirens, and the witches always feared sirens,” Nathiel interrupts Posy. “I believe we are safe here with Nerelyth.”

Nerelyth looks at me. “I’m going to sing, and they’re going to pay for coming in here. I will sing and bring in the water they’ve raised in here to drown them all. They will die and they will not take our home.” Her eyes are glowing green.

She looks back at Nathiel. “Will you stay and make sure no one slips past me in here? No matter what you hear, do not come out of those doors. My singing will drive you to madness.”

“Where you stay, so do I,” he answers. It’s simple, but I can see it gives her the strength we all need.

“Are you sure?” I softly ask. “I will understand—”

“You have a battle to win for us all to have a future, and I have a castle to clean out of unwelcome guests,” she interrupts, almost sounding like my Nerry, the bossy best friend I’ve always had. Maybe giving her someone to protect has given her a reason to fight. “I’m not giving up anymore. I need to fight. Let me fight for us all.”

“Get rid of them all, Nerelyth. For the Wyern Court.” I lift my head. “Show them how fucking badass you are.”

She smiles at me for the first time in a long, long time and lifts her head high. “Yes, my queen.”

Posy has a death grip on Lorenzo’s hand when I get to her. “We need to go.”

“I’m not leaving him,” she sharply snaps at me. “If this was your mate, you wouldn’t leave.”

I know she is right. Paxton touches her shoulder, and she looks up at him. “My father is waiting for you. They all are. I can heal your mate as he is not close to death, like the old king. Some wounds I can fix like his, but I’m not powerful enough to fully heal him.” He puts the girl down, who has no injuries, I notice now that I can see. He places his hands on Lorenzo’s face, and all of Lorenzo begins to glow green. “I will keep him alive.”

Posy leans down, whispering something I can’t hear in his ear, before standing up. She looks at Nerelyth. “I’m trusting you with him.” What she doesn’t say speaks much louder. I can hear how much she cares about Lorenzo with every single word, with the way she is lightly shaking.

“I know,” she quietly responds. “I owe you my life, my bat friend. Let me repay it now.”

The ice is cracking louder, and Zurine walks away from it to us. “We have a minute. Maybe less. We leave now or not at all.”

Nerry begins to walk to the door, and Nathiel stands in front of Lorenzo and the kids to defend them. Posy holds her hand out, making two portals. One leads to Emerson, to the battle I can see on the other side, and the other portal leads to the gods.

I’m torn between my heart and the right thing to do. Zurine goes to the portal to Emerson, to the war. She looks at the other portal and back at me. “I’m beginning to understand you have somewhere to go first.” I can almost hear the war, the echo of it reaching us. I rush to the window, see the front mountains are flooded with water in places, and there is nothing but waves of blackness spreading across the ground. The skies are full of Wyerns, the ground too, and they are luring the army into the mountains. Louie hasn’t unleashed all his power yet. I don’t understand why he hasn’t. What is he waiting for?

“Make sure he doesn’t die.” My voice breaks, and I pull the sword off my back. Posy steps to the portal. “We will be back.”

Zurine jumps through the portal, and it shuts behind her. Posy looks at Lorenzo one more time and closes her eyes for a moment before setting them on me. “Time to release the gods on our world.”

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN



Havoc. There is nothing but pure, chaotic havoc all around me as I step out through the portal, knowing who is following after me. The deal with the gods took minutes, and it was easy. Too easy. The marks of each deal are on my back, each an element and each a heavy price to bear for us all. We need them, but I don't trust them. Posy gives me a nervous look, and I feel the same. I just cut through the barrier to the gods' prisons and released them on this world. The air goddess comes through the portal first, and she sucks in a deep breath. I wonder if she can smell the blood, the filth, the mud and death that fills the air. Heavy rain continues to pour, drenching me from head to toe within moments, but it's nothing, nothing compared to how I'm feeling inside as I look around. This is war, and it's horrible. Endless, horrible brutality and I can't look away. Monsters rip a Wyern from the sky, tearing him in two and leaving nothing but his wings in his grasp. Another three Wyerns descend on the monster, and I have to look away. But looking away does nothing. There is nowhere to look that makes me feel better, makes me feel safe. Two monsters break out of the group of the Wyerns fighting near us and head straight our way. Before I can even prepare to destroy them, they float off the ground and are violently thrown across the battlefield by the goddess. She never even blinked.

“Stay close, daughter.”

“I belong at Calliophe's side. She is my family,” Posy coldly responds, yet her bitter tone only makes me feel better.

She isn't leaving my side, and I don't want to fight without her.

Air lifts one eyebrow. "We will discuss that later."

She flies through the air, effortlessly disappearing into the thick of the battle while I pray I did the right thing. I hope I did. The earth god steps out of the portal next, and he looks just like Paxton, albeit an older variation. His hair is dark green, like forest leaves, and his skin is darkly tanned. The fire goddess is naked, has been since I met her, but her long red hair covers most of her body. Her hair is red, but it's on fire, constant burning flames in locks that contrast against her pale skin. Her eyes, pure red flames, look my way before she walks into the monsters, leaving a trail of lava in her wake. She barely spoke the words of the bond to me, and I wonder how long it's been since she talked to anyone. Silence can drive even the most powerful insane.

Lastly, the water god jumps out, digging his hands into the ground, which opens up into a massive hole, right down into the earth. The earth god watches, and I'm not sure which of them did it. He looks up at me with nothing short of hate before looking back down at the ground. Water shoots towards him from every direction, hitting monsters but avoiding Wyerns and sucking them into the hole in the earth.

"I need to find Emerson," I shout to Posy over the sound of the water shooting in every direction. Screams, roars, and shouts fill my ears, and I can barely hear Posy's agreement over it all. I keep my sword in my hand as I run through the pathways where there is no water, seeing hurricanes spreading into the sky nearby, the mountains shaking with the power of the earth god. Emerson. I need to find him. I search our bond, but whatever the witches did to me, I still can't reach him. He must be going out of his mind.

Posy makes a portal, taking us to another part of the battlefield, near one of the mountains. I sense Emerson's nearer. Five Rift soldiers lunge at us when we step out, and I immediately cut one of them down. Fire spreads down my sword, and I swing it, casting a wave of flames that smacks right into two more of them. The others are on their knees,

clutching at their necks as Posy steals the air from their lungs. They collapse in minutes, and I turn around to see fae fighting nearby us, fire magic bright and colorful as it spreads across the ground towards the monsters and the Rift soldiers.

My eyes drift up to the mountain. Emerson is up there. I know it, I can feel it. Posy nods to me once and we run for the mountains, only to get blocked again and again by Rift soldiers and monsters. Everything blurs until it is just me and them, my sword, and the power it is feeding through me to battle. I've barely touched the true amount of power the sword holds, and I know once I dive into that power, it has to be used for Louie and the old god. My hands are coated in thick blood by the time I get to the base of the mountain and turn around.

Posy is gone. "POSY!"

"Calli!" Zurine shouts, and I turn to her. She is in front of two Rift Kings, the light-haired twins easy to spot with the crowns shining brightly on their heads. The sword vibrates in my hand, recognizing she's barely holding them back with her ice magic, and she is struggling. My feet are moving as I lift the sword, and they both notice me. Zurine drops the wall of ice as I jump past her, landing right in front of one of them. He slams grey magic right into me, but I block the attack with my sword. The power, the magic, is absorbed by it like smoke. The Rift King stumbles back, and the other one runs from me.

I don't let either of them get far. Using my magic, I make the floor ice, and the one running slips. The other one stares at his hands, in shock, like it's their fault the magic won't work. He doesn't fight me as I slam my sword through his heart and rip the crown off his head. He fades into a pile of ash that I step over to get to the other one. He throws his magic at me, and the sword makes it easy to cut through it and slam the tip through his heart. The second he is dead, hundreds of monsters and Rift soldiers around us simply fall dead, like a wave of death. Zurine runs to my side, and I search her, noticing the awful shape she is in. Cuts smother her, burns too, and she is bleeding everywhere. She still stands strong, but I know she needs to rest. Zurine huffs a laugh, wincing. "If it's this easy for you, the war should be over soon."

“They weren’t as powerful as he is or the old god will be,” I admit, picking up the second crown. Holding them both feels odd, and I can tell there is nothing in them. Louie must be keeping all the power, but why? Why hasn’t he destroyed them all yet? “Where is Emerson?”

Zurine looks up the mountain. “He followed Louie up there. I’ve been trying to fight my way up.” She looks back at me. “Tell me he is alive.”

Emerson’s roar fills my ears, my mind, along with a sharp pain I feel in my own chest. His scream echoes to me, tearing me apart, making me feel weak and mortal again. Powerless. My mate is hurt.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

POSY



My heart is racing as I anxiously look around, the surrounding air reacting to my magic and protecting me. I lost Calli. I was meant to protect her, but in the crowds of monsters, I lost her. One moment I was ripping apart three monsters with a lash of air magic, and the next she was gone, and I'm not sure where she went and in what direction. It's madness here, and I can't see which way is the best to go. The ground continues to shake, the air is hard to breathe, and there is fire everywhere now. Gods are on the playing field. In the distance, the water god is destroying the sirens in the water, leaving their blood to mark the seas for years to come. I keep searching for Calli, for anyone that I know, but there is nothing but monsters and the Wyerns fighting them. Fae are dotted around, easy to see with their magic, but none of them are Calli.

The monsters are endless, ruthless in their attacks, and I can't focus on anything but stopping each one of them as they lunge right for me. The Rift soldiers' heartless, cruel faces will haunt me for years, stuck in my mind, as I kill them one by one. I pull more power from my chest, from where it feels like it comes from, to protect myself as a massive group charge at me. I step back, tripping on a rock. Deadly air whips around me, cutting into them before they can get close, and they fly high in the air, well away from me. They will be dead when they land. My magic won't cushion their fall. Weakness settles into my bones, pulling me under the spell of magic, into a place that I'm not meant to touch. Too much magic is a death sentence, and I'm close.

I need to stop.

I'm not trained enough for this. I've been a bat for too long, far too long. My hands sink into the mud beneath me as I slam another group of monsters up into the air. I inhale deeply, needing strength and reminding myself that I'm stronger than I ever thought I was. The witches didn't destroy me. My past didn't break me. This war will not be my ending, either. I pull myself up off the ground, letting my air magic wrap around me, undoing the braids of my hair until it's freely flowing around my shoulders. The air glitters, like my magic can actually be seen within it. I push out all of my power, into everything around me, and hundreds of monsters going flying into the air, Rift soldiers too, and witches with them. Breathless, I lower my hands onto my knees and grin at a Wyern male who raises his eyebrows at me from across the battlefield. He goes to say something, but he pauses, the color draining from his body as grey magic wraps around him, pulsating like a fog that's alive. The Wyern falls into the mud, and behind him is something worse than all the monsters, all the evil that's on this battlefield.

A Rift Queen.

She has long blonde hair that's gone grey in patches that matches the color of her skin. *Drained of life* are the only words that come to my mind. She was a fae once, and only her pointed ears are left to mark that. Her teeth are pure black, like they have rotted, as she grins at me. Her gold crown shines brightly on her head, and it's addictive, pulling me towards it. Everything is a contrast to the crown, and I have to force myself to look away. To realize how much danger I'm in. I search around me, and I realize with horror that my sword is gone, lost in the bodies and mud. I've used too much of my powers, and I'm so tired, weak from defending myself for too long. A wave of grey magic spreads around me like a storm coming in on the horizon. Horrid magic wraps tightly around my body, lifting me off the floor. Suddenly, everywhere it touches, it burns. I scream and scream as she pulls me right up to her, close enough that I can smell the rot on her skin, in her soul.

“Old magic,” she coos at me, reaching out and running her sharp nail down my cheek. I can’t stop screaming. I can’t move, I can’t breathe. I need to escape. My heart is thrashing in my ears, and I barely focus on her. “How powerful you are, demigoddess. Creatures like you should not exist. My mother used to warn me of the gods in her stories and their children, born with power that can consume them. Will it consume you before I kill you?” She shakes my body like a doll, and I can’t stop screaming. “I think I’d like to see it. A demigoddess consumed into a monster.”

I keep screaming, barely even able to understand her. She’s going to kill me. There’s only one person I can think of. The only name that comes into my mind is Lorenzo. How I never made sure he survived this and how he deserves so much better than me. I wanted him to have a happy ending, to find a way to be happy. It was never going to be with me. I need him to know that. I need to know he’s okay at the end of this. But I’m going to die here, and if I am, I’m going down fighting. Sweat pours down my back as I close my eyes and reach for my power, for too much of it, letting it flood in my system and knowing that there is no way back from this for me.

Just before it’s too late, before I’ve taken too much, a cry echoes in the air. It almost sounds like what I would imagine a dragon roaring sounds like, and it’s loud. The Rift Queen looks up at the same time I do, only to see Celeria diving right at us, and on her back, Lorenzo. Celeria slams hard into both of us, her claws grabbing me around the waist and harshly tugging me from the magic with its claws as Lorenzo jumps off her back, placing himself between us both. A sword rests in his hand—his father’s sword. He looks back at me once, checking I’m alive with his bright green eyes, before turning on the Rift Queen with a look of pure vengeance on his face. “Hurting my mate, my female, means death. What’s your real name so I can tell your family of your demise?”

She glares at him and never answers his question. Even in vengeance, he is good. He asked her name because we both know this female was once a little girl stolen from her parents. My heart pounds as he lunges towards her before she can use her power. He moves fluidly, like breathing, and his sword is a

part of his every move, like it is part of his body. Witch, shining gold magic seems to hover around him as he moves, but my heart lurches when the Rift Queen sends grey magic right into him. He flies backwards with the hit, rolling to a stop in front of me, blood pouring from a lashing on his chest. He looks right at me as the Rift Queen heads towards us. I grab his collar. “You shouldn’t have come! You’re going to die protecting me, you compete fool!”

Lorenzo’s eyes soften. “Finally.” He blows out a breath, picking up my hand. He kisses the back of it, and a fire burns in my body from the touch. “You admit you care. I will not die, and neither will you as long as I am alive. We fight her together, the way we were born to be.”

I pull my hand from his, and he grins as he stands. Lorenzo looks down at me once more, serious this time. Prince of the Wyerns and leader of the Wyern armies. “Knock the crown off her while I distract her. It’s her power.”

The Rift Queen lashes at him with her magic, but he dodges it this time, moving so fast that he reminds me of a summer breeze, swift and alluring, as it blows through you. Lorenzo moves so fast that I barely see him go, and the Rift Queen’s attention is fully on him this time. I lift my hand, making the wind pick up in a storm around us, pulling power from the sky above. Rain pours down my neck, down my clothes, and the wind harshly protects us in a circle. I tug a strand of the air towards me, a grey rod of air forming in my hand... like a whip. I lift it quickly and slash it across the top of the Rift Queen’s head, knocking her crown straight off and into the air. She screams and lunges for it, but Lorenzo jumps, grabbing the crown midair. He lands, twirling his sword around in his hand and slamming it through the stomach of the Rift Queen. Her eyes widen as he pushes her further down into the ground and puts the crown on his head. Gold magic explodes out of the crown, smothering Lorenzo from head to toe and straight down the sword.

He can wear the crown. How?

The Rift Queen screams, the sound echoing through the world before she turns to ash around the sword. Lorenzo wipes

rainwater off his eyes as he looks at me and takes the crown off, the gold fading away. I walk to his side, noticing the ash floating away and slightly glowing for a moment before it's gone. "How did you know the crown wouldn't consume you?"

Lorenzo shrugs a shoulder, and he steps closer to me. "Nothing in this world, magic or not, could consume my soul when it belongs to you. You consume me, Posy. The crown had no chance."

My heart thumps in my chest, and my lips part. For once, for a second, I let myself look at his lips. The war continues around us, the devastation of so many, and I'm watching him. My hands itch for me to push a lock of his dark hair away from his eyes and to kiss the cut on his cheek. Celeria lands next to us, and I snap out of it. What the hell is wrong with me? I don't need a mate. I don't need him.

Lorenzo pulls his gaze from me, nodding at his flying pet. "We should—" He pauses at the same time I sense it. Something is wrong. Lorenzo throws himself over me just as the ground violently shakes, throwing us both up into the air and right back down on it. I land on his chest as he turns us, and the ground doesn't stop shaking. It cracks under Lorenzo, dust puffing up into the air, and Celeria roars loud. I try not to scream as Lorenzo holds on to me tightly, like he can shield me from the world itself falling apart on us. The smell of thick smoke fills the air when the shaking stops. Smoke, ash, and fire. I use my magic to push the dust and smoke away from us, and Lorenzo lifts his head. From the way his entire body tenses, I can tell it's bad. "Celeria, come here now!"

She lands with a thump at our side, and Lorenzo lifts me up, straight onto her back. I don't fight him, just this once. He climbs on next, and she takes up into the air immediately, just before a wave of lava spreads across the ground where we were standing like the sea coming into shore.

"Volcano. It's erupted," I whisper, seeing what made Lorenzo go pale. What I thought was once a mountain, one of the biggest that rests near the back of the territory, is not a mountain at all. It's a volcano, which has erupted. It's currently spitting fire and lava straight up into the air, filling

the sky with hot ash and fireballs that are smashing into the battlefield, killing everything there. The storms are still heavy and thick, but with ash that falls like a grey blanket belting across the wall, it's becoming impossible to see the ground. The red lava is spreading in a wave, and people are running from it, the battle forgotten in the need for survival. Flocks of Wyerns charge past us, towards the cities.

“We have to stop it... someone has to,” Lorenzo whispers in horror as he goes stiff behind me.

The lava is heading downhill, right towards the cities and where most of the people are hiding. Millions of children, females, and people who cannot fight. They are going to be burnt to death. “Is there another way out of the city?”

“The back of these mountains can be flown out, but...” He pauses like he can't believe he has to say it. Almost like it's not real if he doesn't say it out loud. “The tunnels are few and there are many, many people who can't fly. We don't have time to evacuate them.”

It's going to kill them all. He knows it. I know it. Still, we can do everything we can. Just like in Goldway City. My voice breaks as I turn back, looking at him. There is every chance we will die in that city with them if we go to help. There was a point in my life that I believed mortals, Wyern, fae and supernaturals were never worth dying for. I thought everyone was evil until a mortal with pink hair saved my life, cared for me even when I couldn't see through the bitter hate that consumed me. She showed me how to be a good person, how to do the right thing, even if you have a past that taught you otherwise. I will die helping them because turning away is not an option for me anymore. “We evacuate whoever we can.”

His eyes reflect the lava, red dancing within the green. “Together.”

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN



Desperation makes me move quickly. Makes every inch of my body tremble, but I fly up the mountain, jumping over rocks and smashing others out of my way with spheres of flames and ice. If I stop, I can't breathe through the fear. Emerson. My mate, my king, my reason for breathing at all, is in trouble and fighting on his own. We swore to never fight alone, and yet this war has split us up again and again, this time for the last time. Sweat pours down my body as I race up the mountain at Zurine's side, sending up prayers to the goddess to help me. To guide us all through this war and leave my mate alive at the end of it. I can't lose him. Please, please don't make me lose him. Zurine screams at me. "Watch out!"

I narrowly miss a rockslide, slamming my back against a wall. The mountain shakes, and the small ledge my feet are slipping off becomes hard to stay on. Zurine is holding onto a rock ledge near me, her wide eyes meeting mine as everything stabilizes once more. "Slow down. We are no use to him dead!"

My mouth is dry and there's a tightness in my chest that I can't get rid of. Tightness that won't disappear until I know Emerson is okay. I can feel him and he's weak. Weaker than I've ever sensed. He has used too much magic, too much darkness. Even for him, there is a limit. I look up as black shadows, pure darkness, spread out the tip of the mountain cavern windows like snakes, spreading in every direction. Emerson roars, and this time, I feel his pain like a dagger through each of my legs. I cry out, barely able to hold myself

to the wall. Zurine catches up with me, pushing me back as the mountain shakes once more. She looks up before backing down at me. “We will make it through this. Let me help you.”

“I’m okay,” I pant, but we both know it’s a lie. I have to push the bond back, just to be able to stand up with her arm wrapped around my waist. Zurine half carries me up the mountain, to the pathway that has been carved and the dozens of broken stone steps that lead to the top.

“I once had a dream about you. When I was fae, in the first couple of weeks,” Zurine tells me. I look at her, her silver hair glistening in the lightning flashing across the sky. “I used to think you were a pink-haired angel sent to guide me through the worst days of my fae life. It turns out, the goddess sent me a vision of you because I was here to guide you through yours. To be at your side, your friend, for the final steps of the last battle. I see the future in you and Emerson. I see peace, a world where what happened to me never happens again.” We get closer to the top, closer to Emerson. I smile softly at her. Maybe the goddess did send her for me. Zurine has always been my greatest defender, my friend, in this crazy world of magic. “We are so close to that world. So, so close.”

Emerson roars again, more darkness spreading out of the windows. A scream ratchets up my throat as I let go of Zurine and run up the mountain’s final steps, pushing all the pain to the back of my mind, fear replacing it. I can’t stop. He needs me. The ground is shaking violently, threatening to throw me over the edge, but I can’t see where it’s coming from as it gets worse than it was before. The rain is replaced with thick ash, mixing with the water, and the smell of fire lingers in my mouth.

Finally, I get to the top of the mountain, throwing myself through the a hall around the waves of darkness, remembering what Zurine said about this place being a old temple for the gods with passaways leading to the main room. My eyes widen when I see Emerson and Louie are battling in the center of a cavern. Emerson is hurt. There’s a dagger embedded in his shoulder and another in his thigh, and there is so much blood all over him. His leathers are ripped from magic, revealing

cuts where they have torn, and he is pale. So, so pale. I can sense he is running out of magic.

But he doesn't stop. He's still battling against Louie's magic continuously, nothing but darkness, swarming like a beehive against Louie's grey sickness. Emerson looks my way first, his eyes widening, but he doesn't lower his outstretched hands or even pause with his magic. His wings are stretched out on either side of him, his black crown glowing within his thick dark hair. We are battling with gods, but it's my mate who looks like an avenging god of darkness sent to judge us all. Whatever magic kept us apart is gone the moment I step closer. "Emerson! I'm here, I will help."

Emerson's voice is groggy, broken, weak. I hate hearing him like this. "I love you, from the beginning of time when my soul was created until the end of time when my soul will rest next to yours. I love you endlessly, my mate. We are endless."

"And we do not end today," I say back, tears forming in my eyes as I look at my king in his monster form, his true form. "I love you too."

I pull my sword out of my holder on my back and run at Louie. Louie turns on me with his eyes fully black, empty of anything good or kind or mortal. I tell myself that. He is not my mortal brother, Louie. Louie's eyes flash at my sword, true fear lurching in his eyes. "NO!"

He sends magic into the walls of the cavern, and it explodes around us. I scream, calling up my magic as I look for Emerson. His dark magic wraps around my waist, tugging me to him and covering us both in a dark bubble. His body smothers mine as rocks slam into us, and I pray Zurine didn't come in here. When the magic settles, Emerson lifts me up, only for Louie to be right in front of us. Before either of us can defend ourselves, Louie slams magic into Emerson, and he goes flying back, hitting a rock hard with a sickening crack. My heart lurches as fear rises in my throat, and I go to run to him. Louie grabs my shoulder, pulling me back, his hand heading for the sword.

I move before I've even realized it, before I've even thought out what I'm doing, as I slam my sword straight towards him, and he meets me, grabbing the end of it. It cuts through his hand. He screams in pain, jerking his hand away and jumping back from me. Black blood pours from the cut as he starts circling me. I make sure to keep checking on Emerson, who isn't moving. "You don't get to touch him. He's mine, and I came here to end you. I will stop you, Louie. You're evil, and I know there is nothing left to save."

"He killed them all, but I will live on. I made them all weak," Louie hisses at me. "He shouldn't have been able to kill them."

A secretive smile tilts my lips up. "Emerson and I melted the crown down into bracelets to be wielded. Emerson, as a Wyern, comes from the gods too. It's why he is powerful, and he can harness the magic. It was a guess, but Emerson could pick up my sword, and it didn't hurt him. I knew then."

Louie shakes his head. "The old god told me—"

"Lies," I counter. "He is a liar. Where is he?"

Louie's eyes drift over my shoulder, and I take the risk to quickly look. There is a massive mountain in the distance, right at the back, and I swear it's glowing red. What the fuck is wrong with that mountain? Is it the fire goddess doing that? I turn back to Louie. He has to be dealt with first. Zurine runs in, bleeding but alive. She looks at me. "Emerson."

Zurine runs to Emerson, and I turn back to Louie. It was always going to end with him and me. "I'm sorry I couldn't save you. If there is anything left of my Louie, end this now and take off the crown. Give it to me."

"I will die without it," he shouts at me, black veins spreading up his face from his neck. I step closer and he steps away from me, from the sword. "I came here to rule. I won't leave or die yet. Not without taking you with me, at least."

Grey, horrible magic explodes from him and right into me. I block it with the sword, pushing against the stream of magic and taking one step forward at a time. The magic cuts at my

skin, lashing at me, but I don't stop walking to him. With my other hand, I flex my fingers and close my eyes. I pull the other crowns, sensing them out on the battlefield, all around me. They fly through the broken walls of the mountain, cracking and floating around my hand along with the melted bracelets from Emerson. The metal burns under my fire, melting into an incomplete blade. Louie has the final crown. Once I get Louie's crown, the sword will be whole again. Louie screams. "How are you doing that? STOP!"

"Never!" I shout back at him. He roars at me, throwing so much magic my way. "I am the one who is destined to hold the swords and to stop you. I am sorry that I couldn't save you. I really am, but it's over now, Louie. It's over."

"It's not over!" His head thrashes over and over, his magic getting louder and harsher, but it's not stopping me. The sword cuts through it with me as I pull ice and fire, lacing it around me in a protective wall. I walk through Louie's magic, my heart cracking with what I have to do. I tell myself over and over it must be like a nightmare for him. I'm ending a nightmare. Louie is already gone. It doesn't stop the tears from streaming down my cheeks.

When I'm in front of Louie, I can't see through the pure hate for everything he has done to even pause. I grab my sword, my heart breaking, and I slam it straight through him. He cries in pain, the final crown leaving his head and falling onto my sword. It glows as it completes, becomes whole, the crown pieces all back together. I grab the second sword and slam that straight into his heart with my own cry.

The magic stops instantly, and he falls forward on his knees, black blood pouring from his mouth. I pull my swords out, a sob leaving my throat. His body fades away into ash and grey dust, and swirls round, leaving almost like a hollow version of him as a child in front of me. I fall to my knees at the sight of the little boy I loved, the swords dropping out of my hands as tears stream down my face. My voice gets completely clogged with emotion. "Louie," I whisper. "Goddess, I'm so sorry. Please, please forgive me for not finding you in time. It's all my fault." I can barely even get the

words out. “I failed you.” I failed him so much. Failed this little boy who was my ward, in my care. He was like a brother to me.

The soul of Louie, or whatever he is, touches my cheek. He is warm. “You didn’t fail me. You tried to save me, my sister. You did save me in the end. I’m free now because of you. I love you, Calliophe. You’re the best sister I ever had. Don’t cry.” A sob echoes from me. “I get to be with my mum now and my dad. They’re waiting for me. I’ll wait for you one day too.”

I can’t breathe through my sobs. Warm hands wrap around me from behind, and I feel Emerson at my back. Holding me up. “B-be happy with them, please. Please. I will always miss you, Louie. I wanted you to have a future. I wanted so, so much for you.”

He is still touching my cheek. “I will if you do something for me.” He smiles at me, and I can’t stop crying. I haven’t mourned him, not really, because a part of me always thought there would be a way to save him. To bring him back. Hope crushes grief into the back of your mind, and when hope is gone, grief swallows you.

I touch his hand on my cheek. It feels like touching smoke. “Anything.”

“Remember me as when we sat on the roof on Nocturno and watched the fireworks across the city for the celebration. Remember how happy we were that night?” he asks. I remember that night. It wasn’t long before I met Emerson. We were happy, free, and together. He laughed and smiled all night. The fireworks looked like a million falling stars, and we both made wishes. I wished for us both to be free from the life we had.

In a way, it seems we both got our wishes, just not in ways I would’ve imagined. “Forget the rest, as best as you can, and remember, I love you. Be happy, smile, and set off fireworks for me on your birthday. I might be able to see them from wherever I am going.” He grins at me in the way that I always remember Louie grinning, before turning around and walking

away. The dust fades from what is left of his soul, wafting into the breeze, and sunlight shines through the clouds for a moment on him. For a second, I see his mom and dad reach out a hand to him before the light, for all of it fades away into darkness. “Louie.” I cry, turning and falling into Emerson’s waiting arms, and he holds me as my heart breaks. His arms wrapped tightly around me, never letting me fall alone. Louie is gone.

Eventually I lift my head, and Emerson kisses me. Softly. “I’m sorry.”

I nod, unable to say anything about Louie yet. I touch Emerson’s cheek, needing to feel him, know he is alive and okay. “You’re hurt.”

“Healing,” he proudly answers, picking me up with a grunt of pain. He speaks into my mind. “I’m sorry. It was you who had to do that. Had to end it.”

I lean my head on his shoulder. “It had to be me.”

Zurine’s eyes are soft as she walks to me, and I stay close to Emerson. I’m sure she can sense that I’m barely holding it together right now. “He was a sweet boy. We will remember him.”

“Always,” I whisper, looking back at where he was and seeing the two swords on the ground, the tips touching like they never want to be apart again. I reach for the swords, just as the ground shakes violently, and I scowl. What is causing that? Zurine runs to the left side of the mountain, looking over, ash and smoke blowing around her. I quickly grab the swords and run out with Emerson to Zurine to see what is going on. The mountain next to us was never a mountain. It’s a volcano. There’s a figure standing at the top, a male, but he is massive and twice the size of a mortal. His hands are digging into the volcano, ripping a gap in the top of it and making the lava come out thick and fast. Too fast. The lava is not touching him, but something is wrong. The male is fading right before my eyes, and I realize this is where Louie looked.

I frown. “It’s the old god. He is killing himself to do that, but why?”

Emerson's voice is hollow. "To kill all our people." I go still as I follow the direction of the waves of lava, which is currently washing over the lands. Wyerns are grabbing fae and flying back to the cities in the distance. The lava is chasing them... right towards the Wyern cities. They will be trapped. Our people will be trapped. "I can stop it, I think, with the swords."

"No, you're weak from the fight with Louie, and you said tapping into the sword's power like that... it would be bad," Emerson warns me. I know my own warning, but millions will die.

I look into his purple eyes. "I have to try."

"No," he answers with a clenched jaw... and I know he would literally let the world burn to save me. I'd do the same in his shoes. Goddess, I'd let them burn too, even if it makes me a monster. I guess everyone is closer than they think to becoming monsters. It turns out true love is the switch. It makes you do anything, rational or not. In the distance, our soldiers flood the city to save the people they love.

"Congratulations on winning the war, king and queen of the Wyerns, fae and mortals," Air sarcastically cheers.

I turn around to face her. We all do. She isn't alone. The other gods and goddesses are with her. "It means nothing if he destroys our city. Will you stop him?"

"We will do no more," Air replies, her voice like ice. "The old god is fading, his magic gone, the last of it used to destroy your cities."

My eyes widen. I can't believe they are happy to watch millions be killed when they can help. I look at the fire goddess. "Please, can you not stop the lava? It's fire, and you —"

"Are not your puppet to wield," she snarls at me. "No. I agreed to help you win the war, and it is over. You have nothing left to bargain with that I'd ever want or need. Their lives mean nothing to me."

The water god looks right at us before each of them walk out. “We are free.”

“COWARDS!” Zurine shouts at their backs, but they do not turn. They will not help us, and Zurine is right.

“We have to get out whoever we can,” I state, knowing it’s the best we can do. “If we can’t get them out, then they will die. I will hold off the lava as long as I can with the swords.”

Emerson grips the back of my neck. “You will be lost in the magic of the swords. Just cutting a portal between the worlds is too much, but to use that kind of power... I won’t lose you.”

I rest my forehead against his, feeling Zurine watching us. “Let’s hope we don’t have to do that.”

“We won’t,” Emerson vows. “Or I’m sharing the power with you and dying at your side.”

My heart hurts, not just from Louie, but from the knowledge we might have to sacrifice ourselves to save our people. I wouldn’t be able to stop him from helping me, from tapping into the power. He is my mate, and our connection is too deep. We wouldn’t survive without each other, anyway.

Emerson holds his arm out for Zurine, who steps into his side. She won’t look at me as I cling to Emerson, and he spreads out his wings to fly. It will take us time, too much time, to get to the city, but we don’t have another way down. He flies straight out the window, my stomach lurching, and suddenly we are flying fast through the air on a current. I look down as we fly, faster than we ever could, to see the air goddess holding up her hand from the base of the mountain. She is helping us. It’s something. Maybe there is some good in her. A tiny bit. For Posy’s sake.

We land rather quickly outside the city gates leading into the mountains, within the crowds running or flying past us. The Rift soldiers and monsters are gone, and they likely died with Louie and the old god. Most haven’t even gotten into the city yet, and the lava is a couple of miles off. I rub my

forehead. I'm so tired. "Maybe I can make a blockade with ice. Maybe we can find fae to dig a way around—"

"It won't work." Zurine steps in front of us both. She touches both of our shoulders. "When I was turned, I felt how much power I had, and I was terrified of it. I've never touched the deep pit of my power. I never felt like it was the right time to. But it is now. I need you both to let me save the city. Save you two."

"No!" I shout at the same time as Emerson. "No, you—"

"But you can?" She looks between us. "Both of you can die for the city but not me?"

Emerson steps forward. "Zurine, you're like a sister to me. I won't let you, and I comm—"

She wraps her arms around him, and he lets me go to embrace her. "You're the only brother I've had, not in blood but in our souls. My king, it has been an honor to know you, and don't you dare command I don't do this. I told you once that my life was nothing before you, and I meant it. I've been happy, free, and at peace in your court. It has been everything for me. Everything, Emerson."

"I will not let you do this for me," Emerson begins, but she smiles at him, and he stops. Zurine bows her head at Emerson, who looks broken, and she turns to me. I can't lose her too.

She kisses my cheek before hugging me tightly. "Don't do this. There has to be something else. Anything else. I have the swords—"

"Some power is never meant to be used," Zurine gently whispers. "My sister, my friend. My queen. Goddess above, I will be thankful forever that I got to love you."

"I love you too," I cry as she lets me go.

Emerson tries to grab her, but she steps back. "No. Don't you dare take this from me." She points at the lava, at the destruction coming for our city. "I was born to nothing. Nothing. In a world where being nothing meant you got used and abused until you wished for death. If you die, no one will be alive to stop that world from continuing. I won't let you

stop me. I didn't have a life before you. There was nothing. I was nothing. I didn't want to live. Didn't want to exist. I didn't even know that there could be peace and happiness. Friendship and love." She looks right at me, her purple and blue eyes alive and bright. Her silver hair flows around her shoulders in the breeze, ash sticking to her. "But there was. You were a brother to me through everything, and I am choosing to protect my family and the hope of a world where people like me are born to something. To hope. I'm choosing to protect you, my king and queen, because I know that you will protect this entire world."

"Zurine," Emerson croaks as I cling to him, my legs weak. I can save her; the swords—

The swords warm in my hand, almost burning me. This is the moment that the sword warned me... the deal I made. I can't save Zurine. It was Zurine. My heart cracks as she looks at me and smiles widely before turning away.

Magic like I've never felt other than from Emerson explodes out of her in silver waves of sheer, freezing ice. It hits the lava in an explosion of mist, mist made of ice. Her power is beautiful as it swarms the lava, stopping it and spreading all the way to the mountain. She doesn't stop and her magic grows, powerful and special. Just like Zurine Quarzlin. The ice spreads and spreads as I hold on to Emerson, and he holds onto me. She screams, the power coming from her impossible, and yet, it's working. Emerson holds me, holds me tight because he needs me to hold him too. When the entire volcano is pure ice, silver and glistening, sunlight streams through the sky onto Zurine as she turns into ice.

Until there is nothing left of Zurine, the savior of us all.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN



I glance up at the stone statue of Zurine as sunlight pours down from the clear skies, and in the distance above the mountains, I see a small rainbow. It's beautiful here and if she were alive, she would think the statue is too much. Snowflakes make up her dress up to her waist, and she holds a sword in her hand. Her long hair looks like it's moving in the wind, and the sculpture's captured her face perfectly. It hurts to look at her sometimes, to know I won't hear her laugh, see her smile. Sadness washes down my spine, and I shiver, tugging my cloak around me as I glance at the plaque at the base of the statue.

Zurine Quarzlin, Protector of Wylvcelm, who fell in the last war. Forever loved.

Three fae children run past the statue to the rows of water fountains behind her that lead the path into the distance. More snowflake statues mark the path, and I watch as one of the kids runs around it before going after her friends. They must be going back to the newly built city, a free city for fae, supernatural and Wyerns to live together if they wish. The fae and supernaturals are welcome in our city, but old hate dies slowly, and we all think they feel safer out here. The lava flattened everything out here, turning it into an ideal place to build on. We started building, rebuilding what will be a great city here not long after the end of the war. I think it's a perfect memorial for her. She marks the path of the free, something she fought for. We'll never forget what she did for us. I touch the base of the statue, looking up at her. "I miss you, Zurine. It hardly feels like it's been eight months since you..." I drift off

for a moment, my pink hair blowing around my face. “He misses you too.”

Lorenzo steps up next to me, arching his neck. “Hello, my lost friend. I don’t come here nearly as often as I should.”

“Considering the pressure you’ve been under since the war, and healing yourself, I’m sure she doesn’t mind,” I respond, because we both know Zurine cannot.

Lorenzo sighs, wrapping his arm around my shoulder and giving me a tight hug. “How have you been? Anything to tell me about?”

I shake my head as he lets me go. Lorenzo has been on a mission to search the destroyed cities for survivors, to offer help where we all knew it would be needed. I know he volunteered to go not just to help, but to look for the elemental gods. To make sure none of them are coming for his mate, who hasn’t spoken to him since the war. Sadness reflects in the depths of his eyes, and I know Posy is the cause of it. I can’t fix them. “Nope, you?”

We walk together, away from the statue and towards the gates that lead to the Wyern cities. My own guards follow close behind us, and I’ve given up trying to lose them. Emerson doesn’t trust everyone in the cities with me, so if I’m out here, then I have guards near me. “The elemental gods have disappeared, and there is no hint of them. We found many, many fae in need out in the world and brought them back with us. Some have stayed, but we left them with supplies to rebuild on their own. I will send Wyerns back to check on them every few months.”

“That’s a good idea,” I offer. I don’t know what to say about the elemental gods. I know they haven’t broken any of the rules I set for freeing them. I’d feel it if they did.

“There was no sign of the Rift opening in the remains of the fae castle,” he continues, his arms crossed. As far as we know, the Rift closed on its own at the end of the war, or maybe it was when I made the second sword. The sun shines on his dark hair, which he has cut shorter than I’ve seen before. “The witches and sirens have gone into exile, and we

have made it very clear that mercy will not be shown from us.” Every inch of his body is tense at the mere mention of the witches. Not only did they torture him for a few days, but he woke up to find his father killed by them. Emerson hasn’t recovered from the loss of his father, and neither has Lorenzo. I think it has made them even closer. We can’t get into their cities, but we have guards watching the forests. If they try to leave, they won’t get far.

We lost twenty thousand in the war, and they broke their alliance with us. If they had sided with us, maybe the losses would have been less. But we didn’t lose the cities, I remind myself over and over when the grief of everything we lost that day seems to haunt me more than other days. Grief isn’t something that stays forever, so I’ve been told, but instead, it turns into something akin to an old friend. We didn’t lose all our people and family. I touch his arm, stopping him. “Are you okay, Loz?”

He lifts my hand and steps back. “I’m fine. I’m always fine, little faeling queen. I promised Solandis I’d come and see her. She will be missing me.”

I want to tell him to talk to me, make him open up somehow, but I can’t and he walks away. I sense Emerson coming right for me before I look up into the sky to see him soaring above me. My mate lands, grabbing me around the waist and kissing me deeply. I’m breathless by the time we break away. He nuzzles into my neck, sucking in a deep breath. “I missed you this morning.”

Keeping my arms wrapped around his neck, I kiss his cheek. “You had court to deal with, and I wanted to come see her. We did—”

“I know,” he groans, pulling back. I will never get over how beautiful my mate is. His glorious wings are spread out as sunlight streams through them, almost making them shimmer. His thick body easily fills out the black shirt and trousers he has chosen to wear, a silver cloak falling off his shoulders. I love him like this, a king without his crown and more casual than he usually is. Emerson looks over my shoulder, seeing

Zurine's statue in the distance. I can feel his pain like it's my own. "I miss her."

"Me too," I whisper back into his mind. We don't talk about Zurine half as much as we should, because it's too painful. I wish I could have saved her and wish, still to this day, that there was another way. She didn't deserve that fate. But we both know that saving her wasn't an option. It's a hard lesson, the most brutal, that death is final and there isn't always a way to fix everything. Sometimes, you can't save everybody, and we could have lost so much more in that war if it weren't for her. I clear my throat, forcing back the tears threatening to fall. The memory of Zurine will never be gone, not while I'm alive to fight for it. The fae are her people, my people too, and I will make sure they are led into a better future. Some treated her wrong, but she always wanted peace for them. She always fought for them, and I think she would be proud of the changes we're making.

Emerson changes the subject. "Emilana came to court with her baby, Niam." I raise an eyebrow. What did she want now? We try to have a good relationship with her, even giving her a place in the court, but she does make everything difficult. Emerson and I have taken an interest in making sure Niam grows up well. After all, he is related to Emerson and a fae prince in his own right. Emilana is a great mother, even if she is rude and has a temper. "The usual, a title for Niam and for me to make Niam my heir. I believe she worries you might have a baby soon and push him out."

I sigh. Emerson runs his hand across my stomach. "As much as I fucking love the idea of filling you with my baby, now isn't the time for an heir, but I won't name the baby mine."

"I don't know whether the fae would ever want him back as a prince for them officially. After his father..." I pause. "Well, they seem happy with us for now. That can be a problem we deal with in the future, no matter how much she pushes her luck."

He winks at me. "So, banishing her from my castle isn't an option?"

I chuckle. “I’m certain she would find a way to annoy us even then.” Emerson stops in front of the gates. “Someone is here to see you. I’ll be right out here, but I think she wants to talk alone?”

He kisses me softly and nods his head to the gate. I turn, going still, when I see my best friend. Nerry. A sob crawls up my throat. Nerelyth and Nathiel left after the war, after Nerry easily killed all the witches in the castle and left them in a pile in the throne room—and the children safely tucked away in the rooms. She left me a letter, telling me that she was going with Nathiel to his family and that she needed some space alone to heal. That Nathiel would protect her.

I cover my mouth with my hand, unable to move. She looks amazing, like she did before everything happened. Her skin is glowing like moonlight, her long red hair is in two braids that fall to her chest, and a long black cloak covers her. Nathiel is behind her, waiting in the shadows, and he bows his head my way. I incline my head to him before staring at Nerelyth.

I missed her. So, so much. Selfishly, I’ve wished her back here a million times over, even when I know her healing had to come first. My hand slips to my throat when the wind blows her cloak to the side, and I see that she’s holding a bundle in her arms. Not a bundle, but a baby, in a carrier strapped to her chest. I can just about make out the baby’s chunky legs at the bottom of the carrier and red hair at the top.

She comes over, stopping in front of me. The baby’s scent finds me, and I know that scent. Nerelyth and... Louie’s. She was pregnant when she left. “I’m s—”

“No,” she stops me and shakes her head once. “That’s why I couldn’t stay. My baby deserved to be born in peace and without judgment. I know you don’t mean it, but it is not her fault how she came to be. Despite how she came to be, I love her, and I always will be thankful she exists.”

Tears wet my cheeks as Nerry takes my hand, linking our fingers. “I’ve missed you.” The baby coos and she smiles down at her daughter. My best friend has a daughter. “I found

out just before the war. When the witches attacked and the water hit us, I just knew I was carrying a child. The water told me as much. She gave me a reason to fight, to want to try to live. Nathiel helped me survive for her and, in time, for myself too.”

I step closer, looking down at the adorable little baby. “This is your aunt Calliophe. She is a badass queen, and she is where your middle name came from.” A joyful sob echoes from me. “Calli, meet my daughter. Leia Calliophe Zurine Mist. Named after the most amazing females in my life, beginning with my own mother.”

“She should have your name as a middle name then too,” I whisper, touching Leia’s soft rosy cheek. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, little Leia. I promise to be the best aunt.” She doesn’t look much like Louie until she opens her eyes once, looking at me, and I see she’s got Louie’s eyes. The eyes he had before he became a monster in the Rift. Before he was a monster, he was a good person, a wonderful child. I hope she doesn’t inherit much from her father after he became a monster, but before. The goodness that shone through. I look at Nerry. “Are you okay? Have you been alright?”

“I’m okay,” she answers, looking over her shoulder at Nathiel. Emerson is with him now, both of them talking. “I needed to get away, and Nath was happy to take me. His family is amazing, and they’ve treated me like their own. I guess they needed to heal from Felix too, and together, it just worked. I’m ready to be back in your court, to show my daughter the world. If you will have us?”

I give her a side hug. “You’re always welcome here. You are our family. Both of you.”

We head over to Nathiel and Emerson, and Nerry introduces Emerson to Leia. Eventually we walk back into the city, and the guys are in front of us, but Nathiel looks back every now and then.

I can smell him all over Nerry, and I have to ask. “Are you two together?”

She nods. “Yes. I don’t know how Felix would feel about it, but we’ve grown very close. He protects me, cares for me. He was there when I gave birth and through the many, many struggles I had. I don’t know if it’s wrong because of Felix, but I know life is too short to not be with the ones you fell in love with.”

I look up at the city around us. “I believe Felix would be happy to know that his brother is protecting you and loving you. He only ever wanted to keep everyone safe. Don’t feel bad for love. We all find love in different places, our lives woven together for a reason.”

“Zurine... everyone you lost. How have you been?”

“Better,” I softly tell her.

“I wanted to come back here for the funeral, but...” She pauses. “I was in an awful place. I just couldn’t.”

I rest my head on her shoulder for a second. “She would understand why.” The funeral was a blur to me and for anyone else, I bet. It felt wrong to be saying goodbye to her at all.

I tell her gently, “I know you needed space and time to heal, and I’m glad that you took it.” Even if she did come back for the baby, I am very excited and I hope the baby gets everything from her mother’s magic, not the Rift crown magic her father was possessed with. We don’t talk about anything else as Emerson leads us to our house in the mountains, one used for guests. I sit down with Nerry on the couches as she feeds her baby next to me.

“I did want to ask about the sirens. Have you heard anything from them? I sense the seas are angry...”

“They’re scattered around, but I doubt they will come out of the waters after what they did in the war,” I tell her gently. “Much like the witches, they are our enemies.”

Nerry is silent and I wonder what she is thinking about her people just as Lorenzo comes in, his eyes widening, and he quickly turns away to give Nerry some space. “A baby? You had a baby?” He coughs. “I mean, congratulations.”

I chuckle at how shocked he sounds. He basically blindly stumbles into the kitchen at the back. I can smell whiskey from here. “Just going to see my brother and Nath. I didn’t see anything!”

“You best not have, you bastard,” Nathiel jokingly greets him at the door, pulling him into an embrace, smacking his back. Laughing, they both head into the kitchen—to have a drink with Emerson, I’d bet. After Leia is fed, Nerry hands me her daughter to hold. She soon falls asleep in my arms, and I kiss her forehead as Emerson steps into the room. I can see his eyes visibly soften when he sees me holding a baby. “I like this look on you. Maybe we should re-discuss what we talked about earlier?”

I look at Nerry, who is grinning. “I think you best take Leia back before my mate gets anymore wild ideas. I’m happily baby free for now.”

Nerry laughs, taking her daughter back and standing up. “We will catch up more later? Maybe at the castle?”

I shake my head. “The castle is going to be busy for a while. We are bringing people back from the Rift today when I use the swords for the final time. We have been sending them food for a while until we got the housing situation sorted.”

Emerson looks at me. “It didn’t help that your fae friend Ailen found the Flames and offered them our library as their new home. The little shits burn everything.”

I shrug. “You’re the one who made Ailen one of your court, along with all my fae friends. It’s not my fault that he came with frie—”

“Pests. They are not friends,” Emerson points out. I mean, he isn’t wrong. The Flames are happily hoarding all the jewels, good books, and anything of value in the library. They say it’s for safekeeping, but then we have to give them gold coins to see our things. Emerson is not a fan. I think they’re pretty funny.

“Are you sure it’s safe to bring them from that world?” Nerry asks me. She hasn’t been here, but this discussion has

been brought up in the courts a hundred times over, by nearly everyone. No, we know it's not going to be completely safe, but leaving them there in a world that is quite literally dying is cruel when I can do something to help. Plus, it's time for the swords to go back to the Rift, and they should be left in that world alone. No one should be able to have that kind of magic, and I don't want it here anymore. The magic those swords have is too much, too chaotic, too dangerous.

I hug her one more time, so happy to have her back. I didn't know how much I needed my best friend until she was back. After losing Zurine, and with Nerry gone away, I felt alone in support. Posy is... well, off the rails and ignoring everyone, so she hasn't been the greatest. Emerson, as much as he is always there for me, is a king and isn't the same as talking with my girlfriends. "We will give them a chance. Everyone deserves a chance."

"A chance," Nerelyth agrees, hope shining in her eyes.

Emerson flies me up to the castle after we say goodbye. He leaves for the throne room, and I make a detour to get the swords, dodging through the crowds of Wyern and fae setting up to help anyone who comes through. Bundles of food and boxes of clothing, extra fae lights, and more are scattered everywhere. No wonder Emerson is grumpy. The castle is a mess. A Flame flies right past me, dropping embers on the ground, and I stomp one out before getting to my room. Emerson is right, they are pests. Dangerous pests. I smile to myself as I get to our room. I grab the swords at the end of my bed, removing the magic Emerson set around the swords to hide them from view, before going back to the throne room. Most people bow when they see me, and I stop to talk to a few of them before carrying on. The throne room is packed and they part for me until Emerson comes into view on his throne. I take my seat next to him, and he claps once.

Everyone goes silent, looking at us. I will never get used to that. "Today is one that will be remembered as mercy. We, as Wyern, have changed in this war and learnt to take people into our city. To protect everyone who needs help. The people coming here will need our help, and I am asking that you

welcome them as your own. They are my people, like each of you, the moment they come through here. Female, child, or male. They need our help.”

He nods at Ailen, who steps forward with a blank blue leather-bound book. There are rows of them in the library, and in them, is every name of everyone in this city. There is a new book for new births, and this one will be for everyone who comes in. The books have our blood in the leather, and signing it signals they are accepting us as their king and queen. “We are ready, my king and queen.”

I smile at Ailen, who has really found his place here. I make a cut in the air with the swords right in front of the throne. The portal rips through the air, gently shaking the floor, earning gasps from all around before it spreads. My body feels weak from the hit of magic it took to open it, and Emerson stays at my side. It never gets easy, but at least I don’t pass out with two swords this time. A square portal fills the space between the thrones and us, and on the other side, I can see my parents. They step through first, their paleness such a contrast to everything here. Their eyes widen as they look around. “Hello, mom.”

She sobs, pulling me into her. Emerson shakes my dad’s hand before he hugs me next. Mom turns back to the portal, and I see the crowds of people waiting on the other side. “Come on. It’s safe, I promise.”

“Let us help you. This world is alive and bright and safe,” I tell them all, my voice echoing. “I am Queen Callioppe and this is King Emerson. We welcome you.”

A female with dark hair, carrying a small little boy, steps through first. He looks terrified as he grips her side, and he is so, so thin. Ailen steps forward. “Please write your names or tell me. Then one of our friends will give you provisions and show you the way to a room or house in the city. You’re safe.”

The female nods, looking at me. “Thank you.”

My parents wait on either side of the portal, guiding them, and I say hello to each one, along with Emerson. This is what I was born to do, to save them. To lead them out of the

darkness. It takes at least five hours to get everyone out of the world. We still wait another hour, just in case anyone else comes, but it's silent. Empty.

Ailen steps to my side. "Two thousand and thirty-two people counted. Including babies."

It's a sad amount of people to be left from an entire world. But we will make sure our world does not have the same fate. "I'll be back in a moment."

"Do you want me to come?" Emerson asks from my side.

The swords burn in my hands. "No, I should be the last one in that world. It's time to leave the swords in peace."

He kisses the side of my head before watching me go. I step through into the Rift, the world I was born into. The world that caused so much pain for too long. The thick grey world spreads out in front of me. I slam my swords into the ground, right next to each other, before letting them go. "You're free now. Together. This is your world. No one's using you for your power anymore. Thank you for letting me save my world. Our world will do better."

I glance at the swords one more time before stepping through the portal, into my mate's arms. We both turn back, watching as the swords melt down into pure gold on the ground. The gold morphs into stars, bright, beautiful stars that spin over and over before shooting up into the sky, right as the portal shuts forever. I smile at Emerson. "It's over. What do we do now?"

"I have somewhere to take you, my queen," Emerson responds, wrapping me in his arms before his wings spread out. Everyone near us jumps out of the way as Emerson springs into the air with me, flying us out of an open archway window. My stomach lurches and a tiny bit of fear trembles in my throat every single time he does this. His dark chuckle echoes in my ear as he flies us up and up, over the mountains and down the side of the mountain overlooking the sea. He lands us on a beautiful black marble balcony cut into the mountain itself, and from here, all I can see is the sea.

The sun is gently setting as he lands on the balcony. I turn around to see a cavern with a field inside full of Stardaisies flowers. Hundreds, thousands of them, and a small cabin right at the back with a fire lit next to it. Fae lights fill the ceiling, hundreds of them. He remembered I loved that flower, and he made me a meadow of them.

“I wanted us to have a place we could go away from the city, from the titles that mean we can’t be just us there,” Emerson whispers in my ear, tugging at my cloak until it falls. “No one else comes here. It’s protected. No one else can step in other than us.”

Emerson picks me up, carrying me to the meadow and laying me down in the flowers, tugging at his collar. Desire snakes up my spine, burning me to life. “Monster or fae this time, my queen?”

“Monster.”

EPILOGUE

POSY



“**S**he makes cakes.” Paxton protests another complaint with a huff that only a child could make look cute. I ruffle his green hair, which looks darker from his months within the mountain. We are sitting outside a little brick house nestled deep in the Wyern fields, far inside the mountains. Most of the farmers live out here. It’s quiet, peaceful. Rows and rows of farmland that smells like animals and wheat. There is nothing for him to get himself in trouble with. I arch my eyebrow at him. “Do you not like cakes?”

He kicks a rock, and it bounces away into a straw field in front of us. “She’s just too nice. People aren’t that nice.”

I pat the space next to me on the wall, and he jumps up, sitting at my side. I pick up his hand. “People can be kind without cause.” I keep my voice gentle. “I know you’re not used to it, but these people are nice. They won’t hurt or use you.”

He rolls his eyes. “They are fae.”

“They’re both from the city I came from. I think they used to bake there, too.” He still looks wary, looking over his shoulder at the house. His foster dad sits on the porch, singing a lullaby to Emily, who’s happily asleep in his arms. I looked for months for a good foster home for both of them, knowing I cannot be what they need. I’m too broken to be a mom to them, and they need a stable home. I don’t even know how to look after a kid. They need loving parents. Both of these fae are just that, parents I trust. I met these two when they signed up for the new adoption call out a few months back. Calliophe

made a call out for homes due to the many children who were left orphaned after the war and the orphans that were brought in from the cities. Most had been allocated, and they traveled into the city to offer their help. I just knew after seeing them that this place is perfect for Paxton, who is too special to be in the city.

He needs quiet.

“I want to be with you. Take me back to the castle, and I ___”

With a sigh, I shake my head. Every time I come to see him, he asks to come with me and bring Emily. I know it's just fear, fear of the unknown, that makes him ask. He wasn't happy in the castle with me. “It's not safe in the castle. For you or for me, but particularly for you. We aren't the same as them.” I nudge his shoulder. “I'm not leaving you alone. I'm going to come back to train you in your magic every other week. I'll always be your fun cousin and friend. But I can't look after you like you need.”

He leans his head on my shoulder, stretching out his hand. Flowers burst out of the ground, climbing up in the air until a bunch of purple roses are left for us to look at. “Your control is better than mine. I'm impressed, cousin.” He still looks like I'm leaving him forever. “You'll be safe, I promise. I wouldn't have left you here with them if I wasn't absolutely certain of that. You're my family.”

“They aren't.” He crosses his arms tight.

I wrap my arm around him. “They can be family, too. You choose your family. You don't always get to be born into it.”

He whispers low. “My father is out there. Sometimes I feel him in the earth beneath my feet. Like he's checking on me.”

“My mother's still out there, too.” I close my eyes, almost feeling her in the air. Sometimes I swear I see her in the sky. “They disappeared, which is good for everybody, but we both know he can't come for you, Paxton. He wouldn't dare come and take you. It would break the oath he made in blood.”

“I think he will break it one day,” Paxton admits. “I hope I’m stronger when that day comes.”

Sometimes, he speaks so much more maturely than he should have to. I want him to be a kid. He deserves a childhood. His foster mother, Lady, comes out of the house and walks over to us. She brushes her fingers across the roses. “Oh, Paxton, these are so lovely!”

“They aren’t for you. Purple is Posy’s favorite color,” he sharply replies.

She hides the hurt. “I’ve made lunch. I made your favorite.” He doesn’t look at her with open hostility, just wariness before he nods. Paxton jumps off and looks at me. “Are you coming in?”

“In a minute,” I tell him. I stand up off the wall before he gives me a quick hug before running inside. Lady watches him go. “I hope I get a hug like that soon.”

“He’ll come round,” I tell her. “I’m not stopping for lunch. I need to get back. Things to do.”

“You will be back, though?” Her cheeks brighten. “I mean, Paxton needs you. We’re looking to adopt them both permanently. I know Paxton will remember that I’m not his mom, but Emily, she calls me mom already. I’m hoping Paxton will come around to the idea, eventually. We intend to protect him, love him, give him a sense of normality here, away from everything.”

“You know how to contact me if you need me, but I will be back. Tell Paxton I had to go.” I pause. I can be nice, I remind myself. “He likes the baking, by the way. Though he might not say it. I know he does. He was too skinny when we met, and he loves food.”

Her eyes fill with tears. “Then I’m going to cook for him as much as I can. He is a precious boy.”

“Special.” I nod in agreement.

“Can I have a hug?” she asks.

I blanch. “I don’t hug but thank you.” I get why Paxton is wary of how friendly she is. It should be illegal for anyone to be that friendly. Thankfully, she lowers her hands as I step away from her. “See you around.”

I use the wind to whip around me, pushing me high into the sky and out of the fields. Learning to fly has been interesting. I’ve fallen flat on my face more than once, but it’s a good use of my powers. I saw my mother could do it, and she isn’t doing something I can’t. It’s easy now to coast through the breezes, through the currents in the air that whisk around the mountain. I land outside the mountain on a ledge that looks over the forest, spreading far beyond into the destruction of the former cities. I sit down, pulling my knees up to my chest to keep the warmth in. I let my dark hair wrap around me as I relax for a moment. Flying reminds me of being a bat, being in that form, of being trapped, but at the same time, it’s the most freeing experience.

Flying means something to me.

I nearly jump when I feel someone land right next to me, right before her scent hits me. I look over to see my mother appear, like she appeared out of nothing. She’s wearing a gold gown covered in expensive jewels, diamonds clipped into a headpiece on her head. She actually looks like a goddess now. “Did you go and raid one of the cities in your time away?”

“The witches,” she answers with no shame. She always answers honestly to me. I’ll give her that. “Someone needed to sort them out, and I made it perfect for you to return now and claim your throne.”

I frown at her. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You’re a witch. Well, your father was a witch and you’re half a witch, half goddess. You were never mortal like you believed.” After dropping that bombshell on me, she carries on with her insane plan. “The witches need a new ruler, someone with power. There’s a trial you have to go through to take the throne called The Hex. Deadly, but you will win it.”

“You—”

“Before you say no, there isn’t a choice for you, and I’m not breaking any of the rules set out by your queen.” She flashes me a smile. “I can’t rule, but you can.”

“I’m not going to rule the witches. I hate them,” I snap.

“Then be their queen and make them suffer. I don’t care what you do when you rule.” She waves a hand at me, and I bite down on my lip to stop myself from shouting at her. “Prince Lorenzo, that mate of yours? His ex-fiancée is also taking The Hex, along with three others. If any of them win, then they’re going to be a problem for you. A real big problem for your mate because they’ll want him dead.”

I grit my teeth. “And why do you think that’s my problem?”

“Don’t lie to me about your fated mate.” She rolls her eyes at me like I’m a clueless child. “I know how much it lures you back, even now. The witches may have been your enemy once, but now they are looking for someone strong to rule them. Don’t you want to know about your father’s family? They live in the city. They spent years trying to get you out.” She yawns. “That’s why the witches got you in the first place. He was going to see his family with you.”

“How did that end with my kidnapping?” I question.

She looks at her nails. “One of his family members betrayed him to the queen. You know everything else after that.”

I’m part witch. Part of the people who I want dead for hurting me, for taking anything good about me and crushing it. “Why should I come with you?”

“I’m using the deal we made,” she coos, offering me her hand. I close my eyes, remembering back to that moment that I made that awful deal.

My mother sits in her seat, in her icy prison. “I made it clear that the gods would not come out of their hiding places. Some of them want to stay.” She lifts her hands. “They like their prisons. They’re not interested in saving mortals. All of

them betrayed us. They won't come out. Not unless I give them a reason to. Not unless I ask nicely."

I wave to the door where Calli just went through. "You just said—"

"And I lied. Gods lie. Get used to that. If you want our help in the war to make sure you survive it, I want to make a deal with you."

I cross my arms. "What kind of deal?"

"When I want something, I can ask for it and you will do it. It won't cause your death. Or the death of anyone you love. I promise you that," she offers. "But if you want me to convince my siblings, then this is the deal we take."

My heart pounds as I look down, knowing I can't refuse her. We cannot lose the war.

I open my eyes, feeling the mark of the deal humming on the back of my arm where it appeared. "Fine."

She offers me her hand, looking pleased. "Let's go and show them what true power is, my air-born daughter of the witches."

**CONTINUE WITH POSY'S/LORENZO STANDALONE STORY
HERE...**



G. Bailey is a USA Today and international bestselling author of books that are filled with everything from dragons to pirates. Plus, fantasy worlds and breathtaking adventures.

G. Bailey is from the very rainy U.K. where she lives with her husband, two children, three cheeky dogs and one cat who rules them all.

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DESCRIPTION



The dragon kings need a queen, and they have chosen me to compete in their race.

Four gorgeous dragon shifter kings break into my home and kill my ex-boyfriend before taking me to their world to compete to be their queen. Once every thousand years, the dragon kings come together to find human brides from Earth, and if they don't have their brides in one hundred days, their courts will lose their magic. I didn't know the world of magic and dragons existed, not until I'm thrown headfirst into it and expected to compete in a deadly competition to be one of their four brides.

Arden, Emrys, Grayson and Lysander are cruel, entitled, and I don't want anything to do with them.

In this world of glittering dresses, sharp teeth, and claws, I need to become stronger than the dragons themselves.

They want a bride—but I'll be nothing but a nightmare when I win.

This is a full-length enemies to lovers fantasy romance with dragon shifters, a badass heroine and possessive alpha males.

Perfect for fans of spicy fantasy whychoose? romance.

CHAPTER 18

BONUS READ



“**T**here’s a dragon in the sea. Can’t you see him?”

The waves brush against the stone steps, smothering the bottom two until they can’t be seen anymore as the local crazy man walks past, muttering to himself about sea dragons and magic. The cold, beautiful coastline of Silloth stretches out for miles, wrapping around a small corner of England, but it feels like it’s a million worlds apart from the rest of the busy world. It certainly is in the middle of nowhere, for me at least. The sky fills with bright, vibrant oranges and yellows that reflect across the calm blue sea as the sun sets. This is my favourite part of the day, but it fails to make me smile, to make me feel less lost and alone today. I wrap my tanned arms around my short legs, breathing in the familiar sea air, and try to forget today. It doesn’t work.

“Ellelin!”

Fuck. I knew hiding here wasn’t a good idea, as he knows it’s my secret spot, away from the visiting tourists. This is the end of the promenade, where it meets the old lighthouse. I climb to my feet, just as my boyfriend—no, ex-boyfriend as of half an hour ago—stumbles to a stop in front of me, sand spraying onto my worn boots. He’s handsome, so my grandmother says, six foot tall with blond hair and honey brown eyes. She also told me the pretty ones always, always fuck up in the end.

She was right.

“I can explain. If you’ll just listen—”

I chuckle, wiping a stray violet lock of my hair out of my eyes. Dying my black hair violet was one of the only things I've done for myself in a long time, and I love the colour. Finley said he preferred it black. "Explain what, exactly, Finley? You want to explain how you slept with a friend of mine? I don't think that needs to be explained. We're over."

I turn around and leave. I'm done with him, and this damn town I've been trapped in since I was six and my grandmother took me in. The sad truth is this is the only place I have ever known, and I don't have any friends except for my ex-boyfriend and my friend who he slept with. I don't have anyone but my grandmother, and something about that fact makes me sad. I can't remember my life before I was six, and my grandmother won't tell me anything about where I lived before that. I only know that my parents died tragically after travelling for years but that my mum was born here, in Silloth. I've been stuck here with my grandmother, my only remaining family, and I've never left.

School finishes soon, only three days away from graduating, and then I can leave. I can get out of this small town, see what the world has to offer me. My grades are high, and I've been accepted to several universities from Edinburgh to London. I just need to make my choice exactly how far I want to go from my grandmother. She still needs my help, but I'm not sure I can be here to help her without giving up the chance of leaving this town. The stubborn old lady refuses to let us have any carers in.

Finley scrambles up to my side, grabbing hold of my arm to pull me to a stop. "Let me go," I demand, loud enough to turn the heads of several people nearby. Finley looks around, noticing how many people are looking, and roughly lets me go. I shake my head and turn away, walking back to my house.

"Ellelin, please, just listen to me!"

I pause, turning back to look at him standing on the edge of the road. "Look, we were going to break up. I'm going off to university, and I'm sure not staying around here for you. Just go and live your life. We both know your life is here with your family. Just leave me the hell alone."

“But I love you,” he weakly protests.

I chuckle as I walk away. I’ve always told him not to say that to me, because I don’t believe you can fall in love at eighteen, or at least, I never felt that way about him. Love is destruction, according to my grandmother and every romance book I’ve ever read. So no thank you. I want security, a decent apartment, and money to travel the world. Not a life trapped in a small town, popping out babies with a man I don’t really care that much for as he cheats on me. That would be my life here with Finley, and I’d rather have no life than that.

I look at Finley once last time, remembering that he was charming and made me laugh once, but every one of those good memories is now tainted. “You certainly didn’t love me when you were screwing my only friend. It’s over. Leave me alone.”

Finley looks like I’ve broken his heart as I tuck my hands into my pocket to warm them up and cross the road, hoping he doesn’t follow me this time. The bitterly cold sea breeze blows against my black hoodie and leggings, reminding me I shouldn’t have left without my thicker coat this morning.

I head down the streets until I come to our small, terraced home, the street quiet and empty. All the terraces around here are a multitude of colours like a rainbow, and ours is yellow. The yellow paint now is chipped, faded, and cracked in so many places, and the windows look close to falling off, but I love this house. It’s quirky, like my grandmother, and I’ve never not felt at home here. Our house stands out in the row as every other house is freshly painted, but we don’t have the money for that, and our neighbours make sure to mention the paint every time I bump into them. One day, I’m going to have a good job and be able to repaint the house for my grandmother. One day.

Unlocking the latch, I open the door and head inside, where the warmth of the lit fire makes me sigh. “Nan, it’s me.”

I take my coat off and rub my eyes. I’m exhausted after cleaning caravans for two hours after school to give us a bit of extra money for food, as my grandmother tries her best, but

everything is expensive. Between work and school and caring for my grandmother, some days I feel like I never rest. No wonder my boyfriend cheated on me. Never have enough time to be with him—with anybody, in truth—which makes it sadder that I decided to surprise him by walking to his and sneaking in through his bedroom window today.

My grandmother doesn't reply to me, and I frown as our cat, Jinks, jumps up onto the back of the sofa. Jinks is pure white with strange red glowing eyes, but the vet swears it's normal. I swear he looks like the devil, especially in the middle of the night. I stroke the back of his head as he purrs at me for food. "Alright, Jinks."

I feed him in the small kitchen at the back of our house before going to search for my grandmother in the garden, where she usually is. The thick grey clouds above suggest it's going to rain soon, and the sun has nearly set completely. The solar fairy lights around our garden flicker to life along the path as I walk down the long stretch. The garden stretches all the way back, and my grandmother has filled it with beautiful flowers, trees, and bushes. I find my grandmother at the back of the garden, on a metal bench, wrapped in a pink knitted blanket, watching the sky above. Her sea-coloured blue eyes, the same as mine, fall on me, and her wrinkled face lights up with a loving smile. Her grey hair is messily pulled up into a bun, exotic, multicoloured flower slides clipped in, and she is barefoot even when it is a cold late summer day.

"Elle, darling. How was your day?"

I sigh, sitting next to her and crossing my boots. "Finley cheated on me with Daisy. You were right about him."

Her hand picks up mine and she pats it twice. "I don't like being right, dear. He was never good enough for you."

I lean my head on the rotting shed behind the bench. "How did you meet this one true love of your life you tell me about? How did you know you loved him?"

She sadly smiles at me, looking away after a moment. "You simply know when you meet the one who will turn your life upside down. I knew because I couldn't stand your

grandad. He was arrogant, annoying, and always two steps behind me. He drove me around the bend most of the time. But one day I realised it wasn't that I hated him, that I loved him, and I didn't want him to ever stop annoying me. We built a life together, had your mother, and we were happy until his stupid heart packed out on me. Typical. Men always leave first."

I smile at her, enjoying her story. "I don't think I ever cared about Finley all that much."

"I know, dear. That's why you are allowed to feel sorry for yourself tonight, and tomorrow you're going to face the world with a smile. He isn't worth crying over. When you meet the man that is, you won't ever be able to move on. You will just exist."

For a moment, I see her sorrow, and in a blink, she hides it. I'm all my grandmother has left now everyone else is dead, and sometimes I think I'm lucky I don't remember my parents or grandfather. I don't have to mourn them like she does. I change the subject, as I don't want to upset her. "Are you going out tonight?"

She stands up. "Of course. Dorris needs her ass kicked at bingo. If I don't go, who else would put her in her place?"

I chuckle, standing up and linking my arm through hers as we walk back to the house. "I'm going to curl up on the sofa, watch some disgustingly cheesy movie about love, and eat chocolate ice cream, because that will make me feel better."

My grandmother kisses the side of my head. "Leave some ice cream for me, dear. When I'm back, we can share and talk shit about Finley."

I laugh, breathing in how she smells like mint and garden herbs, which makes me relax. This is home and I'll miss it, but I'm ready to get out and see the world.

A few hours later, I curl up on the sofa after my grandmother has gone out and turn on the TV to search for a good movie. I just pop open the lid of my chocolate ice cream when there is a frantic banging on the front door. I groan,

putting down the tub as the banging continues. I know exactly who it is. Finley knows when my grandmother goes out to bingo, as it's usually our time alone. I unlock the door, intending to tell him to piss off, but he barges in without asking. I slam the door shut behind him.

"You're interrupting my ice cream and crappy movie. What do you want?"

Finley runs his hand through his hair, and I smell the alcohol on him. Great, he is drunk. "To talk to you. You have to give me another chance. You just have to let me fix us. I love you so much."

I roll my eyes, going back to the door to open it, but he grabs my arm to stop me. He's always been a bit grabby when he's had a drink, and considering he's twice the size of me, I can't do much as he pulls me away from the door and back into the living room. For the first time, I realise that I should not have opened the door to him. "Let me go, Finley, and go home. We can talk when you're sober."

"No," he angrily snaps, tugging me against his body. "Look, you just need to listen to me. She kissed me and then one thing led to another. I was just horny and stupid, but I love you. You have to forgive me, Elle."

I try to pull myself away from him, but his grip is iron-tight, borderline painful. "No, I don't. We can talk tomorrow, Finley. Let me go."

Instead of letting me go, his thick hand wraps around my throat as he tries to kiss me, and I panic, trying to push him away. My voice comes out frantic, and I scream, "Let me go!"

Finley doesn't listen, pushing me backwards towards the sofa, kissing my cheek and mumbling about loving me. Dread pools in my stomach as I struggle in his arms, trying to get away and fearing what will happen if I can't. Dating Finley was a big mistake, but I was never scared of him until now. I manage to lift my leg and I knee him hard, making him groan in pain and let me go. He trips on the sofa, falling to his knees and cupping his balls. "What the hell is wrong with you? Get out of my house and don't come back!"

He glances up, and the look he gives me sends chills down my spine. He's going to hurt me for that. "No, I'm going to make you listen to me. You're mine, Ellelin, and we are not breaking up!"

I back away towards the kitchen, knowing I'm going to have to leave and run. He is drunk, so I have a good chance of escaping through the garden if I run fast. At least if I scream outside, my neighbours will come and see what is happening.

I hear the back door unlock, and my shoulders sag in relief. My grandmother's back from bingo early, and maybe the shock of seeing her will make Finley leave. Finley rises to his feet as I stumble away, and he pauses, looking over my shoulder to the kitchen. All the colour leaves his face. A shocked scream rips out of my throat as a silver dagger swiftly flies past my cheek and slams into his chest, blood spraying across the carpet between us. His scream is bloodcurdling and terrible, as I freeze in shock. Red hot fire spreads out from the dagger, burning him so quickly that, within seconds, he's nothing but ash falling softly on the blood-stained carpet. The dagger falls with a thud, and my scream dies away as I turn around slowly.

My heart pounds in my chest as I face the four massive men standing in my tiny kitchen. The man in the middle lowers his hand, smiling at me through waves of shiny thick black hair as his red, fiery eyes meet mine.

"You can thank me later."

CHAPTER 19

BONUS READ



“Y -you killed him?” I sputter, taking a step back in shock. I’m shaking from head to toe as the men all look between each other.

“Humans don’t like murder, dumbass,” the red-haired man says, patting the shoulder of the man who threw the dagger. He is wearing a black shirt tucked into black trousers that scream money. “Arden, you broke this one. You can deal with her. The last one bit me.”

Arden groans. “I’m not dealing with this one, Lysander. I’m already bored.”

Arden leans against the wall, picking up another dagger from his long trench coat and playing with it, throwing it up and down in the air. Lysander looks at the other two. One of them watches from the darkness of the back of the kitchen, and I can only see his outline. The other steps forward, a playful smile on his lips as locks of white hair fall into his moss green eyes, and he pushes it aside. He goes to say something when a deep voice speaks from the back of the kitchen. “She’s going to run, and then she’s my problem.”

“She’s not going to run, Grayson. Arden just saved her from whoever that fucker was,” he murmurs. “I’m Emrys. You’re Ellelin, right?”

“Boyfriend. That was my ex-boyfriend, and you just murdered him,” I croak, snapping out of my shock. “How did you do that? How did you burn him?”

Arden's laugh is deep and taunting, just like his eyes as they meet mine. "We are dragon shifter kings, babe. Fire is my skill."

"Arden, you're being a dick and scaring her," Emrys mutters, stepping closer to me with his hands in the air. He is wearing a dark blue jumper and dark jeans. For some reason, I get the feeling they don't wear clothes like this often. "He forgets humans don't know about magic and dragons. We aren't here to hurt you."

Lysander sits down on my grandmother's chair, crossing his legs at the ankle. "Just let Matron explain it all. We burnt her boyfriend to a crisp; she isn't going to believe anything else we say."

Emrys ignores him. "We're dragon kings from four courts. We're not from this world. Your world is connected to several worlds, including ours, and we can travel between."

My hands feel sweaty as I cross my arms. "What does this have to do with me?"

Lysander grins. "You've been chosen. All you need to do for now is come with us through a portal."

I lower my arms. "I'm not going anywhere with you." I step back and accidentally stand in what is left of Finley. I step aside, cringing as I rub my shoe on the carpet.

Arden laughs, the sound echoing. "She just stood on her piece of shit boyfriend. It's almost funny."

I narrow my eyes at him. "Fuck you."

He meets my gaze, running his eyes up and down over me. "Anytime, princess."

My cheeks burn as I take another step back, looking between them all, focusing on the shadow outline of the man in my kitchen. For whatever reason, he feels like he's the most dangerous of them all, and I can't even see what he looks like from here. They all look pretty dangerous, and I'm not sure how I'm going to get out of this. They're all muscular, ridiculously tall, and handsome. All I can think about now is how they just burnt my ex-boyfriend to a crisp in the middle of

my living room. How is that even possible? And now they're talking about kidnapping me.

I steel my back. They aren't taking me anywhere without a fight. "I'm not going with you. Get out of my house."

Emrys tilts his head to the side, his forest green eyes softening. "I know this is creepy and you don't trust us, but we don't want to harm you. You have been chosen to come to our world and compete in an event. This is an honour. There are several bloodlines in this world that came from ours, including yours. Your bloodline was sworn to the same magic we are bound to, allowing us to find you and bring you back to our world. Four of the chosen will become our brides. Become dragon queens. More will be explained later."

I feel delirious as I chuckle and then laugh. "I'm pretty sure I'm going mad. I must be dreaming. Going completely mad. You're kidnapping me to become your dragon queen, and I have to compete for the honour? I'm not fucking doing that. Find a girl the normal way."

"I like this one," Emrys laughs.

Arden throws a dagger at him, and swiftly he catches it midair. "I don't."

Emrys pockets the dagger before he runs his hands over his face, looking frustrated. "We are wasting time here. Let's just knock her out and go home."

"Agreed," Arden replies, leaning off the wall. I don't think, only act, as I turn and run. The front door lock melts as I run for it, so instead, I fly around the banister of the stairs, lugging my ass up the steps as fast as I can, my heart pounding.

"Arden, go after her. You freaked her out by killing someone!" Emrys demands.

"He was going to attack her! She should thank me for killing his worthless ass!" Arden all but growls.

"I will go and fix this mess," Lysander sighs, my grandmother's chair creaking, "while you two fight like children."

“Good luck!” Arden shouts while laughing.

I get to the top of the stairs, stumbling around the corner and pulling the bathroom door open, slamming it shut behind me and locking it. I don't know what use the locks are going to be against—what did they say they were? Dragon shifters? Are they actual dragons, wings, and scales and all that? No, this can't be real. No, none of this can be real. I'm going mad.

I hear Lysander's heavy feet thudding up the stairs after me. He is real, and I have to find a way to escape. I look around the room for anything. Anything at all to defend myself with. My eyes flicker to the small, frosted window. I've never climbed through it. It's thin and I'm not sure I will fit through it. Fuck it. I have to try. I start cranking it open when I hear the bathroom door handle being twisted, the door shaking. My mouth parts in surprise as clear water runs up the door from the bottom, smothering every inch of it. I don't move as the water suddenly turns to ice, the door shattering in shards of wood and ice. Lysander stands on the other side, leaning against the frame, his thick arms crossed. “Running is completely useless, Elle.”

“Don't call me that. You killed the last person who called me that!” I snap. I might have hated Finley for cheating and attacking me, but he didn't deserve to burn to death.

He raises an eyebrow. “I don't control fire, Elle. I'm the water dragon king, so you can't blame me for that one. If it matters, I agree with Arden. He deserved to die for laying a hand on a woman. I would have done far worse with him if we had more time.”

For a moment, he lets me see past the charming smile to the true darkness hidden in his soul, and it scares me. I'm not going with them. No fucking way. “Don't make us chase you. It's boring and pointless. You can't escape.”

“Fuck you!” I snap, picking up the nearest thing and throwing it at him. My nan's multi-coloured squeaky duck flies pathetically through the air, and he catches it. Lysander's lips twitch in amusement before he squeaks it once and throws

it over his shoulder. “Fine. We’ll do this the hard way if we must.”

He steps into the bathroom and reaches for me. In a split second, I look around quickly for anything and grab the top of the toilet lid, lifting it and smashing it straight across his head. He looks so surprised for a second, right before he collapses onto the ground, blood pouring from a deep cut on his forehead. “Holy shit.”

I drop the toilet lid on the floor, wasting no time as the others might notice. I go to the window again, propping myself up on the ledge and pushing my legs through first. I manage to squeeze right through the window as I hear them running up my stairs. My heart pounds as I softly shut the window and lie down on the tiles of the back porch, listening to them for a second.

“Whoa, the little human princess knocked him out. How the fuck did she do that?” Arden questions.

Emrys laughs. “Make sure Grayson doesn’t do anything stupid, while I heal him. She’s impressive, that one. Make sure she doesn’t hurt herself trying to escape.”

“It was the toilet seat,” Arden laughs, and I hear him picking it up. “Or was it the rubber duck in the hallway? Either way, it’s hilarious.”

“I’ll get her,” Grayson’s dark voice states.

The others go silent. Emrys clears his throat. “Don’t hurt her.”

His voice is like death. “The brat hurt us.”

“Gray!” Emrys shouts, but Grayson doesn’t reply. Dammit, he is coming for me, and I’ve wasted too much time. I slide down the roof panels, some of them clicking under my weight. Rain begins to pour out of the sky, making the roof slippery. A cry escapes my throat as I slip, sliding off the roof and slamming hard onto the grass. Ignoring the pain in my ribs, I climb to my feet and start sprinting straight up the garden. All at once, thick green vines shoot out of the surrounding ground, coming out of everywhere, and one trips me. I fall over, only

to be caught in the vines. I fight them as they are wrapping around my legs, arms, and chest. I manage to snap a few of them, but more just keep appearing until they're wrapped so tightly around me, squeezing me until I almost can't breathe.

Grayson's face comes into the moonlight. He is gorgeous with thick brown hair, dark golden skin, but there is a harshness to his silver eyes that matches the cruel smirk he gives me. He looks at me like I'm pathetic. "You're going to die first in the Dragon Crown Race. You're clearly stupid."

"Let me go, you fucking monster!" I scream, struggling and wriggling the best I can. He smells like the earth itself and a mixture of sandalwood that reminds me of forest walks. "Let me go! Let me go! HELP! I'm being kidnapped by crazy magic men who think they are dragons! HELP!"

"Shush, brat. You're just embarrassing yourself and giving me a headache," he mutters, picking me up with the vines like I weigh nothing. He throws me over his shoulder. "It's time to go."

My eyes widen as he twists around to look at the others, who are walking up the garden path to us. There's something in the middle of our garden. It looks like a shimmery wall, almost like it's water, but it's gold, illuminating and bright on the other side. Creatures fly through the air around the mountains and castle in the distance. They are too big to be birds. They are dragons. Actual dragons. Through it, I can see tall mountains and a silver castle nestled right in the middle of them. Orange fields surround the mountains, luminated by the night sky full of glowing yellow stars. I scream, panicking as Grayson turns and begins to walk towards it.

"Will you knock her out, Emrys? She is pissing me off," Grayson growls. *I'm pissing him off?* They are literally kidnapping me and making it sound like a chore. I hate them so much. What is my grandmother going to think when she comes home, finding a pile of ash and that I'm missing? She is going to be so worried. She has lost everyone else.

Emrys walks up to me, his eyes surprisingly soft as I keep screaming, hoping someone will come and help me. No one is

going to save me from them. Oh my god. “I’m vaguely impressed with you, Elle. I hope you win.”

He touches my cheek, and suddenly I can’t breathe. I gasp for air right before everything falls away into darkness, where I can hear wings.

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